

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

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**Key words:** Power; Wantok; Leadership; Leadership-As-Practice; Worldly Leadership; Papua New Guinea

## **Power: The influencing role of Wantok; a Papua New Guinean Context**

### **Abstract**

Individual and collectives of 'Wantoks' [actors] exercise power in an attempt to achieve leadership and organisational outcomes within a specific context. This paper investigates the influence of Wantok power on leadership, context, power and resulting implications for leadership and organisational outcomes in Papua New Guinea (PNG.) The study draws on the researcher's observations, conversations, interviews and day-to-day experiences whilst living and researching in PNG. The influence of Wantok contributes to shaping leadership practice; a recursive force influencing context. The strength and impact of intersecting forces inside context settings are moderated by how Wantoks exercise power, which in turn is swayed by individual and collective values, attitudes, assumptions, beliefs and expectations (VAABEs), mindsets and 'cultural' DNA. Results show that the understanding of the term Wantok continues to evolve from its traditional meaning, and has developed to appreciably influence the exercise of power and achievement of leadership and organisational outcomes. Findings suggest that the exercise of power is influenced by the deeply entrenched Wantok system in PNG. While the PNG context is particularly complex, more so than 'developed nations', the relationship does contribute to our broader understanding of the exercise of power, particularly leadership power. The findings raise a fundamental question: is Wantok power, as practiced in the developing nation of PNG, really any different to the practice of power in 'developed nations'?

**Key words:** Power; Wantok; Leadership; Leadership-As-Practice; Worldly Leadership; Papua New Guinea

### **1. Introduction**

This paper explores the exercise of 'Wantok' power through the through the multiple lenses of Similarity Attraction paradigm, Social Identity theory, and Social Categorisation theory, in the developing nation of Papua New Guinea (PNG). 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. With a population of seven and half million people and several thousand tribal societies largely organised on the basis of kinship (Tivinarlik & Wanat, 2006), PNG is a diverse and complex society. '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. However, 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). PNG is a linguistically fragmented country; Grimes (2000) estimates that there are in excess of 832 distinctive, mutually unintelligible languages actively spoken in PNG. 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). Language, the original basis of the Wantok system, remains an important binding influence within tribal groupings, whilst also acting as a dividing force between tribes. However, language is increasingly being superseded by contemporary factors as the basis of Wantok, challenging traditional meanings and practice. The new understandings and interpretations are re-shaping leadership power and practice, and organisational effectiveness and outcomes.

### **2. Literature**

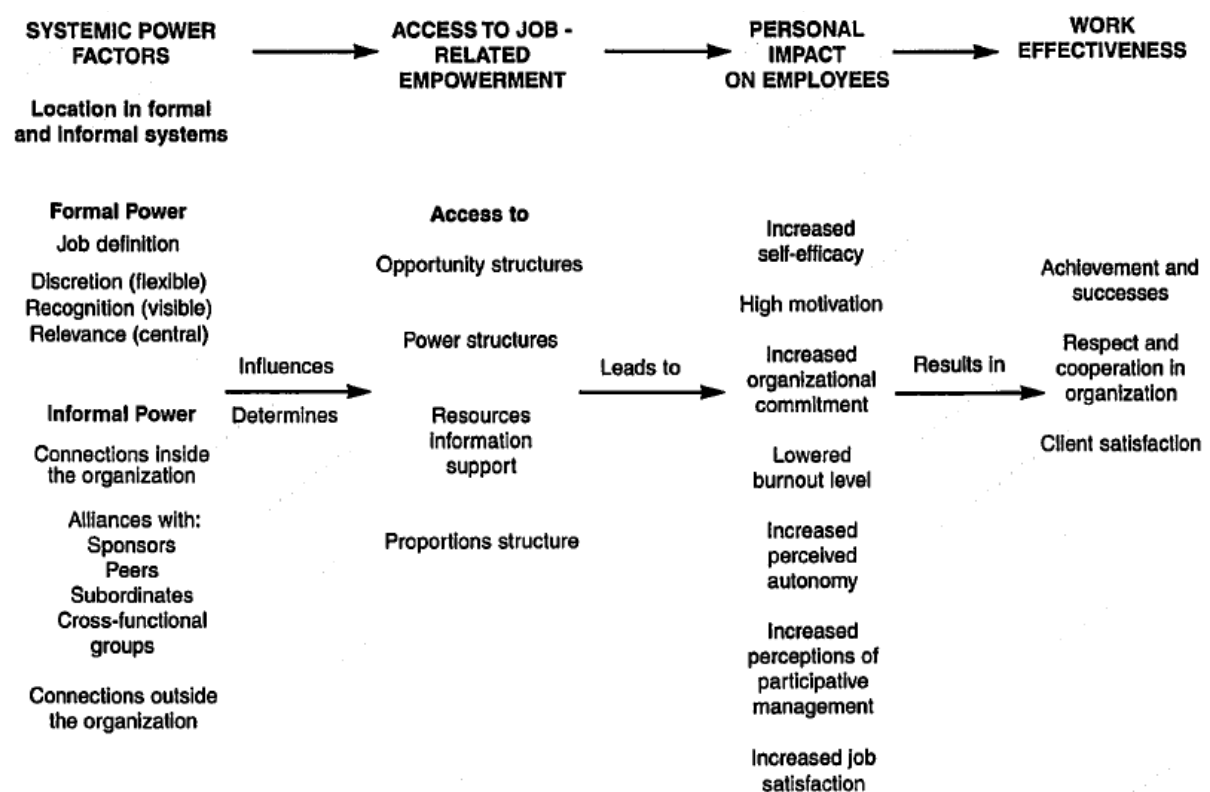
This literature does not claim to be comprehensive, rather representative only to set the context of study. Extant literature is awash with studies of change, leadership, and more recently, infused with

an expanding interest in Worldly Leadership (Case, Turnbull, & Shakoor, 2012; Turnbull, Case, Edwards, Schedlitzki, & Simpson, 2012) and Leadership-as-practice (L-A-P) (Carroll, Levy, & Richmond, 2008; J. Raelin, 2007; J. A. Raelin, 2017). However, Ray *et al.* (2004) suggested that there is a paucity in extant leadership literature of power. Power is essential for the exercise of leadership (Braude, 2010). Drawing from L-A-P's proposition of understanding gained through unfolding events in the day-to-day; in conjunction with Case *et al.* (2012) worldly leadership view of developing 'an appreciation of non-western or indigenous leadership constructs and narratives' (p. 6), our understanding of power can be enhanced, at least in the context in which it is examined. 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.

## 2.1 Power

Russell (1938) stated that power is the fundamental concept in social science; is the 'ability to get things done'; stems from the organisational position a person occupies and can be derived from informal and formal organisational systems (Kanter, 1993), Figure 1.

Figure 1 Relationships of concepts of Structural Theory of Power in Organisations



Source: (Sabiston & Laschinger, 1995, p. 43)

'Power aims to regulate free and autonomous actors who are acting on the basis of different interests, motives and ideologies, but it does not aim to strip the individual or collective actors of their capacity for free action' (Braude, 2010, p. 113). Raven and French identified legitimate power as compared to coercion, identifying five types of power: reward; coercive; legitimate; referent, and expert power

(Raven & French, 1958, p. 83) and established existence of a hierarchy where a powerful individual has real, or perceived, authority over another individual. The term 'power' is 'highly contested' having been conceptualised from behavioural and a charismatic perspectives, has been divided into two classifications: 'individuals who are assigned formal or legal authority to direct others' and 'those who exert (or where leadership identity is derived from exerting) significant influence over others in task groups but where there is no formally allocated authority - referred to as emergent leaders' (Edwards, Schedlitzki, Turnbull, & Gill, 2015, pp. 330-331). Hofmann *et al.* (2017) argue this as 'processes or individuals which organise the cooperation in a community by an assigned social position that allows to create and maintain environments and thereby influence the behaviour of individuals' (Hofmann *et al.*, 2017, p. 1).

Power being the energy underpinning leadership practice, can be viewed from a number of perspectives. First, the Similarity Attraction paradigm suggests that people are attracted 'to others whom they perceive to be similar to them in background, personal attributes, interests and values' (Hartel & Fujimoto, 2015, p. 166). Those perceived as dissimilar tend to be excluded. Second, Social Identity theory holds that people attempt to enhance their 'self-image and self-esteem by showing favouritism to other people who are in their own social group, at the expense of those in another relevant group to which they themselves do not belong' (Hartel & Fujimoto, 2015, p. 166). Third, Social Categorisation theory (Turner & Oakes, 1989) suggests that people 'tend to define their self-concepts in terms of social groups' (Hartel & Fujimoto, 2015, p. 167), forming in and out-groups. In-groups attract people who are seen as similar, such as Wantok's, and actively attempt to differentiate themselves from 'dissimilar other'.

## 2.2 Wantok

Deeply entrenched in PNG culture, Swatridge (1985) described the Wantok 'system' as a 'friendly society, welfare system, and life-assurance all in one' (p. 4). Wantok also means friend, relative, 'who you know', or someone who speaks the same language (one talk). MacDonald (1984) argues that Wantok is a 'bond of people with a basic, kinship community, speaking the same tongue, living in the same place, and sharing values'. The Wantok 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 'Wantok-ism', is both a collective and an individual exercise of power, which can result in ineffectual outcomes.

## 3. Research Design

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 and recorded interviews, whilst situated in the 'recurring and sometimes evolving patterns in the moment, and over time among the 'actors', engaged in the practice' (Raelin 2017 p.215) of unfolding day-to-day events. In total, 42 conversations and interviews were recorded. All the actors were engaged in full-time work, many holding middle or senior management and leadership positions in government and private organisations. The 'actors' were drawn from wide cross-section of the PNG mainland and associated islands. First, observations were noted, conversations documented and interviews analysed in keeping with Thomas' (2006) general inductive approach which has been previously used in studies (Chansa, Sundewall, McIntyre, & Forsberg, 2008) to ensure rigor and trustworthiness. Next, deductive themes derived from the extant literature (Lewis, West, Bautista, Greenberg, & Done-Perez, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994) were reviewed. Combining inductive and deductive approaches facilitated consideration of the findings with prior research (Bradley, Curry, & Devers, 2007). The following discussion presents key empirical themes identified.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Changing understanding and meaning of Wantok

In apparent contradiction to Swatridge's (1985) description, the term Wantok lacks a commonly agreed definition whilst practiced in different ways throughout PNG. However, common elements are evident. The term 'Wantok' is a common language word used in pidgin, refers to people of Melanesian extraction, sharing common blood line (family), who are from the same village, province, tribe, speak the same language, share the same religious belief, or share customary practices. Wantok is widely regarded, as Edwards *et al.* (2015) describe, as both an individual authority to direct others from a formal position, and an exertion of influence through individual power outside of formally allocated authority positions.

The extent of divergent interpretations of Wantok are highlighted in the following extracts:

**Extract 1:** It [Wantok] has gone from 'one talk' as we came from the same village, now it's your social circle; whom you know.

**Extract 2:** It is your sphere of influence.

**Extract 3:** What is Wantok? It is many things; (1) it is one language group, (2) a work mate, and (3) whom you know, so it's an ambiguous definition now.

**Extract 4:** It's not about employing quality [of the people employed] but about who you know.

**Extract 5:** Wantoks provide physical and financial support to those that request it, always bearing in mind that their deeds will be compensated during their time of need.

**Extract 6:** Today's Wantoks are synonymous with political affiliations, regionalism, wealth, status and popularity and fame.

**Extract 7:** The current trend of Wantoks identified within society today has a different connotation. Wantoks make or break society and it is a powerful medium for control and domination, mostly used by those within authority and those that can afford to do so. Wantok is the next level breed of corruption, compared to the traditional 'necessity' requirements.

**Extract 8:** Wantok system is defined as people from the same family, clan and tribe. Wantok system has been commonly practiced throughout PNG for many years in terms of giving money and offering services. This is done for many reasons, for instance to assist those who need, for recognition and identity or unity and to gain trust and respect from the family, clan and tribe. However, today the Wantok system has lost its [original] significance and people now use the system for personal gain.

**Extract 9:** Wantok has invaded all forms of government and social structures, which is the norm in PNG. Definitely in WNBPA [Western New Britain Province] and the WNBPA [Western New Britain Provincial Administration] the definition would be very different from the rest of PNG or from any textbook and social media definitions. This is due to the fact that WNBPA comprises of all ethnic groups in PNG, initially brought in to cultivate oil palm in the late sixties. Over the years and due to the robust economic climate of the province, many more continue to come and live in the province. We have learnt to live in harmony despite the diversity and created culture that we all appreciate and call PASIN WEST (Our way of life).

To gain an insight into how the Wantok system operates in organisations, the following extracts provide some context:

**Extract 10:** Managers recruit their own Wantoks for the following reasons:

- i. Ease of communication (language is spoken and understood well).
- ii. Job security (Bribery involved).
- iii. Protection from other warring tribesman and other threats.
- iv. Support and control over a minority group (More highlanders than coastal people or vice versa – more Wantok s equals more bargaining power.
- v. Target deadlines are met (Wantoks listen to their own – allegiance).
- vi. Contract hiring of Wantoks to reduce high rounds of crop (Wantok s will agree to set conditions when hired).
- vii. Political interests (former [company] managers contested the national elections, because they thought Wantoks in plantations would vote for them).

**Extract 11:** For instance, if there is someone in authority, he/she can influence the process and select a relative or a good friend to take up the position even though he/she does not have the qualification or meet the criteria required for the position. As a result, this person cannot perform his or her roles and responsibilities because he/she lack the skills and knowledge. The organisation will lose money and time to train him/her to acquire the skills and knowledge needed. Furthermore, other staff will become job burnout because they are doing additional tasks for the person responsible. When this continues to happen, the staff are exhausted and tired and eventually affect the organisation causing [a] drop in the productivity. The organisation can lose potential staff because they will be looking for an organisation that promotes and provides equality, rather than Wantok.

**Extract 12:** Wantok system has infiltrated all levels of the government and social structures from Waigani, [the centre of national administration] Port Moresby (POM) [the capital of PNG] to the lowest level of government in every province in PNG, That is in the form of National Politicians, National Government bureaucrat, Provincial Government and the Administrations, District Administrations, the Local Level Government (LLG's) and even the ward and village level. Wherever a PNG national is in the office, the office integrity is in question. For example, it is evidently observed that the same ethnic group occupy most of the offices in the national, regional and sub-national level. It is a matter of time before the integrity of the judiciary system is questioned.

#### *4.2 Power exercised through Wantok*

Exploring the exercise of Wantok power through the multiple lenses of Similarity Attraction paradigm, Table 1, Social Identity theory, Table 2, and Social Categorisation theory, Table 3 advances our understanding of the exercise power by 'a powerful individual has real, or perceived, authority over another individual' (Raven & French, 1958), through the day-to-day leadership practices in PNG. Key findings are shown in Tables 1-3.

**Table 1. Similarity Attraction paradigm**

<b>Similarity Attraction paradigm</b> - people are inclined to be attracted to those who are similar – background, personal attributes, interests, values, culture and nationality.	
Wantok power is embedded in and reproduced through <b>Similarity paradigm</b> structures	<p><b>Embedded</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Favoring employment of people from same clan or tribe where there is a direct relation.</li> <li>• Favoring friends from a social group.</li> <li>• Favoring people from peer group.</li> <li>• People employed tend toward common personal attributes.</li> </ul> <p><b>Reproduced</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political affiliation – leading to positive ‘buying’ power.</li> <li>• Strength and connectivity with ‘Wantoks’.</li> <li>• Sharing of the same language</li> <li>• Sharing similar identity and ideology.</li> <li>• Shared faith [religion] and sense of sharing and openness.</li> <li>• Facilitates ease of developing work ‘friendships’.</li> <li>• Promotes a common acceptance of agreed dress codes.</li> </ul>

Viewing Wantok through the Similarity Attraction paradigm suggests that the original foundation of Wantok remains important, serving as an ‘anchor’ for future career prospects and personal gains.

**Table 2. Social Identity theory**

<b>Social Identity theory</b> - people attempt to enhance their self-image and self-esteem by showing favoritism to other people who are in their own social group, at the expense of those in another relevant group to which they themselves do NOT belong.	
Wantok power is embedded in and reproduced through <b>Social Identity</b> structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social status is improved through enhanced wealth opportunities for Wantoks.</li> <li>• Wantoks are likely to enjoy job security irrespective of skills, competencies or capabilities to perform the job.</li> <li>• Recognition favors Wantoks with enhanced ‘packages’, diminishes contribution of non-Wantoks resulting in lessor packages to Wantoks.</li> <li>• Promotes common shared interest.</li> <li>• Can influence (bias) appointments and promotions based on gender.</li> <li>• Encourages the exercise of ‘customary obligation’.</li> <li>• Spillover effect of Wantok job security to family safety and security.</li> <li>• Can result in exercise employing Wantoks of same religion/denomination, and belief system(s) and values.</li> </ul>

Viewing Wantok through Social Identity theory suggests that once the Wantok is ‘in’, they are likely to remain secure in the system regardless of capacity to do the job.

**Table 3. Social Categorization theory**

<b>Social Categorization theory</b> - people tend to define self-concept in terms of social group membership and, as such, categorize themselves and others into various social categories, namely 'in-groups' and 'out-groups'.	
Wantok power embedded in and reproduced through <b>Social Categorization</b> structures	<b>Factors determining groupings</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In-groups have more privileges over the out-groups.</li> <li>• In-groups dictate operations for personal gains.</li> <li>• In-groups tend to exert significant peer pressure to conform to in-group norms.</li> <li>• In-group size is controlled to maintain control of the group.</li> <li>• In-groups assume disproportionate levels of authority and control throughout the organisation.</li> <li>• Non membership of In-group can lead to sense of insecurity by out-group.</li> </ul>

Viewing Wantok through Social Categorization theory suggests that the non-Wantoks, those in the out-groups are likely to experience social and organisational disadvantage, possibly discrimination and job in-security, in contrast to the Wantoks in the in-group.

#### 4.3 Conceptual Framework

The influence of Wantok power in PNG is strong, active with deeply embedded roots across most, if not all, facets of organisational, social, government and political contexts. Figure 2 provides a conceptual framework of the intersecting perspectives of Wantok power.

**Figure 2 Conceptual Framework of Wantok Power**

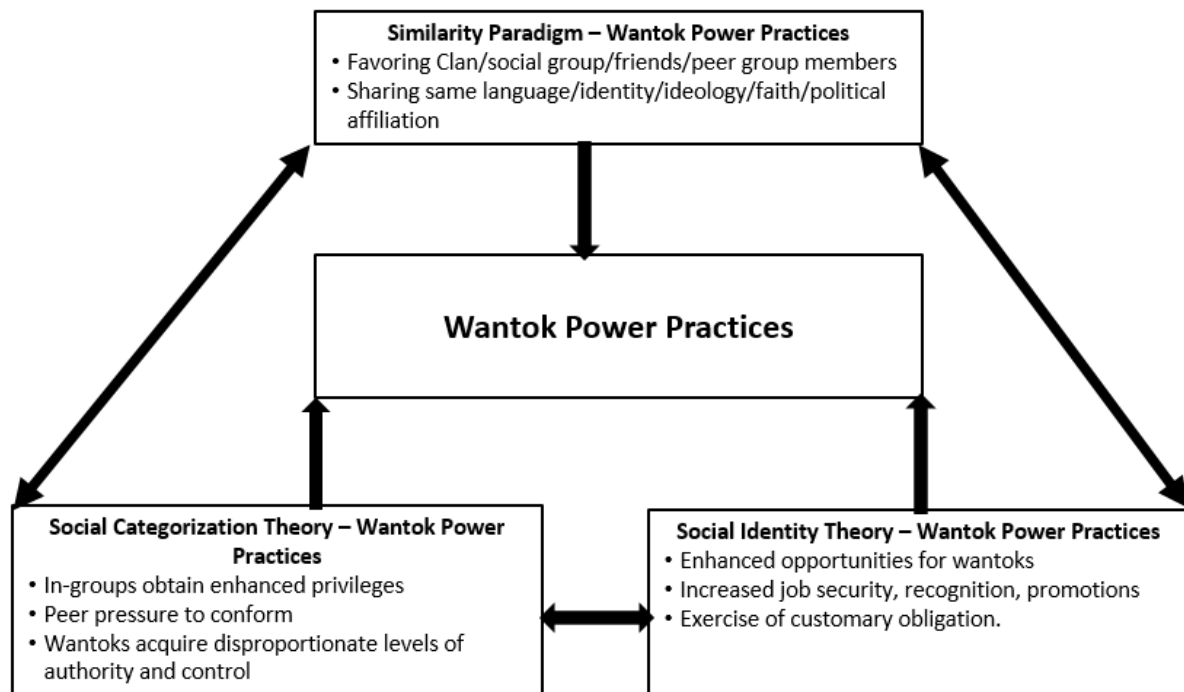


Figure 2 shows the interrelationship of the Similarity paradigm, Social Categorization and Social Identity theories and the mutual reinforcement of Wantok power practices. Wantok power draws legitimacy and strength from the day-to-day practices, customs and traditions that support life in the



village. As PNG integrates into the global community, the original village based tenants of Wantok are being reshaped with the rise of public and private organisations and are increasingly embedded in political and organisational leadership practices, values, attitudes, behaviours and expectations.

## 5. Discussion

Determinants of positional and individual power (Kanter, 1993) support the constantly evolving Wantok system in PNG. However, Kanter's conception of power, Figure 1, suggests the positive application of power, while overlooking 'darker' aspects of the exercise of power (Blair, Helland, & Walton, 2107; Sadler-Smith, Akstinaite, Robinson, & Wray, 2017). As a developing nation, PNG seeks to proactively engage with an increasingly globalised and interconnected world, the constantly evolving Wantok system acts as a powerful developmental anchor. Leaders, managers and the participants of the Wantok system have a tendency to 'revert back to the village' or 'cultural DNA'. More powerfully, 'some have educated ourselves out of the village, but take the village with us', enabling the development and evolution of a Wantok Mindset, Table 4, strengthening the exercise and on-going evolution of 'Wantok power' and 'Wantokism'. The result, 'Wantok is normal and 'it's how we do business'. Non Wantok thinking is often dismissed, resulting in both positive and minus impacts on individuals and social structures inside organisations and government, on organisation and government operations, and capability of organisations to achieve strategic and operational outcomes. Braude (2010, p. 113) suggested that power 'does not aim to strip the individual or collective actors of their capacity for free action', however, this study indicates that the exercise of Wantok power, when viewed through the lens of Social Identity, does show that 'non-Wantoks' may have their individual and collective power diminished as a result of being in the out-group, and that their capacity for free action is decreased when set beside benefits and privileges enjoyed by in-group Wantoks.

**Table 4. Wantok Mindset**

<b>Wantok Mindset</b> – the exercise of Wantok power can result in the development of a 'Wantok Mindset'.	
Wantok power.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourages a sense of belonging.</li> <li>• Supports the mobilization of resources.</li> <li>• Promotes and encourages networking.</li> <li>• Creates a positive sense of wellbeing of individual and organisation.</li> <li>• Stimulates productivity and performance improvements.</li> <li>• Develops a sense of loyalty to others and organisation.</li> <li>• Encourages sharing of responsibility.</li> <li>• Positivity influences developing and maintaining a competitive advantage.</li> <li>• Promotes effective communication channels to facilitate information and knowledge sharing.</li> <li>• Protection of person, as individual or position, confidentially.</li> <li>• Reduces costs as people have common understanding.</li> <li>• Encourages accessibility to information and mutual support.</li> </ul>
Negative outcomes of Wantok power.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decreased commitment to training and enforcement of 'code of conduct'.</li> <li>• Undermining organisational values in favor of gaining individual benefits.</li> <li>• Non-adherence to statutory requirements.</li> <li>• Willing non-compliance with regulations.</li> </ul>

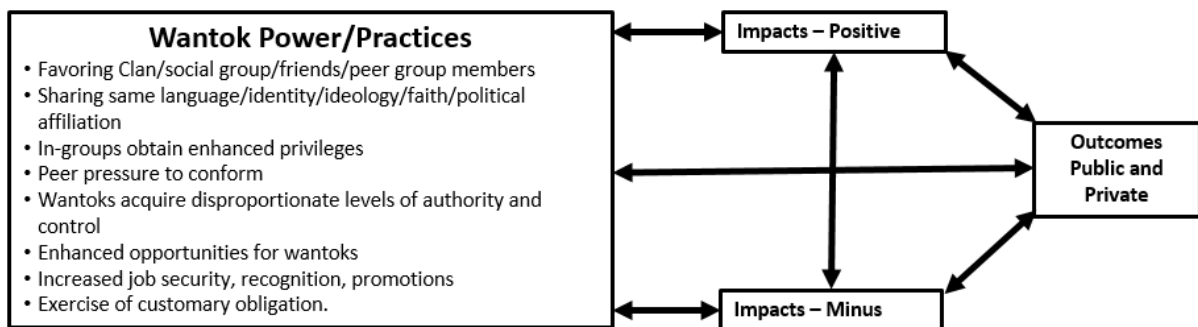
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduced transparency and accountability against standards.</li> <li>• Organisational culture focused on individual gain as opposed to organisational values.</li> <li>• 'Wantok practices supersede 'best practice' organisational policy and governance.</li> <li>• Recruitment and selection conducted (if at all) by Wantoks to the exclusion of non-Wantoks.</li> <li>• Weakening of individual and organisational values.</li> </ul>
Positive outcomes of Wantok power on an organisations ability to achieve its outputs/strategic outcomes?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organisational targets met with great teamwork.</li> <li>• Shared responsibility and increased equity.</li> <li>• Effective information sharing across the organisation.</li> <li>• Increased organisational efficiency and productivity.</li> <li>• There is trust.</li> <li>• Reduced risk and prevent wastage.</li> <li>• People can take 'ownership' of working environment.</li> </ul>

It is apparent that there is both an acceptance and a rejection of the Wantok system in PNG. The Wantok mindset and its day-to-day practice, acts as a barrier to global integration.

## 6. Future Research

Future research should also appreciate at a deeper level Wantok power and practices in government and private organisations to gain a sense of how the application of Wantok power influences government, organisational and social outcomes. Exploring the interrelationship of positive and minus effects on power and practice and outcomes may provide a rich dynamic multidimensional system model as a framework to develop a deeper insight of into the Wantok system and its implications, Figure 3.

**Figure 3 Conceptual Dynamic Multidimensional System Model**



## 7. Conclusion

The findings suggest the exercise of leadership power in PNG is influenced by a constantly evolving Wantok system with significant positive and minus outcomes for leadership and organisational effectiveness. While the PNG context is particularly complex, more so than 'developed nations', an understanding of Wantok and the practice of Wantok power contributes to our understanding of the exercise of leadership power in 'Worldly' context. Developing an understanding of Wantok through the lens of Similarity Attraction paradigm, Social Identity theory and Social Categorisation theory enables greater clarity in understanding the nuances of the exercise of Wantok and Wantok power in PNG. Such insight may inform the discussion regarding the implications of Wantok and potential impact on PNG's integration into the global community as a result of political and organisational

Wantokism. The findings raise a fundamental question: is Wantok power, as practiced in PNG, really any different to the practice of power in developed nations?

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