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EDITORIAL

Guest editorial: Themed collection on Indigeneity, labour relations, and work

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Abstract

We are pleased to introduce a themed collection of articles on Indigeneity, labour relations, and work. There has been a lack of Indigenous voices in academic literature on labour and workplace relations. This themed collection of ELRR amplifies Indigenous voices, knowledges, and perspectives, in labour relations and work. Indigenous researchers from across the world were encouraged to contribute to this important collection. A broad range of topics were proposed for this themed collection, which included; Indigenous justice, human rights and labour, Indigenous participation in labour markets, Indigenous labour history, Indigenous economic and employment risks, Indigenous employment equity, labour relations and public policy, Indigenous labour and unions, colonial power and labour relations, economic benefits of Indigenous labour, Indigenous employment policy and practice, discrimination, and Indigenous labour. Whilst this list was not exhaustive, the call produced a plethora of articles which will be explored below.

Keywords: Enterprise bargaining; Indigenous disability; Indigenous employment; work health and safety; workplace grievances; workplace wellbeing

Introduction

There has been an underrepresentation of Indigenous voices in academic literature on labour and workplace relations, which perpetuates marginalisation, exclusion, and a lack of understanding of Indigenous cultural approaches and experiences, thus hindering effective workplace policies and practices. For example, Leroy-Dyer (2023) was the first Indigenous author of an article in the *Journal of Industrial Relations* in the 65-year history of the journal. This is but one example highlighting the importance of this themed collection.

The absence of Indigenous perspectives in workplace relations leads to policies and practices that are not culturally safe or inclusive, potentially undermining Indigenous mental health and well-being (Leroy-Dyer, 2022; 2023, Jones et al 2023). Indigenous peoples globally, especially those in settler colonial states experience racism, ridicule, discrimination, harassment, and are actively devalued in the workplace (Leroy-Dyer & Menzel, 2024). Indigenous workplace needs cannot be understood nor met without Indigenous voices and Indigenous-led solutions. Workplace policies are crucial for addressing the specific challenges faced by Indigenous employees to create truly inclusive and psychologically safe workplaces.

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The collection of papers in this Themed Collection prefer Indigenous voices; all papers have Indigenous authors, and some are co-authored by non-Indigenous allies. The collection covers a range of topics that consider Indigenous workplace well-being, Indigenous management in Disability care, Indigenous employment in non-Indigenous workplaces, Mining and enterprise bargaining, workplace grievances, and work health and safety of Indigenous workers. In framing this collection, the guest editors wanted to ensure that our voices, those of Indigenous academics, are no longer silenced in mainstream journals.

The first two papers highlight the plight of community/disability support workers across two Indigenous cohorts, Māori, and Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander peoples, as they juggle community responsibility of relationality, culture, and reciprocity with those of the organisations/service providers. The second two papers focus on Indigenous employment in Australia and the ability of non-Indigenous employers to provide adequate policies, procedures, and practices for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment. The last two papers apply a work health and safety lens to Indigenous employment in Aotearoa, with one focusing on personal grievances. and the other on health and safety pertaining to the handling of hazardous substances.

We are delighted to bring you this themed collection.

Hauora: relational wellbeing of Māori community support workers

Indigenous views of well-being are holistic and relational, and consider many elements, including spiritual, ecological, socio-cultural, as well as economic dimensions. In this paper, Nicholson, Hurd, and Ravenswood undertake a literature review of Māori well-being which privileges the voices of Māori. Using Māori oral literature, they weave the voices of ngā pou herenga alongside other cited academic texts, using their kōrero (voice) in the same way that the written literature is quoted in academic publications.

Utilising community-based participatory research, they investigate the holistic multi-dimensional well-being of community support workers (CSWs) in Aotearoa New Zealand during Covid-19. They argue that in Aotearoa, employee well-being has long ignored Māori experiences of well-being, and that western individualistic models of well-being dominate the research.

Nicholson, Hurd, and Ravenswood found that hauora—Māori well-being that includes culture, spirit, and whānau—was additionally affected by discrimination, racism, and a lack of cultural awareness and support from employers. They found that Western models of care and support did not recognise the importance of, or allow for the expression of tikanga Māori, which limited options of culturally appropriate care.

The authors unpack the multiple dimensions of Indigenous well-being; voices of the ancestors, relational well-being, spiritual well-being, environmental well-being, social well-being, and economic well-being. Then ground these dimensions in the CBPR to investigate the holistic and multi-dimensional wellbeing of CSWs in Aotearoa during Covid-19.

The study found that there was a mismatch between the professional boundaries of care essential for organisations, and ethical and well-being dimensions of whanaungatanga (relationality), thus limiting both the meaningfulness to CSWs and holistic care for those they care for. Participants of the study reported how they crossed professional boundaries set by organisations, as they did not uphold the mana (care) of the people they cared for. In addition, there was a disconnect between care and culture within organisations, with some participants reporting discrimination and being asked to enter unsafe situations. The study found that the Hauora of Māori support workers was impacted both positively and negatively by their employment. Māori support workers saw their cultural identity and values as strengths that are interwoven with caring practices, leading to a desire to provide culturally appropriate care to others, which was at odds with the organisational objectives.

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Connecting community: the role of Indigenous management in disability care

Cooms, Watson, and Watson discuss Australian disability services in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. They discuss strategies employed by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous disability support providers to ensure equitable access and culturally appropriate support for Indigenous peoples with disabilities within the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) framework.

The paper takes an intersectional approach, acknowledging the overlapping challenges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples face, and seeks to create service models that cater to both disability-related and cultural needs. The study emphasises the key differences between organisations with an Embedded Cultural Base and those who have an ad hoc approach. Indigenous-led management strategies, grounded in cultural values, they argue, provide a path to embed culturally safe practices into service delivery, improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander NDIS participants. A standout example of this, according to Cooms, Watson and Watson in the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (ACCHO) model of care, which exemplifies this approach, viewing health and well-being as interconnected with the social, emotional, and cultural well-being of the entire community.

This study found that Indigenous managed disability service providers actively resist neoliberal tensions by providing services and supports beyond those required by funders and non-Indigenous service providers. This approach aligns with critical disability studies, which critique the neoliberal individualistic focus of the NDIS at the expense of collective wellbeing.

The paper then outlines the implications for policy and practice, which includes that organisations utilising the Indigenous management approach are inclusive of not just Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples but also of other marginalised groups, because of their intersectional approach which is grounded in relational accountability and holistic care. The authors contend that integrating Indigenous management frameworks could transform disability services into more equitable, responsive, and inclusive systems.

Making Indigenous employment everyone's business: Indigenous employment and retention in non-Indigenous owned businesses

In response to the under-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples within their workforces, Australian institutions are increasingly implementing policies and practices aimed at improving these organisational and societal outcomes. Commitments in the form of reconciliation action plans, Indigenous employment strategies that include targeted recruitment strategies, and cultural safety training, are some of the actions businesses have undertaken. However, there has been little formal analysis of their effectiveness in enhancing rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment and retention.

Using primary survey data of non-Indigenous-owned businesses in Australia, Eva, Bodle, Foley, Hunter, and Shirodkar analyse associations between Indigenous-focused workplace and recruitment practices with Indigenous employment and retention outcomes. The study finds that businesses that report Indigenous employment rates at or above parity with the Indigenous proportional population (3.8%) are more likely to maintain several Indigenous-focused workplace practices than those businesses with employment rates below this level. This is similarly found with businesses that report enhanced Indigenous retention outcomes. However, the most significant finding of the paper comes from probit models which reveal that businesses with Indigenous people in positions of management are 50%–60% more likely to maintain an Indigenous employment rate of 3.8% or above, and a 11%–16% lower probability of having poor Indigenous staff retention.

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This article underscores the importance for Australian institutions in making concrete commitments to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment, beyond platitudes or vague goals. Indigenous business leaders have continually called for the increase in Indigenous representation within senior decision-making positions in Australian institutions. This article helps in highlighting the impact this may have on Indigenous employment outcomes. This article is timely and highlights the need for more institutional buy-in when it comes to closing the gap on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment disadvantage.

First Peoples, Groote Eylandt mining, organisational legitimacy: the possibilities of enterprise bargaining

This article by Williams, Lafferty, and Teal evaluates how enterprise bargaining might contribute to organisational legitimacy by achieving significant employment and community objectives for First Peoples on Groote Eylandt in the Northern Territory, Australia. The Groote Eylandt Mining Company (GEMCO) is the largest employer on the island. However, mining operations on the island are challenging, as on one side it is economically crucial to the Anindilyakwa people, yet it is also responsible for endemic social dysfunction, including drug and alcohol abuse, violence, poor health, inadequate housing and impoverishment. The authors state that during GEMCO's presence on the island, socio-economic disparities have intensified between the wealthy township of mostly (fly in fly out workers) and the First Peoples township.

The paper argues that GEMCO enacted an Employer of Choice strategy in 1997, guaranteeing real work, on-the-job training, mentoring, and a culturally safe work environment, underpinned by their corporate social responsibility (CSR). The authors argue that with the employer of choice strategy, organisational legitimacy conveys a sense of cultural appropriateness. They evaluate whether rhetorical claims have been matched with tangible improvements for the First Peoples of the island and whether the First Peoples have progressed from 'dependent stakeholders' to 'ultimate stakeholders'. Williams, Lafferty and Teal found strong evidence of the widely documented deficiencies of corporate self-regulation at GEMCO, where there were no consequences for the failure to meet projected goals. The overall perception among First Peoples was that the Employer of Choice strategy has worked neither consistently nor comprehensively to achieve employment and community outcomes.

The article then explores how enterprise bargaining might be a catalyst for GEMCO's employer of choice program, as means to could deliver enforceable employment targets which are monitored, evaluated, and regulated by active union action. The paper gives examples of where enterprise bargaining has led to positive outcomes, such as the tertiary education sector.

Workplace grievances and tikanga Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand: an initial exploration

In this article, Walsh and Hikuroa explore the weaving of tikanga Māori (Māori legal systems) and English-derived state law within Aotearoa New Zealand workplace personal grievance processes. The article highlights the need for employment law and practice to understand the many experiences in Aotearoa NZ society, so the law and judiciary reflect current realities. In Aotearoa NZ, He Whakaputanga o te Rangatiratanga o Nu Tireni (He Whakaputanga; Declaration of Independence) and Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Te Tiriti; Treaty of Waitangi) derive rights and obligations for both Māori and the Crown, and subsequently non-Māori.

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The article discusses the interpersonal relationships and personal grievances between an employee and their employer, and includes the broader historical and ongoing socio-politico-economic effects of capitalism and colonisation on employment relationships. Walsh and Hikuroa explore how current workplace personal grievance processes in Aotearoa NZ often produce 'winners' and 'losers', and such outcomes are not conducive to maintaining or improving employment relationships. They look at the role a tikanga Māori take–utu–ea (cause–reciprocation–satisfaction) framework could play in supplementing personal grievances processes (against current or former employers).

The article often utilises a radical pluralist approach to analyse and understand the role of workers in relation to their work by assuming that conflict exists in the employment relationship, which often does not favour working people. The article adopts a secondary source analysis to engage in critical reflective practice in order to understand and translate employment law and industrial relations.

The authors urge all working New Zealanders, including policymakers, employment law practitioners, trade unionists, and academics, to recognise the potential for tikanga Māori to be used within employment-related issues and to adopt a humanistic and values-based approach to the employment relationship.

Indigenous Fijian (iTaukei) RSE workers and hazardous substance material: knowledge, guidelines and use

This article by Maiono and Ruwhiu explores labour mobility and Indigenous iTaukei (Indigenous Fijian) workers in Aotearoa NZ, focusing on three crucial elements of the New Zealand Hazardous Substances and New Organisms Act *1996*. The research explores whether RSE workers understand their rights to protective protection equipment, using a 3D veivosaki, as a culturally sensitive research method developed for collecting group discussion data in the Pacific.

The article notes that limited research has been conducted on the experiences of iTaukei workers regarding worker safety, and that the workers continue to remain silent about workplace issues leading to a neglect of health and safety requirements. The study sheds light on the daily challenges the iTaukei RSE workers face when dealing with hazardous substances by exploring two underlying research questions, to what extend do RSE workers understand the safety risks associated with the hazardous substances they use daily, and how knowledgeable are these workers on the potential environmental hazards of those chemicals on the ecosystem.

This study is timely as it not only looks at a subset of workers who are often overlooked but also has transferable results to other countries that rely on labour mobility. The results of this study are far-reaching. Is enough being done to ensure labour mobility workers know their rights at work, especially around work health and safety? What options are available to mobility workers who experience unsafe work practices? Are mobility workers upskilled on ensuring environmental sustainability? What recruitment policies should be implemented for this cohort of workers? How can organisations ensure they have a duty of care to these workers? What if any government interventions are need for labour mobility workers? What would a coordinated approach to ensure the success of a labour mobility program look like?

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