

Emancipatory decoloniality as leadership in social service organizations: Insights from indigenous and anti-oppressive yarnings

Bindi Bennett¹, Donna Baines^{2,*}, Maresse Terare³ and Amanda Howard ³

¹Federation University, Victoria, Australia

²University of British Columbia, Canada

³University of Sydney, NSW, Australia

*Corresponding author. Jack Bell Building for Social Work, University of British Columbia, 2080 West Mall, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2, Canada. E-mail: donna.baines@ubc.ca

Abstract

Around the globe, there is a growing demand for leadership in resolving longstanding social injustices experienced by Indigenous peoples. As part of a larger, international study, this article draws on early findings from yarnings/qualitative interviews to contribute to theorizing Indigenous leadership in social service organizations. Within our research design, the team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers consciously centre Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing to build emancipatory, decolonizing theory and practice. The analysis in this article identifies Indigenous social justice leadership in several overlapping forms, including Indigenous-centred/cultural-centred ways of knowing, being, and doing; intersectional identities; partnerships; and envisioning for all. The article concludes with further early theorizing and calls for future research to delve more deeply into Indigenous leadership as it develops in resistance to new conditions, including the far-right push-back against human rights and equity and the constraints of neoliberalism.

© The Author(s) 2025. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The British Association of Social Workers.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. For commercial re-use, please contact reprints@oup.com for reprints and translation rights for reprints. All other permissions can be obtained through our RightsLink service via the Permissions link on the article page on our site—for further information please contact permissions@oup.com.

Keywords: aboriginal leadership; cultural practice; decolonization; organizations; social justice.

Accepted: February 2025

Introduction

The literature and public discourse confirm a growing interest in decolonization and social justice struggles in countries that were once colonial holdings, as well as in formerly colonizing countries in Europe (Hölscher and Chiumbu 2020; BlackDeer 2023; Seckinelgin 2023). In White settler countries such as Australia, this emancipatory project frequently takes the form of decoloniality, or the struggle to recognize, legitimize, and rebuild subjugated Indigenous knowledges, cultures, values, governance, and social and economic approaches, also referred to as re-Indigenization (Clarke 2022; BlackDeer 2023). This project simultaneously de-centres and dismantles oppressive colonial knowledges, norms, and power structures (Bennett and Gillieatt 2022; Clarke 2022). For the purposes of this article, we understand emancipatory practices to be undergirded by decoloniality, and to reflect shifts in power that foreground Indigenous ways of being, doing, and thinking, interwoven with a deep commitment to social justice and equity for all peoples.

This article draws on early findings from the Australian section of an international research project that brings together Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to explore emancipatory decolonizing theory, practice, and knowledge in social service organizations. Framing our inquiry in Indigenous perspectives and anti-oppressive theory and practice (AOP), we are investigating policies, practices, and structures that fostered emancipatory practice, and those that inhibit them in contemporary social service organizations in Canada, Taiwan, and Australia. For the purposes of this article, we use our early findings from Australia to contribute to a growing discourse on Indigenous leadership (Muller 2020; Gram-Hanssen 2021; Jimenez-Luque 2021). Rather than treating Indigenous perspectives as useful ‘add-ons’ to Western social work theory, and practice, our decoloniality methodology foregrounds Indigenous voices and insights, interweaving them within other critical knowledges and practices. The analysis draws on insights from fifteen qualitative yarnings undertaken in Australia with Indigenous and non-Indigenous anti-oppressive leaders in social service organizations. Yarning is an Indigenous process of collective and conversational meaning-making and mutual learning (Geia et al. 2013; McKnight and Yunkaporta 2024). While there is a need for further exploration of social work leadership in general, this article contributes to preliminary theorizing on

decoloniality/anti-oppressive Indigenous leadership in social service organizations.

The struggle for decoloniality does not happen in a vacuum. We are attuned to the challenges in leading and transforming social service workplaces in the ongoing context of neoliberalism and austerity policies. Indeed, New Public Management (NPM) and other iterations of managerialism within social work workplaces prioritize accountability metrics and audit cultures that reduce or remove hard to measure practices such as those associated with building ongoing social justice, promoting human rights, and the open-ended work of sustaining the dignity of service users and excluded communities (Pease and Nipperess 2020; Timor-Shlevin et al. 2023). Though constrained in terms of the time and space to practice critically, research has demonstrated that social work practices aimed at emancipation (decoloniality, power sharing, critical reflexivity, social justice advocacy, and critical social analysis) can flourish even in highly managerialized workplaces (Baines 2022; Smith 2022).

Drawing on relevant literature, the article starts with an overview of the contexts in which Indigenous leaders are emerging in social service organizations, and then moves on to a brief discussion of the Indigenous and anti-oppressive social work theories framing our argument. The methods for the larger and the Australia-specific project are discussed, followed by an analysis of the strongest themes on leadership from the Australian data. The article wraps up with further discussion and conclusions. The balance of the article now engages with the question, which emancipatory decoloniality leadership practices are evident in our data, and what forms do they take?

Literature review

This section provides an overview of the neoliberal context in which social work operates in most parts of the world. We then set the scene for our analysis through a brief discussion of Indigenous and AOP paradigms and theory. The section concludes with a short review of literature on Indigenous leadership.

Social service organizations and neoliberalism

Since the mid-1970s, governments in most countries have undertaken a shift from public to private service delivery (for-profit and non-profit) through contracting-out and a ratification of private market solutions for economic and social problems (Rogowski 2020; Baines et al. 2024). Understood as an iteration of classical economics in the Adam Smith sense (Harvey 2020), neoliberalism is a set of policies aimed at limiting

government, legally mandating balanced budgets, cutting taxes, flexibilizing labour markets, reducing the regulation of private corporations and creating optimal conditions and opportunities for private profit making (Stanford 2015; Whiteside et al. 2021). Neoliberal approaches tend to view all social problems as technocratic and financial accounting issues that can be solved by substantial government cutbacks in public spending and justified by market metrics and other auditing techniques and rationalities (Gallo 2022).

The literature substantiates that these auditing techniques significantly decreased professional discretion while contracting out, a reduced tax base and thus a reduced funding base, and significantly reduced service provision (Stanford 2015; Whiteside et al., 2021). This lack of services significantly increased the demand for services, as well as complexity and intensity of the problems experienced by service users and communities (Abramovitz and Zelnick 2021; Baines 2022). Claiming to promote accountability and efficiency, neoliberal management models such as New Public Management introduced increasingly strict outcome targets and measures of work that diminish social workers' discretionary space (Abramovitz and Zelnick 2021). In part, this is because the numbers associated with these measures do not represent the full range of interventions, communications, and relationship building that is part of every good social work endeavour (Pascoe et al., 2023; Timor-Schlevin et al., 2023). Instead, these metrics narrowed the bountiful complexity of social work practice and introduced increasingly restricted, standardized practice (Abramovitz and Zelnick 2021).

Standardization both reduces decision-making capacity and reduces or removes practices that are difficult to measure, including those associated with building social justice, promoting human rights, and the ongoing work of sustaining the dignity of service users and excluded communities (Healy 2017; Rogowski 2022). These practices include open-ended, dignity-enhancing relationship building; ongoing, participatory assessment and case planning; advocating with and for individuals and communities; policy debates and critique; and community development and mobilization (Healy 2017; Schlevin et al. 2023). Standardizing practice also means that the work can be broken down into smaller, more simplified, repetitive pieces and undertaken by lower-paid, less credentialed workers, or volunteers (Baines 2024). This undermines hard-won gains in terms of wages, respect, and better conditions in the highly gendered and lower pay social services sector (Abramovitz and Zelnick 2021). Standardized practice also means that not only do workers have less autonomy and discretion to use equity-engaged practices, but they also have less time and space to critically think beyond the dominant culture and have fewer resources, time and capacity to respond to the specific cultural needs of service users and communities (Rogowski 2020; Smith 2022). This poses particular problems for those seeking the time

and space to generate new decolonial practices, and to serve those silenced and created as marginal within the current operation of social services.

Indigenous and AOP social work theory: Deepening conversation

This study is located within two paradigms: an Indigenous paradigm based on knowledge, ethics, world views, ideas, and systems (Bennett 2015) and a critical paradigm (Calderwood et al. 2024). The Indigenous paradigm has been developed by Indigenous scholars worldwide who see a need for research that reflects Aboriginal relational and dialogic ways of knowing (Kovach 2021). It frequently involves the oral tradition of sharing knowledge in the form of storytelling, yarning, talk story, re-storying, and re-remembering (Absolon 2022; Calderwood et al. 2024) or, as Kovach (2021) puts it, conversational methods (p. 124). The critical or alternate paradigm undertakes theorizing to pursue positive social change and to redress inequities (Habermas 2015). Aboriginal scholars Green and Baldry argue that the two paradigms share a commitment to use of knowledge for emancipatory purposes, including decolonization and reconciliation. Additionally, both paradigms highlight the intersectional nature of oppressions and injustices and seek to address individual pain and difficulty, while simultaneously seeking change within the social structures and relations that generate inequity and oppression (Calderwood et al. 2024).

In terms of both theory and paradigm, the study draws on Indigenous social work theorizing and AOP. Like the Indigenous paradigm, Indigenous theories are grounded in Indigenous knowledges, ethics, world views, ideas, and systems or as Martin and Mirraboopa (2003) put it, Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing (see also, Freeman 2017). Bennett (2015) argues further that Indigenous theorizing ‘respect(s) the inter-relational way many Aboriginal people are raised and incorporates Indigenous voices and perspectives. It aims to achieve a positive outcome for Indigenous peoples’ (p. 20). While Indigenous perspectives present a crucial worldview, they remain largely at the periphery of the Westernized social work endeavour (Rowe et al., 2015; Sinclair 2022). The emancipatory theory this project aims to develop is not an add-on to AOP or a superficial blending of Indigenous and AOP, but an extension and deepening of each and their shared ground. We place Indigenous theorizing at the forefront of our project as a political act of decentring Western approaches. Western approaches, arguably, have not led to the liberation of humankind and require rigorous critique in order to further develop and contribute constructively to the local and global problems facing the planet.

Critical/AOP approaches highlight the interwoven nature of oppressions and injustices and seek to address individual pain and difficulty while simultaneously seeking change within the larger structures and social relations that generate and benefit from inequity and oppression (Bennett and Gillieatt 2022). This provides an epistemological congruence with Indigenous perspectives, as Aboriginal scholars Green and Baldry (2008) note, both perspectives have emancipation and equity as their end goals. Despite this shared ground at the level of theory, Rowe et al. (2015) argue that to achieve positive outcomes for Indigenous peoples, research undertaken by non-Indigenous peoples requires a paradigmatic shift, exposing colonizing and racist assumptions underpinning praxis.

Taking up Rowe et al.'s (2015) challenge above, our project foregrounded Indigenous voices and theories, alongside a commitment to deep shifting the paradigm, in part, through critical reflexivity (Morley 2016; Morley and O'bree 2021) concerning colonialism, whiteness, and racism, and in their place generating new decoloniality-engaged social justice practices, theory, and dialogue. Morley and O'bree (2021) argue, similarly, that critical reflection on theory, knowledge, and practice provides an important means to remain closely connected to the need for systemic change, including decolonization, and to peel back the layers of thought and practice that keep inequities in place. Though many professions and disciplines undertake reflection on their practices, critical reflection involves a focus on individual practices and theory, as well as close consideration of the ways that larger social structures shape and delimit thought and possibilities for more socially just ways of being and thinking (La Rose and Veltman 2025). Critical reflection and critical consciousness raising are integral aspects of AOP but are often difficult to enact in the high-paced, under-resourced, neoliberal social service workplace (Morley and O'bree 2021). This undermines the capacity of social justice theory to be part of contemporary social work interactions and to build better outcomes for individuals, families, and communities (Fook 2021).

Indigenous leadership

The literature on Indigenous leadership is growing rapidly (Wolfgramm et al., 2016), with agreement around several central points including the importance of culture and spirituality (Gladstone and Pepin 2017; Dutta 2018); the individual-collective simultaneity (Gram-Hanssen 2021); the complex structures of ritual, protocol, ceremonial rights, extended family, bands, and societies that all influence leadership (Gladstone and Pepin 2017); global continuities in Indigenous practices (Khalifa et al. 2019); leadership as a journey of learning (Doyle and Hungerford 2015); the importance of flexible approaches to respect the diversity of

Indigenous needs and populations, as well as the need for situational leadership to engage with rapid changes and diverse needs (Doyle and Hungerford 2015).

Drawing on an extensive review of the educational literature, Khalil et al. (2018) found that Westernized Eurocentric schooling serves as a tool of imperialism, colonization, and control in the education of Indigenous peoples. They argue persuasively for global Indigenous leadership in decolonizing education through prioritizing Indigenous ancestral knowledge, enacting self-reflection and self-determination, connecting with and empowering the community, altruism, and spirituality as expressed through servant leadership, and inclusive communication practices (Khalifa et al. 2019). Gram-Hanssen (2021) argues that the continuity of the individual and the collective within an Indigenous relational ontology makes it possible to imagine leadership as an 'individual-collective simultaneity' (p. 519). Envisioning transformative leadership for all, she argues further that 'it is through holding and working through these creative tensions that we can start to see pathways towards equitable and sustainable futures' (p. 519). As will be analysed below, similar insights and themes were found in our Australian qualitative yarning/group interview data.

Research design

The research design foregrounded the knowledge and research methods of Indigenous people, as well as connections with, and ways to speak into critical/AOP theory. The study took place in three countries with long colonial histories and Indigenous populations, namely Australia, Canada, and Taiwan, though only the findings from Australia are analysed in this article, as data collection is ongoing in the other countries. The team in each country included Indigenous scholars, an Indigenous elder or advisor, and non-Indigenous critical/AOP scholars who consulted and dialogued regularly on all aspects of the project, thus respecting and highlighting the oral traditions of Indigenous knowledge sharing and conversational methods (Kovach 2021) and deepening our data collection and analysis through ongoing critical reflexivity (Morley 2020). The teams also had dialogue across countries, providing international insights and complexity to the project.

Our research questions included: What is an emancipatory social work practice and theory in contemporary contexts? What are meaningful forms of dialogue and exchange on Indigenous and AOP theory and practice? What fosters and what inhibits emancipatory theory and practice? Does foregrounding Indigenous perspectives within this process provide a credible pathway for developing the theory and practice necessary to meet the challenges of the 2020s and beyond?

In terms of the insights discussed in this article, the research team yarning with Aboriginal (10) and non-Aboriginal (5) people at five human service organizations in Australia, serving Indigenous peoples. Yarning is a two-way, respectful, and culturally appropriate way of storytelling and the creation of new knowledge within Aboriginal cultures (Geia et al. 2013; Christiansen 2022). Yarning is built on and deepens relationships and community and is increasingly used to improve communication with Aboriginal peoples in health, community, environmental, government, social services, and research projects. Our Australian research team includes two Indigenous and two non-Indigenous researchers, with the researcher best acquainted with the organization initiating the yarning. Four of the organizations involved in the yarning for this project were non-profit, community services and one was a female-led, Aboriginal-owned, community-controlled, for-profit organization. With the permission of the participants, the yarning was audio-recorded, transcribed, data coded, and used as the basis for this article.

In terms of analysis, yarnings were transcribed verbatim. Drawing on grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 1990) and narrative/yarning/conversational analysis (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010), we applied an open-coding procedure: after multiple readings of the transcripts, the data were partitioned into stories and concepts (Kovach 2021). Coding was undertaken by one member of the team, followed by group discussion and analysis. Coding was then undertaken by all members of the team, followed by further team discussion and analysis. Emerging concepts were continually compared to each other in terms of characteristics and dimensions, as well as to similar concepts in the literature, until a tentative mapping of the inter-relationships and patterns was possible (Darlington and Scott 2020). This process continued until no new concepts/themes emerged. The study meets internationally accepted ethical guidelines and received approval from our universities. Participants provided written consent. Though the five organizations provided services in very different areas, there were strong common threads and insights that dovetailed much of the literature discussed earlier. The themes and insights are analysed below.

Insights and themes from the data

In this section, we do not draw on direct quotes from the research participants to contribute to theorizing on Indigenous leadership, as we plan to use direct quotes elsewhere to develop arguments that are akin but different. Instead, we draw on our preliminary analysis of data to present insights and themes. Insights may paraphrase quotes but do not reproduce them in their entirety. Though direct quotes are not presented in this article, significant data exists to substantiate the insights presented

below. The four themes include working and leadership from Indigenous-centred/culture-centred knowing, being, and doing; intersectional identities in leadership for Indigenous peoples; partnerships as Indigenous leadership; and envisioning for all.

Working and leadership from Indigenous-centred/culture-centred knowing, being, and doing

Though most practice in social service organizations is culture-centred, this culture is not made explicit; rather, White, euro-centric, capitalist-linked, hetero-normative, monoculture is naturalized as the understood and unquestioned *modus operandi* (Strekalova-Hughes et al., 2021). This universalized, normative approach leaves many groups excluded, alienated, and oppressed within ongoing processes of subjugation. Rather than operating as a hegemonic but opaque force, Dutta (2018) argues for a culture-centred approach in which cultures are made obvious. Within this process, service providers, service users, and communities are invited to share cultural understandings, practices, and knowledge, as well as understandings of the ways these systems regulate and determine resource accessibility for those made marginal, particularly but not exclusively, Indigenous Peoples. A culture-centred approach includes recognizing different ways of hearing and of telling people's narratives in terms of needed services (recognizing and legitimizing voice), as well as making a commitment to understanding and addressing structural barriers to services. In this approach, multiple ways of knowing, doing, and being are indivisible from the need for immediate service and larger macro-level change.

This cultural approach was very evident in our data, with organizations inviting ongoing participation of Indigenous staff, service users, communities, and service partners, and committing to continuous critical reflexivity and two-way learning. Though there is no equivalent in Western culture, for Indigenous people, ways of knowing, being, and doing may include beliefs such as the inter-twining of health and well-being with Country and nature (Freeman 2017; Terare and Rawsthorne 2020). In practical terms, within a culture-centred model, leadership is shown by providing opportunities and support for Indigenous service users to articulate connections to Country and nature, and to help plan and develop needed services.

Though research participants noted that austere neoliberal funding regimes constrain opportunities for this kind of decolonial innovation, they argued that service leaders and providers should be empowered to develop approaches and services that respect this perspective and mobilize appropriate resources and supports. All research participants viewed ensuring funding for their organization to be a difficult challenge, particularly since funders frequently demanded priorities that did not meet

those of the organization. Organizations addressed this through private fundraising, attempting to comply with and bend neoliberal outcome metrics that did not reflect the services provided, and applying for and providing complex documentation for a rotating number of short and ever-changing funding contracts.

Currently, mainstream services are not set up with Indigenous values or voices in mind, and with this mismatch, gaps and oppression appear in services and supports. In addition, mainstream services often use deficit models, or models that view Indigenous people and others as the problem, outside the dominant culture as lacking the moral and social values favoured by mainstream, capitalist, monoculture. This places Indigenous people in the position of having to prove that they are worthy of service and support, and ignores the strengths provided by Indigenous values and world views. Moreover, in some organizations, a single Indigenous staff member may be hired to provide representation and legitimation for the organization. However, this is often nominal rather than a significant shift in culture or resources and, in the context of neoliberalism, places a daunting colonial load on the staff member to make things work in a context that is hostile to the empowerment of cultures beyond the mainstream (Thunig and Jones 2021).

Research participants provided leadership by encouraging the expression of non-Westernized, Aboriginal perspectives and practices, and foregrounding them in the organization's services. Cultural safety and humility provided a theoretical frame and method for this incorporation of Indigeneity. Cultural humility involves an understanding that almost every interaction is cross-cultural in some way and requires an openness to learn, an awareness that social structures shape experience, and a commitment to continuous processes of compassionate self-awareness and collective critical inquiry (Gottlieb 2021). Building on initiatives of Maori nurses in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Papps and Ramsden 1996), McKenzie (2023) argues that the goal of cultural safety for social work is

to reduce the alienation of Indigenous peoples by ensuring that non-Indigenous folks understand the history of colonial violence, the systemic influences of racism towards Indigenous peoples, and the ways inequalities and biases within our systems and institutions have continued to marginalize and harm Indigenous peoples. (p. 1)

The adoption of cultural humility and cultural safety at the organizational level also ensured a meaningful shift to collectivist values, including shared leadership and governance, not only involving Indigenous staff but also Indigenous communities and service users. Research participants also emphasized the importance of understanding the intersectional identities of Indigenous communities as a path to foster trust, build ongoing cultural exchange, and lifelong learning. These aspects of Indigenous leadership will be further elaborated below.

Intersectional identities in leadership for Indigenous peoples

In 1977, the Black, lesbian, feminists of the [Comhahee River Collective \(1977\)](#) introduced the concept of overlapping or intersecting oppressions. Later, this concept moved into academic discourse through the critical race theorizing of [Crenshaw \(2006\)](#). A feminist intersectional analysis understands social relations to operate in a web of constantly changing oppression and privilege, depending on the context and the people involved ([Hill Collins et al., 2016](#)). Thus, every experience is simultaneously interwoven with other aspects of identity and social location, such as class, culture, gender, (dis)ability, age, region, sexual identity, and orientation ([Comhahee River Collective 1977](#); [Crenshaw 2006](#); [Hill Collins et al. 2016](#)). [Yuval-Davis \(2006\)](#) cautions that we can never fully itemize the totality of intersecting oppressions and privileges, and that the goal of intersectional analysis is a deeper understanding of complexity and dynamics, rather than a formulaic list or mechanical inventory.

The research participants noted that, because Indigenous culture and identity are not reflected in most mainstream services, their organizations started from and grounded themselves in a clear sense that Indigenous peoples' intersecting needs were not well met by mainstream services. As evidence of this, they pointed to the many Indigenous people who seek support from non-Indigenous services but soon withdraw, even though their unmet needs may remain acute. Revealing a leadership that fostered long-term trust and relationships, the research participants developed ways to deliver intersectional services that better engaged with Indigenous people's intersectional realities. To achieve this, they drew on cultural models, as discussed above, to provide services for Indigenous peoples with multiple, intersecting identities, including people who were disabled, queer, two-spirited, female, challenged by violent relationships, and sometimes physical and mental health issues, as well as experiencing the oppressive impacts of class including low or no income, inadequate housing, stigma, and discrimination. The complexity of needs and services required comprehensive services that engaged closely with Indigenous community understandings and priorities, while simultaneously challenging mainstream single-service models.

Long-term partnerships as leadership

The research participants spoke compellingly about working in two worlds, the Indigenous one and the non-Indigenous. These two different worlds meant that the formation and operation of partnerships among Indigenous and non-Indigenous service organization presented a set of challenges. This was largely because non-Indigenous practices are hegemonic, with many of them reproducing colonial and racist social

relations, and the domination of Western approaches. This made partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations very difficult. These challenges were met by interweaving the practices and knowledge discussed above, particularly the shift to acknowledging the operation of culture and explicitly incorporating Indigenous practices and openness to reciprocal learning.

Similar to our research design, the central plank in meeting these challenges required disrupting taken-for-granted assumptions about partnerships and instead foregrounding Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing as a conscious and conscientious act of decentring Western approaches. Indeed, the data show that decentring Euro-centric approaches put inter-agency and Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal partnerships on a new footing based in collective, reciprocal, and two-way Indigenous-led cultural and organizational learning. The pace of this cultural shift in partnerships was argued to be important in terms of each organization being sensitive to not over-promise or move ahead too quickly, leaving the other organization behind. Instead, the cultural shift needed to occur in tandem as a collective, meeting people and organizations where they are with the goal of nurturing and sustaining long-term relationships.

The theme of intergenerational trust was strong in the data, as evidenced by multiple generations of service users participating in services provided by these Indigenous/non-Indigenous partnerships. These highly valued, long-term relationships and partnerships necessarily involve continuity of care and constant follow-up with communities and service users, thus consistently and constantly knitting and reknitting trust and relationships, as well as the credibility of the services and partnerships. Research participants also emphasized the importance of being continually open to questions and review within partnerships, and to ongoing critical reflection about the services, the partnership, and decoloniality. These practices reinforced Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination by weaving connection, truth-telling, and envisioning into the partnerships, while simultaneously legitimizing and confirming the positive impacts of partnerships that are Aboriginal-led and are based in revaluing Aboriginal ways of knowing and being.

The data also show that the partnerships were keen to provide culturally appropriate services but also to tackle structural-level injustices and inequities, largely at the local level but also with an awareness of larger patterns of anti-Indigenous racism and coloniality globally. Though constrained by neoliberal underfunding and ongoing restructuring of funding and service delivery models, research participants used workarounds, unpaid overtime, and endless goodwill to sustain partnerships and to fight to maintain their decolonial practice. Within the partnerships, the credibility that was built over the long term with Indigenous communities and service users pivoted on shared leadership and collective approaches,

‘walking side-by-side’ rather than non-Indigenous leaders racing ahead with assumed solutions. Trust and long-term, inter-generational relationships were built and sustained by ongoing culture and knowledge exchange between Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers, service users, and community members. As a result, Indigenous leadership in these partnerships can be seen as inclusive, holistic, and a shared undertaking involving Indigenous and non-Indigenous social service workers with an openness to decoloniality and compassionate practice.

Envisioning for all

An important insight from the research participants was the way that decoloniality was described as a way to envision greater equity and social justice for all, though without losing the focus on Indigenous people. The capacity of research participants to operate in two worlds meant that they could hold space for both universal and Indigenous social justice. The research participants reported pursuing Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination within their organizational practices through leadership practices that fostered opportunities for organizations and front-line staff to sustain connections, undertake truth-telling, and participate in envisioning more just futures and collaborative practice.

With reference to sovereignty and its emancipatory power, [Watego \(2021\)](#) argues that Indigenous sovereignty is unceded, and that First Nations connections to worldviews, epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies are significant components of their everyday lives. [Watego \(2021\)](#) argues further that First Nations sovereignty, as expressed through connections to these multi-level world views, is empowering in the face of the unrelenting violence and omnipresence of racism that undergirds colonialism. [Watego \(2021\)](#) refers to this joy of survival as Blak Joy and observes that it underlies centuries of Indigenous resistance and strength. Blak joy was evident in our data with research participants reporting how intensely rewarding it was to receive multi-generational trust from Indigenous families and communities, and to continue to reflexively deepen and expand these relationships and empowering decoloniality practices.

Research participants were critically reflexive on their years of work, noting that emancipatory practice for Indigenous peoples also meant emancipatory practice for other oppressed groups, as there are many who are harmed by current practices and policies, and seek equity. Some of the research participants observed that cultural humility and culturally safe practice are not just for Indigenous people but are also liberatory for other cultures. In their experience, this opened spaces for new mutually liberatory models of being, thinking, and doing. In addition, some of the research participants argued that they found ways to bring forward

some of the best of Western thinking to Indigenous insights and thus, strengthen both at the levels of collectivist, shared leadership and governance, and collaborative practice, as these concepts are highly valued by many groups.

Broad visionary leadership was also apparent in the activism undertaken by the research participants and their organizations in terms of activist decolonization and intersectional social-justice struggles. Several research participants spoke about the importance of participating in ongoing action and activism, particularly in support of Indigenous initiatives in the community. Research participants also critically reflected on how to support the decoloniality and social justice struggles, in the face of ongoing racism, and significant historic setbacks such as the recent defeat of *The Voice*, a constitutional change that would provide Indigenous people with a voice in Australia's federal parliament (Cole 2024). In addition, the research participants struggled creatively with the question of understanding how many current practices and policies are saturated with racism and coloniality. At the same time, they argued that space has always existed for the development of decoloniality and social justice approaches and thought. They wondered out loud how to best foster the latter and challenge the former, both at the level of ourselves as shaped by a system of colonialism, but with the capacity to make meaningful and equitable collective and individual change.

Conclusions

Early in this article, we asked which emancipatory decoloniality leadership practices were present in the data, and what forms did they take? Though the analysis is preliminary and the evidence presented is insights and themes, the research design and method used are innovative in their conscious foregrounding of Indigenous knowledges and approaches. We chose to decentre Western hegemony in our research, with the goal of further legitimizing Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, as well as to uncover decolonial practices that do not mimic or necessarily map onto Western ways of knowing, being, and doing. Our analysis identified decolonial leadership in social service organizations in the forms of Indigenous-centred/culture-centred ways of knowing, being, and doing; intersectional identities; partnerships; and envisioning for all. These Indigenous leadership forms all involve reciprocity and two-way, mutual learning, with a focus on long-term relationship building and trust. Fleming et al. (2023) argue that two-way learning generates a third space rather than a parallel of two distinct spaces, in that two-way learning is the interface where two or more cultures meet and blend learning. This third space could be seen in the fostering of new forms of partnerships, embracing intersectionality, and envisioning further justice

initiatives are ways of reconciling Indigenous and Western knowing, being, and doing within the confines and rigidities of neoliberal organizations. Drawing on data from Canada, Baines (2022) has argued that despite the context of austerity and late neoliberalism, dissent, decoloniality, and anti-oppressive practice continue to find ways to thrive in some social service organizations. The data analyzed in this article confirm the same and extend this by contributing to preliminary theorizing on Indigenous leadership within social service organizations.

The data revealed innovative forms of cultural responsiveness and resilience as part of a deep commitment to foster, nurture, sustain, and support Indigenous service users and communities. Two of the authors (Gates et al. 2023) have previously argued that cultural responsiveness tends to generate an understanding of the intersecting complexities of diversity and cultivates a dedication to cultural humility. As Joliv ette (2021) notes, cultural humility includes fostering decolonization, exploring differences, learning to value and respect diversity, and nurturing a lifelong commitment to going beyond survival and onto thriving. Baumann (2023) deepens this discussion by observing that thriving

moves beyond a statement of survival to a statement of “we are here, we are productive, and we continue to thrive and contribute to today’s world.” In addition, thriving accentuates the importance of ancestral homelands and traditional practices to healing and a positive sense of Indigenous identity and dignity (1).

Though not directly articulated by the research participants, Indigenous thriving and Blak joy (Watego 2021) capture the collective and collaborative leadership and community-advancement evident in the data. Indeed, the concepts of Indigenous thriving and Blak joy provide an effective way to further decentre and disrupt colonial and racist beliefs about Indigenous peoples, including the cultural deficit model, mentioned earlier in this article. Interweaving the concepts of thriving with the leadership forms analysed in this article confirms Indigenous leadership as an identifiable set of practices, as well as a viable and very constructive force within social service delivery, providing greater social justice for everyone.

Reconciliation and decoloniality are not one-sided projects in which Indigenous people should undertake all the work. Instead, it is urgent that non-Indigenous people, foregrounding the voices and leadership of Indigenous people, participate in social projects that decolonize knowledge, policy, and practice on a local and global scale. Our research methodology and the analysis presented in this article identify forms of Indigenous leadership that are propelling this decolonial, social justice agenda forward. However, further research is required to delve more deeply into Indigenous-led practices and social service provision as it develops in resistance to new conditions and forces, such as the far-right

push-back against human rights and equity, as well as the perniciousness and constraints of late neoliberalism and its austere funding regimes. Further innovation in decoloniality within research is also required in order to build ways of knowing, being, and doing that disrupt capitalist, colonial hegemonies and reflect the liberatory capacities of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples committed to mutual emancipation and social justice.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to the research participants and our research assistants, Halina Faqirzada and Krystal Evans, for their excellent work.

Conflicts of interest. None declared.

Funding

This study was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada, Insight Grant, GR016305.

References

- Abramovitz, M. and Zelnick, J. R. (2021) 'Structural Racism, Managerialism, and the Future of the Human Services: Rewriting the Rules', *Social Work*, 67: 8–16.
- Absolon, K. E. (2022) *Kaandossiwin: How We Come to Know: Indigenous re-Search Methodologies*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.
- Baines, D. (2024) 'Feminized Care Work, Social Work and Resistance in the Context of Late Neoliberalism', in C. Noble, S. Rasool, L. Harms-Smith, G. Muñoz-Arce and D. Baines (eds.) *The Routledge International Handbook of Feminisms in Social Work*, pp. 394–404. London: Routledge.
- Baines, D. (2022) 'Qualitative Research: "Without Losing What We Know": Dissenting Social Work in the Context of Epochal Crises', *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work*, 34: 8–20.
- Baines, D., Brown, C. and Cabahug, F. (2024) 'The Shifting Labour Process in Professional Care: Recreating Dominance and the Managerialised Mental Health Social Worker', *British Journal of Social Work*, 54: 475–93.
- Baumann, D. F. (2023) 'Thrivance is My Identity: Moving Beyond Survival', *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 10: 1–12. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48754823>.
- Bennett, B. (2015) 'Stop Deploying Your White Privilege on Me!' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Engagement with the Australian Association of Social Workers', *Australian Social Work*, 68: 19–31.
- Bennett, B. and Gillieatt, S. (2022) 'Indigenous Ideas Benefit Collaborative Research Partnerships', *Australian Social Work*, 75: 269–72.
- Bessarab, D. and Ng'andu, B. (2010) 'Yarning About Yarning as a Legitimate Method in Indigenous Research', *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies*, 3: 37–50.

- BlackDeer, A. A. (2023) 'Unsettling Feminism in Social Work: Toward an Indigenous Decolonial Feminism', *Affilia*, 38: 615–28.
- Calderwood, K., Morgenshtern, M. and Absolon, K. (2024) *Re Search Methods in Social Work. Linking Ways of Knowing to Knowledge Creation*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press.
- Christensen, K. (2022) 'Yarning as Decolonising Practice', *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 2022: 1–8.
- Clarke, K. (2022) 'Reimagining Social Work Ancestry: Toward Epistemic Decolonization', *Affilia*, 37: 266–78.
- Cole, A. (2024) 'Disengagement and Defeat of the Voice to Parliament Referendum', *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, 39: 129–49.
- Comhahee River Collective (1977) *The Combahee River Collective Statement*. South Carolina: Blackpast.
- Corbin, J. M. and Strauss, A. (1990) 'Grounded Theory Research: Procedures, Canons, and Evaluative Criteria', *Qualitative Sociology*, 13: 3–21.
- Crenshaw, K. (2006) 'Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43: 1241–99.
- Darlington, Y. and Scott, D. (2020) *Qualitative Research in Practice: Stories from the Field*. London: Routledge.
- Doyle, K. and Hungerford, C. (2015) 'Leadership as a Personal Journey: An Indigenous Perspective', *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 36: 336–45. <https://doi.org/10.3109/01612840.2015.1009663>
- Dutta, M. J. (2018) 'Culture-centered Approach in Addressing Health Disparities: Communication Infrastructures for Subaltern Voices', *Communication Methods and Measures*, 12: 239–59.
- Fleming, C. et al. (2023) 'A Yarn Among Social Workers: Knowing, Being, and Doing Social Work Learning, Expertise, and Practice', *Australian Social Work*, 76: 330–42.
- Fook, J. (2021) 'Introduction: Creating Critically Reflective Work Environments', in J. Fook (ed.) *Practicing Critical Reflection in Social Care Organisations*, pp. 1–19. London: Routledge.
- Freeman, B. (2017) 'The Spirit of Indigenous Youth: The Resilience and self-determination in Connecting to the Spirit and Ways of Knowing', *Journal of Indigenous Wellbeing*, 2: 60–75.
- Gallo, E. (2022) 'Three Varieties of Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Rule by the Experts, the People, the Leader', *Competition & Change*, 26: 554–74.
- Gates, T. G., Bennett, B. and Baines, D. (2023) 'Strengthening Critical Allyship in Social Work Education: Opportunities in the Context of # BlackLivesMatter and COVID-19', *Social Work Education*, 42: 371–87.
- Geia, L. K., Hayes, B. and Usher, K. (2013) 'Yarning/Aboriginal Storytelling: Towards an Understanding of an Indigenous Perspective and its Implications for Research Practice', *Contemporary Nurse*, 46: 13–17.
- Gladstone, J. and Pepion, D. (2017) 'Exploring Traditional Indigenous Leadership Concepts: A Spiritual Foundation for Blackfeet Leadership', *Leadership*, 13: 571–89.
- Gottlieb, M. (2021) 'The Case for a Cultural Humility Framework in Social Work Practice', *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 30: 463–81.
- Gram-Hanssen, I. (2021) 'Individual and Collective Leadership for Deliberate Transformations: Insights from Indigenous Leadership', *Leadership*, 17: 519–41.

- Green, S. and Baldry, E. (2008) 'Building Indigenous Australian Social Work', *Australian Social Work*, 61: 389–402.
- Habermas, J. (2015) *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Harvey, D. (2020) *The Anti-Capitalist Chronicles*. London: Pluto Press.
- Healy, K. (2017) 'Becoming a Trustworthy Profession: Doing Better than Doing Good', *Australian Social Work*, 70: 7–16.
- Hill Collins, C. P., Bilge, S. and Bilge, S. (2016) *Intersectionality*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hölscher, D. and Chiumbu, S. (2020) 'Anti-Oppressive Community Work Practice and the Decolonization Debate: A Contribution from the Global South', in S., Todd and J., Drolet (eds.) *Community Practice and Social Development in Social Work*. pp. 223–42, Singapore: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-6969-8_2.
- Jimenez-Luque, A. (2021) 'Decolonial Leadership for Cultural Resistance and Social Change: Challenging the Social Order Through the Struggle of Identity', *Leadership*, 17: 154–72.
- Jolivéte, A. J. (2021) 'American Indian Leadership: On Indigenous Geographies of Gender and Thrivance', in M. Walter, T. Kukutai, A. A. Gonzales and R. Henry (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous Sociology*, pp. 464–82. Oxford: Oxford.
- Khalifa, M. A., Khalil, D., Marsh, T. E. J. and Halloran, C. (2019) 'Toward an Indigenous, Decolonizing School Leadership: A Literature Review', *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 55: 571–614.
- Kovach, M. (2021) *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*. Toronto: University of Toronto press.
- La Rose, T. and Veltman, A. (2025) 'Side-lined by the Side Eye: Exploring the Effects of Nonverbal Communication in 2SLGBTQI+ Clinical Social Work Encounters', *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 53: 80–88.
- McKenzie, R. (2023) 'Caring about Cultural Safety', The Federation of Community Services of BC. <https://fcssbc.ca/caring-cultural-safety/#:~:text=Cultural%20safety%20is%20intended%20to,and%20institutions%20have%20continued%20to>, accessed 1 May 2025.
- McKnight, L. and Yunkaporta, T. (2024) 'Yarning and Knitting Words: A Cross-cultural Thought Experiment on Writing Beyond School', *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 47: 351–63.
- Morley, C. (2016) 'Promoting Activism Through Critical Social Work Education: The Impact of Global Capitalism and Neoliberalism on Social Work and Social Work Education', *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 4: 39–57.
- Morley, C. (2020) 'Critical Reflection and Critical Social Work', in B. Pease (eds.) *Doing Critical Social Work*, pp. 25–38. London: Routledge.
- Morley, C. and O'bree, C. (2021) 'Critical Reflection: An Imperative Skill for Social Work Practice in Neoliberal Organisations?', *Social Sciences*, 10: 97.
- Muller, L. (2020) *A Theory for Indigenous Australian Health and Human Service Work: Connecting Indigenous Knowledge and Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Papps, E. and Ramsden, I. (1996) 'Cultural Safety in Nursing: The New Zealand Experience', *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*, 8: 491–7.
- Pascoe, K. M., Waterhouse-Bradley, B. and McGinn, T. (2023) 'Social Workers' Experiences of Bureaucracy: A Systematic Synthesis of Qualitative Studies', *British Journal of Social Work*, 53: 513–33.

- Pease, B. and Nipperess, S. (2020) 'Doing Critical Social Work in the Neoliberal Context: Working on the Contradictions', In *Doing Critical Social Work* (pp. 3–24). Routledge.
- Rogowski, S. (2020) *Social Work: The Rise and Fall of a Profession?* Bristol: Policy Press.
- Rowe, S., Baldry, E. and Earles, W. (2015) 'Decolonising Social Work Research: Learning from Critical Indigenous Approaches', *Australian Social Work*, 68: 296–308.
- Seckinelgin, H. (2023) 'Teaching Social Policy As If Students Matter: Decolonizing the Curriculum and Perpetuating Epistemic Injustice', *Critical Social Policy*, 43: 296–315.
- Strekalova-Hughes, E., Nash, K. T., Schmer, B. and Caldwell, K. (2021) 'Meeting the Needs of All Cultureless Learners: Culture Discourse and Quality Assumptions in Personalized Learning Research', *Review of Research in Education*, 45: 372–407.
- Sinclair, R. (2022) 'Preface', in D. Baines, N. Clark and B. Bennett (eds.) *Doing Anti-Oppressive Social Work: Rethinking Theory and Practice*. pp. xvii–xviii, Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.
- Smith, K. (2022) 'Occupied Spaces: Unmapping Standardized Assessments', in D. Baines, N. Clark and B. Bennett (eds.) *Doing Anti-Oppressive Practice: Rethinking Theory and Practice*, pp. 141–63. Halifax: Fernwood Press.
- Stanford, J. (2015) *Economics for Everyone*. London: Pluto Press.
- Terare, M. and Rawsthorne, M. (2020) 'Country is Yarning to Me: Worldview, Health and Well-being Amongst Australian First Nations People', *British Journal of Social Work*, 50: 944–60.
- Thunig, A. and Jones, T. (2021) 'Don't Make Me Play House-n***er': Indigenous Academic Women Treated as 'Black Performer' within Higher Education', *Australian Educational Researcher*, 48: 397–417.
- Timor-Shlevin, S., Hermans, K. and Roose, R. (2023) 'In Search of Social Justice-informed Services: A Research Agenda for the Study of Resistance to Neo-managerialism', *British Journal of Social Work*, 53: 23–39.
- Watego, C. (2021) *Another Day in the Colony*. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press.
- Whiteside, H., McBride, S. and Evans, B. (2021) '1: Introduction: Varieties of Austerity', in H. Whiteside, S. McBride and B. Evans (eds) *Varieties of Austerity*, pp. 1–28, Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press.
- Wolfgang, R., Spiller, C. and Voyageur, C. (2016) 'Indigenous Leadership—Editors' Introduction', *Leadership*, 12: 263–9.
- Yuval-Davis, N. (2006) 'Intersectionality and Feminist Politics', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13: 193–209.

© The Author(s) 2025. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The British Association of Social Workers.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. For commercial re-use, please contact reprints@oup.com for reprints and translation rights for reprints. All other permissions can be obtained through our RightsLink service via the Permissions link on the article page on our site—for further information please contact journals.permissions@oup.com.

British Journal of Social Work, 2025, 55, 3714–3732

<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaf104>

Original article