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Aboriginal cultural awareness training for mine employees: Good intentions, complicated outcomes

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ABSTRACT

In the Australian context, training for employees to impart 'cultural awareness' concerning Indigenous people has recently become a common feature of workplace inductions within the mining industry. The training aims to foster good relationships between companies and Aboriginal Traditional Owners of land and increase Aboriginal employment within the industry by educating miners about 'Aboriginal culture'. However, there have been few investigations focused on how the training is constructed, delivered, its content, or efficacy. This article presents an overview of how this training is being implemented at several major Rio Tinto Iron Ore (RTIO) mines in the Pilbara region of Western Australia. The study finds that the corporate sector's commitment to educating workers about cultural difference is difficult to achieve in this highly politicised setting. The paper argues for an understanding of the complexities and strategic politics involved in implementing Aboriginal cultural awareness training to avoid both naïve expectations and unintended negative consequences.

1. Introduction

Much has been written about the changing dynamic between Indigenous people and the extractive industries sector in Australia (Altman and Martin, 2009; Langton, 2004, 2006, 2013; Langton and Longbottom, 2012; Langton and Mazel, 2012; Langton and Palmer, 2003; O'Faircheallaigh, 1998, 2010, 2012, 2013; Taylor, 2012). Until around the mid-1990s, relationships between the two parties have been largely antagonistic. However, this has improved due to legislative recognition of Indigenous interests in land in the *Native Title Act (Cwth) 1993* alongside growing recognition of Indigenous rights around the world. Mining companies are increasingly aware of the business case for developing good relationships with Aboriginal people, to obtain and maintain a 'social license to operate' and avoid project delays or reputational damage (Brereton and Parmenter, 2008; Langton, 2013; Owen, 2016).

The implementation of cultural awareness training within mining companies is largely attributed to the recent developments in agreement making between industry and Indigenous people. Indigenous employment provisions are now a common feature of agreements as are Reconciliation Action Plans between Australian mining companies and local Indigenous groups. Employment at mines is seen as a way out of poverty for some, especially those living in remote areas with limited alternative employment options (Langton, 2013). The social and economic disadvantage of a large proportion of the Indigenous Australian population and its impact on their health, education and welfare is well documented. Compared to non-Indigenous Australians, Indigenous people generally have low levels of formal education, are more likely to have lower literacy and numeracy skills, and suffer poor health outcomes.

Within this context, 'culture' can be conceived as a strength for Indigenous identity, but also in some respects a barrier to the effective implementation of employment initiatives. It has been suggested that for some Aboriginal people, the values implicit in working in the mining industry may be in opposition to certain everyday customs and beliefs (Trigger, 2002:42). For example, pressure to share income with kin as part of what is termed 'demand sharing' (Peterson, 1993) has been posited as influencing the extent to which Aboriginal people wish to enter and remain in the workforce (Brereton and Parmenter, 2008). While not necessarily addressing directly such issues arising from customary practices among Aboriginal people, cultural awareness training embraces a general idea of a distinctive 'culture', and aims to educate non-Aboriginal mine employees about some aspects of Indigenous beliefs and practices. The expectation is that this knowledge will build better relationships between the company and the Traditional Owners[1] of the area being mined, and between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal

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[1] The term 'Traditional Owners' arose from its use in the *Aboriginal Land Rights (N.T.) Act* of 1976 and has become widely adopted across Australia to refer to people of Aboriginal ancestry who hold customary rights in land and waters.

mine workers. Previous research in Western Australia, the state where the case study for this research is located, indicates that prejudice against Aboriginal people has been quite commonplace (Edmunds, 1989; Pedersen et al., 2004; Trigger 1995; Walker, 1994). Part of the logic of cultural awareness training is that if the broad group of mine employees can become aware of cultural differences this propensity for prejudice or at the least ambivalence about Aboriginal co-workers can be diminished.

Available research on the topic of Aboriginal cultural awareness training focuses on its efficacy and is largely undertaken in the health sector, and to a lesser extent, the education setting. This research suggests that problems associated with how the training conceptualises culture and identity has contributed to its failure to contribute to culturally appropriate health services (Downing and Kowal, 2011; Franklin et al., 2014; Fredericks, 2008). For example, creating the false perception that 'culture' is a unified entity, which may result in consumers of the training developing stereotypical thinking about particular groups of people, without recognising the diversity within cultural groups. It has also been argued that cultural training that focuses on a single ethnic group is somewhat problematic because it stresses deep seated differences and thereby reinforces a form of negative 'othering' in such cases as Aboriginal people in Australia (Downing and Kowal, 2011:8-9). As Fredericks (2008:11) observed, Indigenous-specific cultural awareness training in the health sector 'focuses the lens on Indigenous people, as being under serviced, needy and problematic to non-Indigenous people to some degree'.

While the aims of the training may be well intentioned, the ambiguities surrounding conflicting ideas about both the positive and negative aspects of Indigenous 'culture' (Cowlishaw, 2012) require analysis in order to make visible the complications and assumptions implicated in the cultural awareness training phenomenon. As we know from the strategic way that 'culture' across a range of settings can be invoked in performances for tourists (Bruner, 2005; MacCannell, 1973, 2011), the underlying assumptions and strategic use of simplistic ideas that are involved in cultural training events invite analysis that goes beyond consciously articulated good intentions.

In this context, our study seeks a nuanced approach to the issue of training effectiveness by looking at a broad range of issues arising in its implementation at Rio Tinto Iron Ore (RTIO) operations in the Pilbara region of Western Australia. We have investigated the motives and interests of the different actors involved and how these may relate to messages about 'culture' that are ultimately received by training participants. The article focuses particularly on concepts of 'culture' as understood among the range of stakeholders with an interest in the cultural awareness training process.

2. Background

The most commonly used terms for this kind of training in the Australian context are 'cross-cultural training', 'cultural awareness', and 'intercultural training' (Bean, 2006). This training aims to 'develop awareness of the cultural dimensions of interactions and effectiveness in situations and environments characterised by cultural diversity' (Bean, 2006:3). Table 1 summarises existing models of Aboriginal cultural awareness training in the Australian mining industry.

Before discussing the specific case of our study it is necessary to briefly explain how and why the general phenomenon of cultural awareness training began. The concept of culture is central to cultural training. However, there is no universally accepted definition of the term or consensus on its meaning. We find most useful in this study a now classic approach from Raymond Williams (Williams [1958] 1989: 4) who notes 'culture' is 'a whole way of life', including everyday meanings and practices. In the context of Indigenous studies we acknowledge the importance of understanding change and avoiding any reification of particular cultural forms as essential or necessary to Indigenous identities (Cadena and Starn, 2007: 3). The idea of 'culture' is

both assumed and contested in the forms of cultural awareness training we encounter in the mining industry.

The very first training of this kind has been attributed to anthropologist Edward Hall during the 1950s (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990; Moon, 1996). Hall worked for the American Foreign Service Institute and was responsible for educating diplomats located overseas. Originally, the content of such training was based on anthropological theories of the time. Culture was taught as a system of 'shared information along with shared methods of coding, storing and retrieving information' (Hall and Hall, 1989, cited in Moon, 1996:71). However, the training participants found the anthropological theory hard to understand and insisted they needed more 'specific and concrete information' (Moon, 1996:71). Hall (1956:7) explains that the training had a political orientation:

> The younger officers … because of the emphasis on 'political' reporting, often were left with the idea that there was nothing of importance to be learned from the foreigner as a member of his culture, and that if they could just get to the 'right person' in the political sense, the cold dope on any given situation could be obtained.

In response to the complaints from participants, Hall excluded the anthropological theory and focused more on 'pragmatic, goal-orientated' content such as communication issues including the significance of voice, gestures, and intercultural encounters (Moon, 1996:72). This shift in focus is critical in explaining the disjunction between how culture is conceptualised in contemporary cultural training and earlier anthropological theories of culture.

Since Hall's work at the American Foreign Services Institute, cultural training has emerged as an international industry, with 'respect and tolerance at work' connected to aims for 'improved business performance and bottom line' (Jack and Lorbiecki 1999:7). The view that cultural difference needs to be managed was reinforced by the work of Geert Hofstede in his book *Culture's Consequences* (1980). This study of IBM employees in 53 different nations differentiated cultures based on national boundaries. The model represents five cultural value variations along a continuum labelled: power distance; uncertainty avoidance; individualism versus collectivism; masculine and feminine; and long term/short term time orientation (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede et al., 2005). Countries are assigned a numerical score identifying where they lie on this continuum. The majority of intercultural communication research that followed Hofstede has conceptualised 'culture' as a variable in positivist research projects (Moon, 1996), generally ignoring the fluid nature of beliefs and practices as well as relevant contextual factors.

Despite criticism of this model for its quantitative approach to culture (McSweeney, 2002), many training resources currently use this theory. While contemporary cultural training has roots in the social science disciplines of anthropology and linguistics, the conceptual approach informing cultural training has remained more or less stagnant, ignored newer developments in anthropology (Bjerregaard et al., 2009).

A promising development in the context of our study is the model aimed at fostering 'reflexive anti-racism' amongst non-Aboriginal people working in Indigenous affairs in Australia (Kowal et al., 2013; Franklin et al., 2014). The three-day program focuses on 'identity formation, knowledge production and cultural recognition' (Franklin et al., 2014:23), enabling participants to foster reflection and acceptance of the disjunction between their own racialised feelings and internalised anti-racist ideals (Kowal et al., 2013, cited in Franklin et al., 2014). A recent evaluation found, for example, the participants had a more sophisticated understanding of 'culture' after the program, from 'perceiving culture as something that can be restored to something in a process of continual change' (Franklin et al., 2014:35). However, the authors note that this conceptual framework needs further research to explore its potential (Franklin et al., 2014). Further, there have been very few qualitative evaluations of cultural training and/or studies that