An Examination of Indigenous Australian Entrepreneurs

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Abstract

There is little published literature available on urban contemporary Indigenous entrepreneurs in Australia. The paper defines the Indigenous Australian entrepreneur and provides an insight into the contemporary environment in which these entrepreneurs operate. Through case study analysis, the Indigenous cultural paradigm of success in entrepreneurial activity is examined. It explores commonalities among the participants, examining their educational and training expertise, their sacrifices and survival techniques in business, and investigates what makes them different from non-Indigenous Australian entrepreneurs. The study provides a framework or foundation for future research on Indigenous entrepreneurs.

Key words: Aboriginality, positivity, Australia, discrimination

This article explores contemporary urban, successful Indigenous Australian entrepreneurs. The purpose is to highlight the results of a qualitative case study analysis that examines the extent to which these entrepreneurs differ from non-indigenous entrepreneurs, and in which ways. Until recently, the academic literature has produced relatively few qualitative (or quantitative) insights into indigenous segments of the global entrepreneurial community.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people are the most socially, economically and culturally disadvantaged group in Australian society (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992). Compared with any other section of Australian society, Indigenous Australians have a higher welfare-dependency ratio, fewer marketable skills, less work experience, and a much lower, almost non-existent economic base (Fisk, 1985; Fuller, Dansie, Jones & Holmes, 1999; Hunter, 1999; Spicer, 1997). The

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Indigenous population also experiences discrimination and prejudice by employers, together with levels of unemployment of 38% to 54% (Fisk, 1985; Spicer, 1997). Economically, Indigenous Australians have been kept on the fringe and in poverty. Poverty is the result of the combined effects of past government policies, high unemployment, low levels of education, poor health, and low levels of home ownership (Fisk, 1985; Pollard, 1988). Economic independence through entrepreneurial activity in small business has been proposed as one possible solution to welfare dependency (Fuller, Dansie, Jones & Holmes, 1999; Herron, 1998) and ensuing success in small business has the potential to improve the economic and social position of Indigenous Australians (ATSIC [Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Commission], 1998; Herron, 1998). Indigenous Leaders endorse the need for economic development and Indigenous enterprise (Djerrkura, 1998).

Urban or semi-urban living is the fundamental structure of Indigenous Australian society (Fisk, 1985) with 72.6% of Indigenous Australian’s living in suburban settings (ABS, 1999; Commonwealth of Australia, 2000). Yet, the only known study of urban Indigenous entrepreneurs involves a compilation of fifty case studies (Byrnes, 1988) that examines a broad range of enterprises including remote rural, rural and urban. The work successfully documents a range of Indigenous enterprises, but it lacks academic rigor in two key areas. It records Indigenous enterprises in an ad-hoc process that does not delineate the legal status of the organization and includes not-for profit, commercial enterprises, and community-based trading entities. Secondly, it provides no structured outcomes other than the writers' personal comments. There appears to be no rigorous research on contemporary urban Indigenous Australian entrepreneurs.

This article aims to correct this void in the literature by presenting the results of a qualitative case study analysis that provides an insight into the urban Indigenous Australian entrepreneurs’ environment, examining the intrinsic and extrinsic stimulus to business success. The article is structured to first define an Indigenous Australian and who is regarded as an entrepreneur within this population. Secondly, it defines the Indigenous cultural paradigm of success in entrepreneurial activity. The final section of the article explores the attributes of the contemporary successful urban Indigenous Australian entrepreneur.

Who is an Indigenous Australian Entrepreneur?

Indigenous Australians are the ‘Aboriginal’ people of Australia. The usage of the words “Aboriginal” and “Aborigine” is seen by some as race-based discourse (Fesl, 1993). For the purpose of the current research, ’Indigenous’ will be used as much as possible in lieu of ‘Aboriginal’. An Indigenous Australian is defined as a person who is of Indigenous Australian descent; they must identify as an Indigenous Australian and be accepted as such by the Indigenous community in which they live. This tri-part definition has been upheld by the High Court of Australia in Commonwealth vs. Tasmania (1983) and Gibbs vs. Capewell (1995).
With a population representation of only 2.2% (ABS, 1999) Indigenous Australians are statistically a minority within their own country. They are alienated from mainstream Australian society (Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Reynolds, 1990) and their commercial business activities are rarely recognised. The social exclusion from the wider Australian community results in Indigenous entrepreneurs being ethnic outsiders to the dominant culture (Barth, 1970; Narroll, 1964).

Entrepreneurship is associated with three desirable economic outcomes: growth, innovation and flexibility (Tiessen 1997:368). An entrepreneur has been defined as:

One who creates a new business in the face of risk and uncertainty for the purpose of achieving profit and growth by identifying opportunities and assembling the necessary resources to capitalise on them. (Zimmerer & Scarborough, 1998:3)

Another definition from the Harvard Business School defines entrepreneurship as: “the pursuit of opportunity beyond the resources one currently controls” (Smilor, 1997:343).

Both of these definitions are simplistic, lacking applicability to the Indigenous Australian scenario as they fail to take into consideration environmental variables or allow for the social positioning of the Indigenous entrepreneur. A more detailed explanation and definition of an entrepreneurship is:

Entrepreneurship is a subversive activity. It upsets the status quo, disrupts accepted ways of doing things, and alters traditional patterns of behaviour. It is at heart, a change process that undermines current market conditions by introducing something new or different in response to perceived needs. It is sometimes chaotic, often unpredictable. Because of the dynamic nature of entrepreneurship and because of the entrepreneur’s ability to initiate change and create value ... the concept of ‘creative destruction’ is an apt description of the process ... the entrepreneur thus disrupts the economic status quo, and as a result creates new market opportunities. (Smilor, 1997:341)

This definition incorporates an understanding of the dynamics of the entrepreneurial environment. It introduces the dynamics of change, the turbulence experienced in the entrepreneur’s daily habitat. The change process can be chaotic; sometimes it may be predictable and within the daily operation in business it is the result of external forces. It is the entrepreneur’s ability to harness this change to advantage, or perhaps even to initiate the change in the first place that is the entrepreneur’s distinguishing ability.

The definition of the Indigenous Australian entrepreneur needs to acknowledge their social and economic conditions. The experience of entering into business is a
dramatic change process for the individual Indigenous person (Knight, 1997). Entrepreneurial activity for an Indigenous Australian disrupts the stereotype of welfare dependency by making individuals independent. The success of their enterprise will depend on the individuals’ business ability, their knowledge, skills and access to resources, that is their ‘empowerment’ (Thomas & Mueller, 2000).

The low socio-economic position of Indigenous Australians and their position at the bottom of the social stratification ladder impede the acquisition of economic opportunity and resources (Tiessen, 1997). The general poverty levels experienced in their communities reduces the likelihood of access to pooled family, or community capital, or other resources necessary in enterprise start-ups (Fuller, Dansie, Jones & Holmes, 1999). This would stifle growth, which can also be impeded by racism or racial stratification (Waldinger, 1996).

Re-apply the Smilor (1997) definition considering the socio-economic environment of the Indigenous Australian entrepreneur and the result is:

The Indigenous Australian entrepreneur alters traditional patterns of behavior, by utilizing resources in the pursuit of self determination and economic sustainability via entry into self employment, forcing social change in the pursuit of opportunity beyond the cultural norms of initial economic resources. (Foley, 1999: 25).

By defining what is an Indigenous Australian entrepreneur this study is focused on case studies which examine the attributes of this defined Indigenous Australian minority group.

The Research Study

The study is based in grounded theory entailing action research enabling the relevant attributes of the Indigenous entrepreneurs to emerge from the data in their own perspective (Eden & Huxman, 1996; Glaser, 1992). To ensure Indigenous epistemologies were adhered to, a strict rule of introduction was used, and ethical consent was sought from the participants for oral data collection. Interviews using a semi-structured interview format were recorded on tape with the participants’ approval. Secondary data and any relevant printed matter on the participants were also used in the interview and recording process. Substantive coding, open and constant comparative coding (Glaser, 1992) was used in the data collation and analysis.

The study was confined geographically to the eastern seaboard of Australia. This covered over half of the Australian Indigenous population (ABS, 1999). Criteria for the selection of participants to the study were:

1. Management control and majority ownership of the enterprises had to be by Indigenous Australians as defined.
2. The enterprises had to be commercial undertakings without recurrent gov-
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ergment funding. Aboriginal Corporations (incorporated under the Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act 1976.) were excluded as they obtain taxation benefits and status as non-profit (not-for-profit) organizations.

3. The participants met the requirements of the Indigenous Australian entrepreneur definition.

The initial study reviewed 118 ‘Aboriginal’ enterprises. This was reduced to 18 business enterprises when ‘Aboriginality’ and commercial status parameters were applied. The eighteen business enterprises were reviewed and studied over a period of several months, which included several interviews and active participation in facets of several of the enterprises. The businesses studied covered a broad range that included a licensed motel/restaurant, metal fabricator, various retail entities (art/crafts/motor vehicle spare parts/mixed-corner store/video/book), professional consultant, licensed construction industry contractors, furniture manufacturer, printer, tour operators, screen/fabric printer, and an oyster farmer/fisherman.

The case study process used in the data collection involved the following steps:

- personal introduction by an intermediary,
- written introduction by the writer,
- informal contact to explain the interview and establish a suitable time and venue that was comfortable for the participant,
- research into recorded data on the enterprise or individual (if available),
- the interview, with possible research into the enterprise if the situation warranted,
- analysis of the verbal transcript and interview notes onto hard copy format, subsequent coding, analysis and cross comparison of data.

Results/Outcomes

The definition of an Indigenous Australian entrepreneur implies success in that the entrepreneurs are forcing social change in the pursuit of self-determination and economic sustainability. Is this sustainability short term or long term? The study therefore needed to explore the participant’s perspective on success as a time variable and/or in monetary terms. How do Indigenous Australian entrepreneurs measure success? The definition of success to the Indigenous Australian entrepreneur is as follows.

Definition of Success

Success in business is usually described as monetary success, as profit is universally the underlying bottom line in business. The research findings reveal that money has little motivation to the Indigenous entrepreneur whereas the non-Indigenous entrepreneur correlates money as a trigger with achievement (Volery, Mazzarol, Doss & Thein, 1997). Money is also recognized as a measurement of status that is a powerful motivator to the mainstream entrepreneur (Knutson, 2000; Natemeyer, 1978). Yet success to the Indigenous entrepreneur cannot be measured in tangible assets.
During the interview sessions the participants were reluctant to discuss this topic. Such reluctance is most certainly a consequence of cultural values that make it difficult for the respondents to talk openly about their success as to do so would be to elevate them to a level above their peers. Indigenous Australian society is traditionally a pluralist society based on the sharing of resources; western capitalism on the other hand is profit driven. In the Indigenous paradigm, this is often seen as exploitation of one over another. The interview process produced a degree of participant embarrassment, or ‘shame’ in the language of the participant.

Their collective interpretation of success is that they had established themselves in business and had not failed. In addition they were prospering and had some accumulated wealth. On examination, the wealth invariably consisted of increased stock levels or other tangible business assets necessary for the expansion of the enterprise. Asset accumulation was not found in the personal context of jewelry, up-market clothing or other material assets.

The interpretation that the interviewer was given from the respondents was that although they were very proud of their achievements, they had broken away from the status quo and there was a level of trepidation about their acceptance by both black and white societies following their continuance in business. The respondent’s views on success are:

A indicates “Success is only what you do today! I do the best I can at achieving what I can today” (interview notes January 19, 1998). B believes that success is “having a sustainable business were I can work 100% on my business rather than in my business” (interview notes June 30, 1998). C feels that success is “to build this up to what we picture it, more than a retail store, … a cultural centre. A centre where Aboriginal people who have been ripped off for their art and things can come and be treated right, can be treated with respect as Aboriginal people, a place were school kids can come and learn of our culture, break down the barriers of racism. Yes success is a place of respect and no racism” (interview notes January 21, 1998). D feels that success is “long term viability [in business]” (interview notes January 24, 1998). Finally E defines success as “a number of things. I have a vision that I want to help my people through the struggles of the 20th century. I want to see educational standards improve, our job participation rates improve. One of the biggest buzzes I get is when I speak to grass-roots people and I come away knowing that I have made a positive difference to them in that my programs have worked. This is success” (interview notes October 21, 1998).

Success is philosophical and tangible, individual and communal. Success is many things, yet not one put it in dollar terms or used the accumulation of assets as a measure. Success tended to be measured in importance of what you do and how you do it, not what you had in assets at the end of the day. Success in the
non-indigenous context is seen within the Indigenous community as a loss of Aboriginal values. On further questioning 80% concluded that this was the case in their individual situations. They felt that success in business terms that appeared to involve increased wealth was in conflict with their cultural value of sharing wealth. They realized that any income had to be re-invested in the business; they felt guilt at not sharing it with their family/community.

Success is seen by some (Fan & Karnilowicz, 1997) as dealing with a locus of control, with the subjective meaning of success being an influence on goal-striving behaviour. The goal-striving behavior and locus of control for the Indigenous entrepreneur would appear to be to strive to improve their children’s future (as discussed in the ‘results’ section) ensuring that they do not remain within the cultural stereotypes of Indigenous Australia.

Indigenous Australian entrepreneurs display trepidation at their achievements as they suffer cultural and social alienation as a direct result of their achievements. Experienced alienation from his immediate family on the purchase of a modest sedan, a necessity for use in his business (interview notes October 21, 1998). The vehicle was 95% financed after trade in, yet what made this participant’s situation vulnerable was that he was the first member of his family, (which included wider cousins) to have ever owned a new vehicle. His family falsely believed that he had come into money and had not shared it. J had purchased a small late trading convenience store. On commencing business his extended family would drop in for a packet of cigarettes, a loaf of bread, a carton of milk:

They tell me, fix you up later cuz, or, I just borrow this. They never pay, I have been forced to stop credit on my family as they seen it as what is yours is mine. This has caused big problems. They no longer speak to me or my wife. It seems as though they see the stock and think I am rich or something, they don’t understand that I have to sell it to pay for it. (interview notes August 28, 1998).

J’s family see his stock as his individual wealth not understanding that it has to be sold at a profit to enable him to restock and maintain business momentum.

Overall success to the Indigenous Australian entrepreneur is continuance in business. Eighty percent of the businesses interviewed had been in business for more than five years, which is a milestone in small business survival in Australia as approximately 49% of mainstream businesses exit within the first five years (ABS, 2001).

Characteristics of Successful Indigenous Australian Entrepreneurs
The result of substantive coding, open and constant comparative coding (Glaser, 1992) revealed seven elements of commonality among successful Indigenous Australian entrepreneurs. These are positivity, face, chaos, education and industry experience, networking, immediate family and discrimination. The coding process
and triangulation of data commonality resulted in the determination of these shared criteria. The common elements are discussed in the following seven sections.

**Positivity**

The distinguishing attribute was a positive application to their business, and family life. Words such as ‘if’ did not occur in their vocabulary, rather ‘when’ was the operative word. The positivity is shown in respondents A’s comments:

> We had to do it, we had to work harder, ... We had to cut costs and do without luxuries ... we knew the alternatives and failure was not one of them” (interview notes, 19 January 1998). Another respondent’s words graphically summarizes this positivity, we have a chance to live like human beings. If we don’t succeed we may never get another chance, this is our time! (interview notes, E, October 21, 1998).

Their driving force, the ‘fire in the belly’ (Smilor, 1997) indicates that the trait of positivity is evident even in the presence of the oppressive yoke of racism and limited financial reserves. Their desire to ‘show the white man that blackfellas are just as good as them’ (joint opinion of A, B, C and E) is a driving force. The participant entrepreneurs have a vision, a driving force that success would happen. They are prepared to sacrifice personal luxury to realize their vision. Wider literature tells us that entrepreneurs in general “refuse to be beaten and persevere when the going gets tough, ... entrepreneurs are motivated to succeed; they possess determination” (Bolton & Thompson, 2000: 24). The study indicates that a positive outlook is a core characteristic for successful Indigenous Australian entrepreneurs. The positive attitude of the Indigenous Australian entrepreneur is an individual characteristic that appears necessary for success.

**Face**

The study revealed numerous references by the respondents to the concept of ‘face’, (or perceived image). Face is defined as the “outward show, to judge by appearances, the image that is projected” (Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1977:370). The study reveals that in the Indigenous Australian entrepreneurs’ position ‘face’ involves two projected images. The first of these concerns an image of business accountability, as illustrated by the Indigenous Australian entrepreneur’s employment of non-indigenous accountants. The non-indigenous accountant creates a perceived image (or ‘face’) of legitimacy, or accountability. This impression is deemed necessary by the Indigenous respondent to counteract negative ‘racial’ stereotyping by mainstream Australia:

> If I had a black [Aboriginal] accountant, who would take my books of account seriously. Let’s face reality, the stereotypes within Australian
society are so entrenched that we need to prove, to justify that our business is profitable. I need to use a ‘name’ accountant, a white accountant then the Bank as an example do not question me. If a Koori did it, no one would accept it as true and correct, it would be treated with contempt! (interview notes, D, 21 January 1998).

This is an illustration of how important it is for the Indigenous entrepreneur to appear as a legitimate businessperson.

In addition to looking good and doing it right in business, the second image issue involves a cultural factor, in that entrepreneurs are role models to their wider community. This included Indigenous entrepreneur’s involvement on the board in organizations, which traditionally have been bastions of non-indigenous control such as Rotary, Lions, hospitality organizations, and in one case as the President of an almost all white golf club. This supports Hallahan, Lee and Herzog’s (1997) findings, that the Indigenous entrepreneur establishes a positive face by their actions that are orientated to wider social acceptance. Again, the Indigenous Australian entrepreneur alters traditional patterns of behavior, forcing social change in the pursuit of opportunity beyond the cultural norms. By their involvement in non-indigenous community organizations they not only become role models, they also break down the racial stereotypes, altering traditional patterns of behavior, seeking opportunity beyond cultural norms. In effect this became a benchmark of their business success that their involvement in these organizations was a direct result of their social acceptance in the business world. It is possibly a superficial acceptance, (joint opinion of C, D, and J), however there appears a tangible societal acceptance to a point.

A perceived ‘face’ of accountability, legitimacy and/or social acceptability is important to the Indigenous entrepreneur. Social acceptance has benefits to the business in both business networking and for the entrepreneurs immediate family.

**Chaos**

Market conditions, resource mobilization and other societal factors are important factors in the decision process of going into business. These are seen as opportunities, it is the overall opportunity of entering a new venture that directly affects the decision process (Busenitz & Lau, 1996). The recognition of opportunity combined with creativity and innovation are the characteristics of the successful entrepreneur (Bolton & Thompson, 2000).

A commonality to all participants is that they had dreamt of and/or planned their entry into business. The one thing that they did not do in this planning stage was to create a timetable so that they could work towards their entry into business in systematic, planned stages. There is a common occurrence in the research findings of a traumatic, chaotic situation in the entrepreneur’s lives, which became
the catalyst before entry into business. This chaos is the trigger or the ‘crisis’, if critical theory is applied (Fay, 1987) or the opportunity (Hills, 1995).

Education and Industry Experience
Compared with the Indigenous population, successful Indigenous entrepreneurs are well educated and/or have industry experience. The case studies showed that all of the participants either have formal educational qualifications and/or trade qualifications or extensive industry experience. The majority of the research participants have a year 12 or better education. Three fifths have tertiary qualifications; two fifths have TAFE (an Australian College equivalent) or trade qualifications. The remaining one fifth have minimal intermediate school education, which is compensated for by extensive industry experience. In comparison 83% of the Indigenous Australian population over 15 years of age have no formal education qualifications other than attendance at primary and perhaps junior high. One third of Indigenous Australian High School students have left school at 15 years of age in contrast to only 15% of the non-indigenous students (ABS, 1999). When one considers the small number of Indigenous Australians who achieve a year 12 education level, there is strong relationship between education and successful participation in business.

The study highlights the respondent' behavioral attitudes ‘after’ the opportunity arose from the initial chaos. Entrepreneurial activity is traditionally the result of self-efficacy, which influences the entrepreneurial career preference, intentionally and performance. The self-efficacy is the individual’s cognitive estimate of their capacity to motivate themselves and to instigate the courses of action needed to control the events over their lives (Chen, Greene & Crick, 1998). Education and industry experience are necessary for the Indigenous entrepreneur to understand their position. Cognitive ability’ and ‘opportunity recognition’ (Baum, 1995) are linked with the experience base of the entrepreneur (Hills, 1995). The knowledge base gained from industry experience, education and technological training is seen as a prerequisite for venture ideas and entrepreneurial activity (Bolton & Thompson, 2000; Hills, 1995; Knutson, 2000). Taken further, knowledge, cognitive ability, and opportunity recognition are seen by some as prerequisites of success. Baum’s (1995) research findings produced an 81 per cent response that ‘industry experience’ and a 77 per cent response that ‘technical skill’ are the supportive variables to entrepreneurial success. This is almost identical with the findings of this study, which emphasize the relevance and value of education and training to the successful Indigenous Australian entrepreneur.

Networking
The research revealed that networking in the case of the Indigenous Australian entrepreneur was threefold. First, it was for the direct benefit of the business. Second, networking was a substitute for previous Indigenous community contacts which subsequently were a benefit to the business development. Third, the net-
working was undertaken by the entrepreneur for the long-term benefit of their children, for social or business connections that directly or indirectly improved the social acceptability for their children. Once again this entrepreneurial characteristic is motivated by racial oppression.

Prior to entry into business, almost all of the entrepreneurs had relatively strong Indigenous community ties and connections, which included strong wider family connections and they were pro-active in the Indigenous community. Within a relatively short time in their entrepreneurial history the majority had ceased pro-active involvement in Indigenous community organizations and had severely cut back on wider family contacts and family involvement. The lack of time was the common explanation as their time was now absorbed by the business. The business had overtaken their previous social commitments. Their previous value system, based on kinship and community obligations, had been altered in response to the ever-growing demands on their time from their enterprise. Thus their opportunity to network within the Indigenous Australian community was severely curtailed.

The findings provide examples of Indigenous people who were once active in ‘grass-roots’ Indigenous community organizations such as land council, housing co-operatives and Aboriginal education organizations. The shift in cultural commitment has been partly economic, partly recreational, or for the benefit of their children’s future. The individual comments of the entrepreneurs confirmed that their actions were to make it easier for their children, providing acceptability and connections that would directly benefit the child:

I’ve got a young family, ... we are involved in a triathlon club and a swimming club [children are talented athletes]. These all-white organizations are confronted by our presence and have to confront their attitudes and change those attitudes. The same in my business circles, the ‘white’ business people are confronted by an educated well dressed black and I have to ensure that I back up this professional image with a professional business ethic of the highest standard as I am continuously viewed under a microscope, yet this has paid off for my children. The hard yards that I have been forced to walk in business circles has resulted in their [his children’s] acceptance in their sporting interests based on their raw talent. The barrier of their skin color no longer seems to be a major issue as most people in the clubs know me through business contacts and we seem to be accepted as ‘one of them’. Without the business networking I doubt if the acceptance of my children would have occurred as I have witnessed other very talented Aboriginal youth ignored in the club selection process” (interview notes, E, 21 October 1998).

A has witnessed his children “being treated like outcasts prior to business. My involvement in Rotary, the Golf Club and other organisations has definitely opened
doors for them. One is now well established in his own business and the others have good jobs” (interview notes 19 January 1998).

While it is acknowledged that the study is restricted in its overall sample size, a single second-generation entrepreneur was examined that re-enforced the characteristic of networking that assisted them in the establishment of their business (Bolton & Thompson 2000). There has also been a change in social positioning of the individual entrepreneur in the study that has benefits for the wider Indigenous community. The entrepreneurs provide role models, contradicting popular stereotypes in mainstream Australian society. They have the potential to create a positive change in the social order for other Indigenous Australians by their active participation in organizations that traditionally have been bastions of Anglo-European society. This is in addition to the social change that they create for themselves.

There is a link in the entrepreneurs’ social economic action to the management of resources through social networks (Hart, Stevenson & Dial, 1995). A’s membership on the board of a Golf Club, his pro-active role in Rotary, board membership on a motel franchise chain and success in business has altered his social position. This is also evident in C’s membership in the local retail traders association and E’s membership in several sporting clubs. There has been a shift in cultural commitment, which has been economically driven, as they needed to establish strong networks for their business links. The entrepreneurs know where and how to find resources, they are quick to build and maintain networks that help them in their business (Bolton & Thompson, 2000). The study revealed a dramatic shift in social embeddedness away from Indigenous cultural commitments to the enterprise commitments, shifting values superficially from their cultural commitment to the economic priorities of the business. This conforms to Hart, Stevenson and Dial’s (1995) concepts. However, as mentioned previously there has also been a subtle substitution of the previous pro-active Indigenous community involvement with more subtle community contacts.

**Immediate Family**

The study revealed that Indigenous Australian entrepreneurs’ are driven by the Indigenous entrepreneurs’ ‘need to provide’ for their families. This finding also complements the definition of an Indigenous entrepreneur in their pursuit of economic sustainability as economic independence is driven by a need to provide for their family.

Different cultural values affect individual cognition, motivation and performance (Baum, 1995; Herron & Robinson, 1993). The cultural value of providing for children in the Indigenous Australian context is consistent with other literature that the social and economic environment is a determining function in the entrepreneur’s “thinking”, which can directly influence the individual’s cognition (Bird, 1989; Busenitz & Lau, 1996).

In the previous discussion on the entrepreneur’s definition of success, a contributing factor was to provide for the entrepreneurs immediate family;
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Why shouldn’t our kids have the same opportunities as the whitefella (interview notes C, 13 September 1998). We want our kids to have the same chance as theirs [white Australia]. We want our kids to have the same opportunities. (interview notes E, 21 October, 1998).

The need to provide for family is a motivator for the entrepreneur, an apparent driving force that is again based on racial lines. It infers that to provide for one’s family is to break the welfare concept scenario (and social stereotype) to progress up the racial stratification ladder. Income from business will provide food, clothing, and shelter increasing the educational opportunities of the children resulting in a better life than what the entrepreneur experienced prior to entering business. To provide for the family is a justification by the entrepreneur to exist in business.

Discrimination
The research results highlighted the experience of Indigenous entrepreneurs that, following entry into business, what appears to be racist discrimination from mainstream Australia was a common occurrence. This was evident when dealing with Government institutions, financiers, creditors and even the entrepreneurs’ clientele. To an Indigenous Australian, racial discrimination is a part of life. The Royal Commission findings of Aboriginal Deaths in Custody acknowledge the development of racist attitudes, both overt and hidden, and the way these attitudes have become institutionalized in the practices of legal, educational, welfare and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander assistance authorities (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992:5). The Royal Commission report acknowledges that racism towards Australia’s Indigenous people is institutionalized. The Australian Human Rights Commission also acknowledges the extent of racism in Australian society. The findings of the National Inquiry into Racist Violence in 1991 state that:

Many Aboriginal people have grown so used to being verbally abused and called by insulting names over the whole period of contact with whites that they tended to focus their complaints upon physical harassment and discriminatory exclusion from social venues. (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1991:16)

Discrimination (racism) is so common to Indigenous Australians that it is only acknowledged when it is physical or exclusionary. The entrepreneurs also reported negative dealings with government agencies whose mandates should have required them to be supportive. This suggests that racism finds its way into the very agencies intended to counteract it.

The Indigenous entrepreneurs experienced discrimination from within their Indigenous community. The research findings indicated that as Indigenous entrepreneurs’ achieved a perceived level of success, the effects of social change together with the subsequent realignment of networking and community contact
often resulted in their temporary (and possible permanent) alienation from the participants’ community.

I had to buy a reliable motor vehicle for the business, with 95% Bank finance I purchased a small Korean sedan, straight away family stopped talking to me. They thought I was rich all of a sudden and was rude in not sharing this fictional wealth with them. The trouble was I was the first person in my entire family to purchase a new car and they [the wider family] could not understand it. Even today, things are strained. They see me as no longer Aboriginal as I wear a tie, a suit and drive a new vehicle. They don’t understand. (interview notes E, 21 October 1998).

In a comparative cross-cultural example, this distinguishes the Indigenous entrepreneur from the Chinese entrepreneur in Australia. The Chinese-Australian community values the Chinese-Australian entrepreneur’s success and the entrepreneur is drawn closer to that community as a consequence of his success (Casimir & Keats 1996, Holt & Keats 1992). The can be the opposite in the case for many Indigenous Australian entrepreneurs and highlights the need to examine the values of Indigenous Australia in relation to business success. The study revealed conflicting evidence concerning the Entrepreneurs value systems beyond the nuclear family. Some were steadfastly pluralistic in the sharing of wealth, others centered on improving their immediate family only, with little thought of the wider community. There is some correlation between the participant’s formulative years and this occurrence, as participants growing up in old ‘mission’ communities focused on wider dispersion of wealth. Several generation urban participants did not. In addition, another distinct characteristic was the occurrence of the non-indigenous spouse. It would appear that this situation provides positives for some Indigenous participants. This together with the conflicting values systems (and other characteristics) requires further empirical evidence beyond the scope of this paper.

**Conclusions**

The study indicates that the dominating factors underlying business success for the Indigenous entrepreneur is their individual motivation to correct negative social perceptions and resultant social stratification based on race. The Indigenous entrepreneur is ultimately seeking self-determination through economic independence and in that process is correcting the negative racial stereotypes. Yet in doing so, the Indigenous entrepreneur risks losing links to the Indigenous community and culture because the requirement for success in business clashes with Indigenous cultural norms.

The Indigenous Australian entrepreneurs positivity, their vision, the driving sense that success will happen, and their unselfish willingness to sacrifice personal luxuries to realize a business success reflect the seemingly desperate plight of being
the subject of negative stereotyping. The use of a non-indigenous accountant for perceived legitimacy is an illustration of the process to gain societal acceptance to counteract racial stereotypes.

Initial chaos prior to business commencement is the catalyst, the trigger, the ‘crisis’ (Fay, 1987) and the opportunity (Hills, 1995) for the Indigenous Australian entrepreneur that instigates entry into entrepreneurial activities and self-employment.

Education and industry experience are linked to success in business activity. Yet Indigenous Australia suffers poor educational outcomes for numerous reasons that include institutional racism within the education sector that results in fewer graduates that limit the pool of potential Indigenous entrepreneurs. This is a key area that needs to be looked at by Government, policy makers and the vocational education sector.

Networking, substituting Indigenous community contact with specific business/social related contacts to improve the entrepreneur’s social position by being accepted into wider social (mainstream) networks are the entrepreneurs’ process to overcome societal stereotypes and to raise their position on the racial stratification scale. The Indigenous entrepreneurs challenge their perceived societal position by improving it through success in business; networking is an essential tool in this process.

The entrepreneurs’ perceived/real need to provide for their children and following generations is an illustration of the negative effect of race stratification. The entrepreneurs’ pursuit for acceptance and economic independence to provide for their children to enable them to be a part of Australian society highlights the Indigenous social plight.

Discrimination is the final characteristic discussed that is the dominant inhibiting factor that the entrepreneur experiences in business and wider society. The direct or indirect discrimination from mainstream Australia and also from within the entrepreneurs own Indigenous community has a continuous stifling affect on the entrepreneurs’ fortitude. It is the societal discrimination from stereotyping, ‘the welfare shackles’ (Herron, 1998) and the low level of Indigenous positioning on the racial stratification ladder of Australian society that are both the inhibitors and motivating force behind Indigenous Australian individuals pursuit for economic independence and success.

It is also important to keep in mind the need for sensitivity to cultural meanings and practices in interpreting ethnographic and quantitative research (Miller, 1997: 171). Sensitivity is an understanding, not a methodological process. One must be sensitive to the environment of the Indigenous Australian entrepreneur, and seek an understanding of the unique person that has achieved this classification. Attempt to understand the personal initiative of the Indigenous entrepreneur as seen as a behavior syndrome resulting in the individual taking an active and self starting approach to work (Frese, Kring, Soose & Kempel, 1996).

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The entrepreneur is self-motivated, in control of their actions and their attitudes to workplace endeavors; this is supported by the positivity characteristic of the Indigenous entrepreneur. Entrepreneurial success to the Indigenous Australian is a chance to change their social positioning "we have a chance to live like human beings. If we don't succeed we may never get another chance!" (interview notes E 21 October, 1998). This was a common comment, before entrepreneurial success the participants saw their lives as sub-human. Such are the levels of poverty, of hopelessness within Indigenous Australian society. "Has anything changed in the last hundred years? ... While many things have improved, many things have not really changed. In fact they've regressed ... Racial discrimination is the prejudice most cosmetically apparent" (Huggins, 1998: 135, 141).

Huggins (1998) is correct in questioning has anything changed. The case study participants envisaged their business involvement as a step towards social acceptability in that they could live like human beings. Racial discrimination is perhaps the greatest hurdle that Indigenous Australian entrepreneurs must address. For the Indigenous Australian self-determination through economic independence is attainable. The results of this study form a small part within the literature base of this evolving story.

The attribute linking the positive behavior that follows this to the concept of 'face' relates to the concern people have about the way other people perceive them is internally driven (Hallahan, Lee & Herzog, 1997). The public self-image that Indigenous Australian entrepreneurs want to claim for themselves is a universal human need, it is not limited to just the Indigenous entrepreneur. The 'positivity' is a determining factor or attribute of the Indigenous Australian entrepreneur's survival in a negative societal environment.

The pursuit for economic independence is the forceful change that breaks the stereotypes related to 'the welfare shackles' (Herron, 1998) that are included in the definition of what is an Indigenous Australian entrepreneur. The preliminary work on Indigenous Australian entrepreneurs highlights two other areas of literature that require further examination; first, the concept of success. Does the Indigenous entrepreneur view, value and measure success differently than the non-indigenous entrepreneur? In addition there is a need to explore the concepts of values, do they differ between the Indigenous to the non-indigenous? What values are dominant to the Indigenous Australian, as the value systems of Indigenous Australian entrepreneurs appear to slightly differ from those of the non-indigenous? Understanding the entrepreneur's values is critical as values reflect social priorities and influence how social and business decisions are made (Holt, 1997).

In conclusion, this article provides insights into minority entrepreneurship on the eastern seaboard of Australia. Common characteristics of Indigenous entrepreneur's may differ in the northern end, or in western states of Australia. This is what the researcher must accept, never follow stereotypes or standardization as Indigenous groups differ not only from country to country (race to race), they may also differ within their own country due to a plethora of reasons. This article however,
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adds to an almost non-existent base of knowledge enabling potential researchers to develop an empathetic approach and understanding on a sample group of Indigenous entrepreneurs. It is hoped that further research will be undertaken to improve our collective knowledge in the area of Indigenous entrepreneurship.

References


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