



# Indigenous institutional theory: a new theoretical framework and methodological tool

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## Abstract

This paper introduces and provides comprehensive detail of a new theoretical framework termed ‘Indigenous Institutional Theory’. In doing so, the paper discusses ‘Western’ and ‘Indigenous’ methodological practices and examines two existing theories that influence the newly developed framework; Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Nakata in *Disciplining the savages, savaging the disciplines*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Chicago, 2007) and Institutional Theory. Illustrating a conceptual framework for Indigenous inquiry, the framework acknowledges the Indigenous perspective, with the intention of offering a new lens in which the Indigenous experience within institutions can be interpreted and analysed. It is anticipated that the framework will be utilised in the future research by Indigenous scholars as a powerful explanatory tool when examining a variety of organisational phenomena in modern society. While the theoretical framework articulated in this paper has initially been designed for an Indigenous research project, the framework can be adapted and utilised when examining the standpoint of minority groups within Western institutions and addressing the diversity gap in leadership. As such, the paper is also relevant to organisational and leadership scholars investigating ways in which discriminatory (e.g. gendered and racialised) structures are created and culturally challenged within Western institutions.

**Keywords** Institutional theory · Theoretical framework · Indigenous methodology · Indigenous · Leadership

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## Introduction

Indigenous Institutional Theory is a theoretical framework that weaves together two distinct but complementary theories to create a new theoretical approach to considering organisations and how they function. The framework was initially developed for an Australian Research Council (ARC) funded project titled *Walan Mayiny: Indigenous Leadership in Higher Education* (*Walan Mayiny* means ‘strong people’ in Wiradjuri, an Indigenous Australian language). The project investigates Indigenous leadership across the higher education sector, primarily in Australia, but with three small international comparison case studies, which builds on and extends Institutional theory. The study examines the views and experiences of Indigenous academic staff and takes it one step further by cross-referencing their perceptions with the perceptions of non-Indigenous senior executive, higher education governance structures and institutional rhetoric. In seeking a theoretical approach to this study on Indigenous leadership in higher education, Institutional Theory had promise but was missing a cultural element. Combining Western and Indigenous methodologies through Indigenous Standpoint Theory with Institutional Theory led to the development of a new hybrid model for the analysis of Indigenous<sup>1</sup> experiences in universities. The newly developed Indigenous Institutional Theory is an unprecedented framework and we expect it will be applicable in other educational settings or organisations more generally, for research seeking to cast fresh light on the role of institutions in working with and advancing the aspirations of Indigenous peoples and communities. While Indigenous Standpoint Theory, Institutional Theory and the newly proposed Indigenous Institutional Theory will be further examined in the proceeding sections, we offer a preliminary note regarding the concept of methodology in general and highlight some of the key distinctions between ‘Western’ methodologies and ‘Indigenous’ methodologies.

### **Indigenous methodologies and western methodologies: conflicting or complementary?**

Methodology offers a theoretical perspective for understanding the technique or approach taken when seeking to understand and gain knowledge of world experiences (Smith, 1999). It is not the same as the ‘method’ undertaken in a research project; the method provides a step-by-step process pertaining to how data will be collected and the process in which research is conducted. Whereas the methodology is the way in which data will be analysed and the rationale for the selected research approach. Methodology is viewed as “a set of complex interpretive practices”, each bearing its own

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘Indigenous’ used throughout this paper and within the Indigenous Institutional Theory framework refers to all First Nations Peoples globally. However, we note, a distinction was made between Indigenous and First Nations Peoples within the *Walan Mayiny* study, i.e. the term Indigenous refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and First Nations Peoples refers to other Native Custodians outside of Australia (e.g. the First Nations Peoples of Canada, New Zealand and North America).

“disciplinary history” and there is by no means a consensus, nor does one methodological practice have authority over another (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 6).

Various distinctions have been made between ‘Western’ methodologies and ‘Indigenous’ methodologies (Kovach, 2009; Rigney, 2006; Smith, 1999). Kovach (2009) argues that Indigenous people’s ability to uphold their knowledge through the use of cultural methodologies was disturbed as a result of colonisation and the introduction (and application) of ‘Western’ research methodologies. This is by no means a new revelation (see Hampton, 1995; Little Bear, 2004; Weber-Pillwax, 1999; Wilson, 2001, 2008). Western methodologies neglect to take into consideration the Indigenous experience (Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009; Rigney, 2006; Smith, 1999). Smith (1999) analysed the impact ‘Western’ methodologies had on Indigenous Peoples and emphasised the need to ‘decolonise methodologies’. Furthermore, Smith (1999) proposed that decolonising methodologies was an essential requirement for Indigenous research.

Building on the work of Smith (1999) and Rigney (2006) explains the use of an Indigenous research methodology allows for circumstances whereby the “dominance of Western-orientated discourse” is contested (Rigney, 2006, p. 45). Challenging Western methodologies through the development of Indigenous methodologies is important because it articulates the ontological position of the Indigenous researcher (Hogarth, 2017). Furthermore, research conducted by Indigenous researchers, pertaining to Indigenous issues, provides “a means to privilege Indigenous voice” (Hogarth, 2017, p. 26). Consequently, Indigenous methodologies have “the potential to improve relevance in policy and practice within Indigenous contexts” (Kovach, 2009, p. 13).

However, while Kovach (2009) believed there is an inherent need for Indigenous methodologies, she took this phenomenon one step further, acknowledging that both Indigenous research methods and Western methodologies can be utilised simultaneously. Hogarth (2017) also concluded that drawing on both Indigenous and Western methodologies further develops understanding of how research proactively challenges societal norms while also contributing to the self-determination of Indigenous Australians. Therefore, complementary to the principles advocated by Hogarth (2017), Kovach (2009), Rigney (2006) and Smith (1999), this theoretical framework draws on two theoretical perspectives; Indigenous Standpoint Theory (i.e. an Indigenous methodology) and Institutional Theory (i.e. a Western methodology), to propose a new theoretical framework—Indigenous Institutional Theory. The preceding sections discuss features of both Indigenous Standpoint Theory and various perspectives of Institutional Theory. Following this, a comprehensive explanation of the newly developed Indigenous Institutional Theory is offered. The explanation also highlights how both Indigenous Standpoint Theory and elements of Institutional Theory inform the new framework.

## Indigenous standpoint theory

Before we examine Indigenous Standpoint Theory, we begin by articulating standpoint theories more broadly. Behind terms such as ‘theory’, ‘analysis’, ‘ontology’, ‘epistemology’ and ‘methodology’ stands “the personal biography of the researcher,

who speaks from a particular class, gendered, racial, cultural, and ethnic perspective” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 11). Likewise, while ‘standpoint theories’ range from being a perspective (Moreton-Robinson, 2013), to an explanatory theory, to a prescribed methodology (Harding, 2004), such theories also recognise research is not neutral (Dunbar, 2008). Standpoint theories illustrate the position of the researcher, in terms of their own social, cultural and political experiences (Herbert, 2017; Land, 2015; Nakata, 2007). To be more specific, standpoint theories acknowledge where the researcher is subjectively located and the manner in which they conduct their research (Povey & Trudgett, 2019). Importantly, standpoint theories give a voice to minority groups, allowing them to challenge social norms as the outsider within. Supporting this notion, and recognising Indigenous ways of knowing have been marginalised due to the dominance of Western methodologies (Kovach, 2009), we now turn your attention to Indigenous Standpoint Theory, as discussed below.

Contributing to the development of Indigenous methodologies, Nakata, frames an Indigenous perspective (1998; 2007). Indigenous Standpoint Theory considers the ‘Indigeneity’ of the researcher (Foley, 2003; Rigney, 1999). Nakata (2007) maintains that an Indigenous standpoint is not “the endless production of subjective narrative to disrupt objective accounts” nor is it the “aggregation of stories from lived experience” (p. 213). Rather, Indigenous Standpoint Theory “is a distinct form of analysis and is itself both a discursive construction and an intellectual device to persuade others and elevate what might not have been a focus of attention by others” (Nakata, 2007, p. 214). This distinct form of analysis highlights, integrates and advances the cultural knowledges and experiences of Indigenous scholars, in a way non-Indigenous scholars cannot. Echoing this position, Moreton-Robinson (2013) explains, “people’s lived experience is the point of entry for investigation of the cultural interface where western knowledge systems and Torres Strait Islander experiences are dialectically engaged” (p. 338). As such, an Indigenous Standpoint Theory is “not a social position but a discursive method of inquiry” (Moreton-Robinson, 2013 p. 338). In other words, as a discursive method of inquiry, it provides the opportunity to reveal the way in which knowledge is constructed, and unravels Western knowledge paradigms from Indigenous ways of knowing. Ultimately, Indigenous Standpoint Theory will inevitably produce more in-depth, culturally inclusive knowledge (Nakata, 2007), informed by history, politics, policies and, more importantly, Indigenous Knowledges.

‘Indigeneity’ of the researcher is an essential criterion of Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Foley, 2003). Elucidating the importance of this criterion further, we examined the ‘Indigenous Australian’ setting as an example; Indigenous Australian cultures are a complex mix of beliefs, values, practices and systems that are often difficult for the non-Indigenous person to understand (Atkinson, 2002; Choy & Woodlock, 2007). As eloquently articulated by Foley (2003), Indigenous Standpoint Theory “supports the view that non-Indigenous Australia cannot and possibly will not understand the complexities of Indigenous Australia at the same level of empathy as an Indigenous Australian researcher can achieve” (Foley, 2003, p. 46). Comparably, Atkinson (2002), Huggins (1998), Moreton-Robinson (2000) and Smith (1999), all share a similar view, i.e. that Indigenous research is enhanced if it is conducted by an Indigenous researcher.

As a method of examination and analysis, Indigenous Standpoint Theory affords Indigenous scholars with a platform to investigate the way in which Indigenous people are recognised and intertwined within Western practices and knowledge systems (Coates et al., 2020). Nakata (2007) defines three principles critical to an Indigenous Standpoint;

- ‘Cultural interface’—acknowledgement of how Indigenous ways of knowing and understanding are discursively constructed within Western knowledge paradigms;
- ‘Indigenous agency’—permits Indigenous Peoples to see and uphold their position comparative to non-Indigenous people; and
- ‘Constant tensions’—recognises the ongoing tensions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous dualities go beyond descriptive analysis and empirical evidence and is in fact experienced in a physical sense.

Nakata (2007) argues that these three principles provide a critical standpoint with regards to Indigenous Peoples’ position within knowledge, and in reference to non-Indigenous people’s understanding of knowledge. An Indigenous standpoint can facilitate with disentangling Indigenous people “from the conditions that delimit who, what or how we can or can’t be, to help see ourselves with some charge of the everyday, and to help understand our varied responses to the colonial world” (Nakata, 2007, p. 217).

Notably, Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Nakata, 2007) is grounded in the resilience to racial oppression (Povey & Trudgett, 2019; Rigney, 1999). Furthermore, Indigenous Standpoint Theory is a means of resolving dissension between Western and Indigenous knowledge (Ardill, 2013), so that research has cultural meaning and perspective for Indigenous Peoples and their communities (Choy & Woodlock, 2007).

However, while Indigenous Standpoint Theory, as described by Nakata (2007), is an important development in theoretical research, the theory itself is seemingly broad and stands alone i.e. it is not specific to one particular field or context, although it has been widely applied in the field of education. This is not a limitation by any means, but rather, an advantage. The broadness of the theory allows it to be applied to a wide range of contexts and amalgamated with other methodological practices.

### **Indigenous women’s standpoint theory**

Recognising there are numerous Indigenous standpoint theories (e.g. Foley, 2003; Hogarth, 2017), we turn your attention to the work by Moreton-Robinson (2013). Building on the work of Nakata (2007), Moreton-Robinson (2013) argues that Nakata (2007) omits gender from his Indigenous Standpoint Theory; therefore, the theory is a gender-blind framework that “universalises Indigenous men’s experiences” (p. 339). Asserting that gender must also be considered, Moreton-Robinson (2013) went on to frame an Indigenous Women’s Standpoint Theory. While the

ontological, epistemological and axiological foundations articulated in Moreton-Robinson's (2013) Indigenous Women's Standpoint can be considered in a similar manner to Nakata's (2007) three principles (i.e. cultural interface, Indigenous agency and constant tensions), contrastingly, Indigenous Women's Standpoint Theory acknowledges the intersecting oppressions in different power relations and social conditions related to gender. Elaborating further, Moreton-Robinson recognises that cultural knowledge is shared by Indigenous men and women, Moreton-Robinson suggests that Indigenous women's experiences differ from Indigenous men, due to women's location within societal hierarchical structures. Moreton-Robinson offers the framework as a "contribution towards the development of Indigenous women's research methodologies" (p. 344).

Similar to Moreton-Robinson (2013), the authors have combined Nakata's Indigenous Standpoint Theory, while acknowledging Moreton-Robinson's Indigenous Women's Standpoint Theory, with perspectives of Institutional Theory. This is discussed in the sections following.

### **Institutional theory: varying perspectives**

While voluminous literature defines and summarises Institutional Theory in multiple ways (Cai & Mehari, 2015; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Greenwood et al., 2008; Lammers & Garcia, 2017; Scott, 2001; Selznick, 1957, 1996; Zucker, 1977), in broad terms, Institutional Theory is a way of seeking to understand the dynamics of organisations. According to Scott (2008), as a school of thought, Institutional Theory consists of a number of varying theoretical perspectives that examines the operational structures of organisations, including rules, norms, schemes, routines and social behaviours (i.e. the way people behave in organisations). As a theory, it can be utilised when investigating the processes by which social and political structures of organisations are established. It is also a way to examine what causes them to evolve, adapt or fall behind. It is important to note, despite the varying theoretical perspectives of Institutional Theory, one perspective does not hold dominance over another. Each perspective has gained legitimacy among a subset of organisational researchers (Scott, 2008).

Drawing on the work of Cai and Mehari (2015), the development of Institutional Theory can be mapped across three stages; 'Old Institutional Theory' (emerging towards the end of the 1940s), 'New Institutional Theory' (developing at the end of the 1970s) and a range of 'New Perspectives' (evolving since the 1990s). While a trend across the three stages is to conduct analysis of complicated institutional environments (Cai & Mehari, 2015; Greenwood et al., 2008), the main difference is the analytical focus (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991).

### **Old institutional theory**

According to Selznick (1996), Old Institutional Theory suggests organisations should be understood as an institutionalised "social organism" (p. 139) embedded

within the local community. In *Leadership in Administration*, Selznick (1957) postulates a distinction between organisations and institutions, and by doing so, he argues an organisation is ‘institutionalised’ when patterns (i.e. parallel behaviours such as strategies, processes, competencies and mission statements) emerge across similar organisations, resulting from organisational interactions (Selznick, 1996). As such, ‘institutionalisation’ focusses on the organisation’s readiness and ability to change or give up practices, in order to respond to new demands or circumstances (Selznick, 1996).

Elaborating further, Cai and Mehari (2015) argue Old Institutional Theory places emphasis on the behaviour of an organisation, through a means of focussing attention on the relationship and/or conflicts between the organisation and political stakeholder groups. Notably, a key characteristic of Old Institutional Theory is the ability to examine the sociocultural constructs of organisations at a macro-level. This is done through the means of analysing the inter-societal systems of the organisation and the community in which it is embedded (see Abrutyn & Turner, 2011). A limitation to Old Institutional Theory is that it fails to recognise individual behaviours within the organisation. Instead, the theory focusses on collective behaviours of agents.

### **New institutional theory**

New institutional theory, on the other hand, focusses on the stability and similarity of organisations (rather than the ability to adapt and change) and accentuates the need for organisations to conform to the institutional field in which it is situated (Cai & Mehari, 2015). Watts and Mead (2005) suggest that institutions seek ‘legitimacy’ by becoming, or staying, like those institutions that are considered legitimate. However, while new institutional theory considers the stability and legitimacy of an organisation, within its institutional context, it neglects to consider the inter-societal systems of the organisation, which influence institutional change (Greenwood et al., 2008).

### **New perspectives**

As institutional theory continued to develop, new perspectives emerged (Greenwood, et al., 2008). For example, when examining institutions, Scott (2005) argued two important aspects needed to be considered; social beliefs and rules can be adjusted to guide the actions of institutions, and institutional logics (i.e. social and cultural elements such as values, beliefs and normative expectations) can vary and conflict within the institution. Cai and Mehari (2015) credit the suggestions made by Scott (2005), and following their literature review pertaining to the evolution and further development of Institutional Theory, they contend that new perspectives of Institutional Theory can be categorised into three separate, yet interrelated streams;

- stream one—‘old and new institutionalism combined’,
- stream two—‘institutional entrepreneurship and institutional work’ and;

- stream three—‘institutional logics’ (Cai & Mehari, 2015, p. 4).

Each of the three streams is discussed in further detail below. We note the three streams Cai and Mehari (2015) identified within the new perspectives of Institutional Theory inform the newly developed Indigenous Institutional Theory framework. This is articulated in subsequent sections.

### **New perspectives: stream one—old and new institutionalism combined**

A number of scholars (e.g. Abbot, 1991; Abrutyn & Turner, 2011; Greenwood & Hinings, 1996) note the integration of old and new institutional thinking. Their position is that new institutional theory ignores the sociocultural constructs of organisations (i.e. the personal interest and behaviour of agents) at a macro-level (Cai & Mehari, 2015). It is also argued combining the two perspectives provides a more comprehensive way to understand institutional change (Stinchcombe, 1997). Integrating the two perspectives brings into focus the collective actions of agents within organisations (i.e. Old Institutionalism), as well as the need for individual organisations to adopt similar organisational structures of those within the institutional field it is situated (i.e. New Institutionalism) (Hirsch & Lounsbury, 1997).

### **New perspectives: Stream two—institutional entrepreneurship and institutional work**

Introduced by DiMaggio (1988), the concept of ‘institutional entrepreneurship’ brings into focus the role of individual agents within an organisation. More specifically, it refers to the activities of those who initiate and implement change across the institutional environment. As suggested by Battilana et al. (2009), institutional entrepreneurs execute change by means of creating a vision, assembling resources and motivating others to strive for, and sustain, the vision. Following an extensive literature review, Cai and Mehari (2015) found that literature pertaining to institutional entrepreneurship was inextricably linked to a concept termed ‘institutional work’. As proposed by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006), institutional work extends its focus to “the purposive action aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions” (p. 216). In doing so, it considers those whose role it is to support and/or facilitate the endeavours of institutional entrepreneurs.

### **New perspectives: stream three—institutional logics**

Finally, the concept of Institutional Logics was developed as a way to examine the political foundations and cultural elements of institutions (Haveman & Gualtieri, 2017; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008; Thornton, et al., 2012). The concept was originally introduced by Alford and Friedland (1985) to examine the symbolic constructions and material practices of hegemonic institutions (e.g. capitalism), by focussing on the contradictory actions of individuals in the political arena. However, while Friedland and Alford (1991) were able to convey the general premise of institutional

logics, it did not clearly articulate how an institutional logic can be defined and analysed (Johansen & Waldorff, 2015). In more recent times, Johansen and Waldorff (2015) investigated the way in which researchers defined institutional logics and found a large number of studies defined logics empirically, by examining the social and cultural norms of organisations (this included examining organisational policies and vision statements) and diligently coding them accordingly. The empirical data highlighted emerging themes, which, in turn, assembled a set of logics within the organisation (Johansen & Waldorff, 2015).

It is important to note that institutional logics not only brings to light the social and political elements of organisations using institutional logics but also encourages the political agenda of the institution to be critically analysed, which in turn demonstrates how agendas influence the development and implementation of policies (Bastedo, 2009). This point is significant to our discussion as it informs the newly developed theoretical framework, Indigenous Institutional Theory. This will be discussed in the following sections.

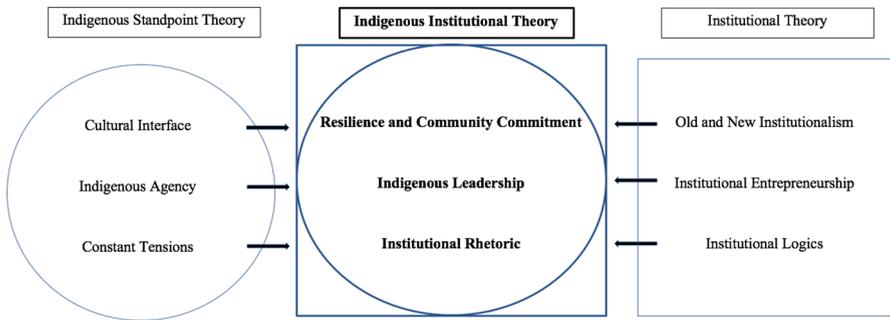
### **Institutional theory: a gap in the research**

While the literature is voluminous and multilayered (Cassell & Symon, 2006; Lambers & Garcia, 2017; Thornton, 2004), there is little research that uses institutional theory to undertake Indigenous research or examine the Indigenous experience within institutional settings. This paper addresses this gap by bringing together two theoretical frameworks (i.e. Indigenous Standpoint Theory and Institutional Theory) to form an integrated model termed 'Indigenous Institutional Theory'. While details of the theoretical frameworks that inform Indigenous Institutional Theory have been provided above, the newly integrated theoretical framework will be explored further in the following section.

It is absolutely necessary to develop a theoretical framework that considers the Indigenous experience when examining organisations and institutions (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2020). Our reasoning for this is clear; integrating an Indigenous perspective affords the opportunity for a deeper analysis of the social, political and cultural intricacies associated with colonialisation, across Western institutions. By doing so, it will provide researchers and policy makers with the ability to forge a cultural shift (i.e. decolonising institutions), thus building Indigenous sovereignty, which will lead to the self-determination of Indigenous Peoples across the globe.

### **Indigenous institutional theory: new theoretical framework**

Building on, extending and personalising methodologies is not a new concept, as it enables researchers to articulate their ontological position (Hogarth, 2017). In this case, developing a new Indigenous theoretical framework also contributes to the development of Indigenous research methodologies (Love, 2019), and advances Indigenous epistemology in organisational research (Ruwhiu & Cone, 2010), thus supporting the work of Kovach (2009) and Smith (1999) as described in the



**Fig. 1** A conceptual overview of Indigenous Institutional Theory

preceding sections. While the model has been developed in the context of higher education, the authors anticipate that the newly proposed framework, Indigenous Institutional Theory, may be employed by Indigenous Peoples when investigating the Indigenous experience across a wide range of organisational fields, nationally and internationally.

Turning attention back to the theoretical framework, a description of Indigenous Institutional Theory (Fig. 1) is articulated below. While Indigenous Women’s Standpoint Theory (Moreton-Robinson, 2013) was considered, the framework specifically acknowledges Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Nakata, 2007), as well as key elements of the various institutional theories discussed in preceding sections. While these theories influenced the development of Indigenous Institutional Theory, as independent theories they did not offer a thorough analysis of the Indigenous experience within Western institutional settings. By combining them, the authors have identified three fundamental principles critical to the new framework; ‘[resilience and community commitment](#)’, ‘[Indigenous leadership](#)’ and ‘[institutional rhetoric](#)’. The three principles for the framework were identified as a direct result from the key themes that became apparent during the data analysis process (see Coates et al., 2020 for more information pertaining to the project).

### **Resilience and community commitment**

The principle of ‘[resilience and community commitment](#)’ draws on the concept of the Cultural Interface (Indigenous Standpoint Theory) and Old and New Institutionalism (Institutional Theory). ‘Resilience’ is a key characteristic Indigenous Peoples are often required to demonstrate when working within ‘Western’ institutions (Doyle & Hungerford, 2015; Evans & Ryan, 2019; Evans & Sinclair, 2016; Leitch, 2017; Minthorn & Chavez, 2015; White, 2010), and acknowledging institutions can be understood as social organisms embedded within the local community (Selznick, 1957), ‘[resilience and community commitment](#)’ examines how Indigenous Peoples are discursively positioned within the intricate social constructs of ‘Western’ institutions (i.e. the ‘cultural interface’). It also acknowledges that the work carried out by Indigenous Peoples is “anchored in families, cultural groupings and communities”

(Evans & Ryan, 2019, p. 46), thus places emphasis on the relationship between the institution and the Indigenous community. Overall, this particular principle provides a more in-depth way to examine the cultural motivations and behaviours of Indigenous and non-Indigenous agents inside the institution, the encounters Indigenous Peoples experience within 'Western' institutions, as well as the commitment between the institution and the Indigenous community.

Finally, utilising perspectives of old and new institutionalism provides the opportunity to compare the Indigenous-specific policies and practices of institutions within the same institutional field. This provides the researcher with the opportunity to investigate whether institutions change, modify or adapt their political agenda and strategic direction in order to replicate other institutions within the same contexts that are viewed as successful or superior.

### Indigenous leadership

Comparable to Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Nakata, 2007), specifically 'Indigenous Agency', 'Indigenous Leadership' acknowledges the position Indigenous Peoples hold relative to non-Indigenous people and extends its focus to issues of challenging the social and cultural norms of 'Western' institutions to promote change. Acknowledging Moreton-Robinson's (2013) Indigenous Women's Standpoint Theory, while Indigenous Institutional Theory remains gender neutral, the 'Indigenous Leadership' principle has the capacity to also consider a gendered perspective. Additionally, similar to institutional entrepreneurship (DiMaggio, 1988), the concept of 'Indigenous Leadership' refers to the activities Indigenous Peoples undertake to initiate and implement change. This is further explained below.

In the context of the Indigenous Institutional Theory framework, 'Indigenous Leadership' does not limit the focus to the activities of recognised Indigenous Elders or Indigenous Peoples holding formal leadership positions (e.g. senior executive). Instead, it includes all Indigenous Peoples within an institution, from the most junior to senior personnel, who demonstrate Indigenous leadership characteristics. For example, an Indigenous leader is someone who advocates for Indigenous Peoples and their sovereignty (Bear & Tippeconnic III, 2015). Indigenous leaders, junior or senior, execute change by means of creating and inspiring a shared vision (Minthorn & Chavez, 2015).

To make this clearer for researchers, first we consider the concept of 'leadership'; the concept of leadership has been defined and summarised in multiple ways (e.g. Marcy, 2020; McDade et al., 2008; Rosari, 2019). However, in broad terms, leadership is a practical skill that encompasses the ability to encourage and guide others (albeit individuals, teams or entire organisations), to maximise efforts towards the achievement of a common goal (Gottfredson & Reina, 2020). Leadership is not a form of authority or power. Instead, leadership stems from social influence. Characteristics of leadership include (but are not limited to) diplomacy, collaboration, innovation and inspiring a shared vision.

Building on the concept of leadership, a definition of Indigenous leadership is now offered; Indigenous Leadership includes the usual aspects of leadership but

then advances such concepts to incorporate Indigenous Knowledges, i.e. Indigenous ways of knowing, being, doing and connecting. Importantly, Indigenous Leadership is heavily connected to our responsibilities and commitment to the Indigenous communities with a strong focus on Indigenous sovereignty. Indigenous cultures inform our practices and draw on our lived experiences to provide a unique form of leadership excellence. Characteristics of Indigenous Leadership include (but are not limited to) resilience, advocacy and activism, courage and commitment.

An additional component of Indigenous Leadership is the fact that it often has a future focus as well as a past focus. It extends beyond the sheer benefits to a particular organisation or group in the immediate time. As such, Indigenous Leaders actualise a vision to create opportunities for future generations.

### **Institutional rhetoric**

Examining institutional rhetoric affords the opportunity to integrate both structural and political aspects of the organisational environment into the focal study. Similar to institutional logics (Alford & Friedland, 1985), as a principle of Indigenous Institutional Theory, examining institutional rhetoric provides the mechanism to review the foundations of institutions and their political agenda in reference to the Indigenous priorities of the institution. For example, the political agenda of an institution may be determined by funding sources or key government priorities.

Acknowledging political agendas that influence the development and implementation of internal policies, the newly developed framework, Indigenous Institutional Theory, also extends its focus to the development of Indigenous-specific policies and practices within the institution. An example of this may be an Indigenous employment strategy developed by the institution in response to a key government initiative.

Furthermore, examining institutional rhetoric provides a means to investigate discrepancies between the developed policies of the institution and their practices. It allows the researcher to ascertain whether an institution follows through with executing the Indigenous-specific policies or whether such policies are simply 'lip service'. Using the example of an Indigenous employment strategy, the researcher can compare the policy to Indigenous employment rates within an institution, in order to determine whether the policy is meaningful or not.

### **Applying the framework in practice**

The three principles of Indigenous Institutional Theory (IIT) derived from the first phase of a project titled *Walan Mayiny: Indigenous Leadership in Higher Education*. In the first phase of the project, Indigenous participants from the *Walan Mayiny* study shared their perceptions pertaining to the value, characteristics and challenges associated with Indigenous leadership. Indigenous Institutional Theory was developed as a result of the analysis of participants responses relating to their perceived characteristics of Indigenous leadership, combined with an extensive literature

review (see Coates, et al., 2021). The newly developed framework (i.e. Indigenous Institutional Theory) was then applied to the second phase of the *Walan Mayiny* study. The second phase of the study involved an analysis of university strategic plans, Indigenous supplementary institutional funding annual acquittal reports and Indigenous student and staff statistics. While the authors are in the final stages of preparing the paper that demonstrates how the entire framework has been applied, we offer two examples of the application.

The ‘**Resilience and Community Commitment**’ principle allowed the authors to examine evidence in university strategic plans that was representative of the commitment between the university and the Indigenous community, as well as evidence that indicated the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous people within the university (Coates et al., n.d.). In practice, key performance indicators representing resilience and community commitment were identified. Indicators included references to strategies to increase Indigenous student participation and retention, Indigenous employment strategies, the role of senior Indigenous leaders and the university’s partnership with Indigenous communities. Next, a scoring system was developed, based on the level of detail articulated within each of the key performance indicators. As a result, the authors were able to assess and compare the commitment to Indigenous higher education across each Australian university.

Examining ‘**Institutional Rhetoric**’ afforded the opportunity to integrate then the political agenda of the university through reviewing funding sources and internal policies and practices and make comparisons with Australian university statistics, to identify interconnections and contradictions. This stage of analysis returned strong results. The authors were able to identify rules and beliefs that guide the actions of each university and compare them to the interactions between senior Indigenous positions, the institution and the overall achievement with regard to Indigenous student and staff retention, engagement and success.

## Concluding statements

This paper has discussed ‘Western’ and ‘Indigenous’ methodological practices and examined two existing theories: Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Nakata, 2007) and Institutional Theory. In doing so, it introduced a new theoretical framework termed ‘Indigenous Institutional Theory’. While the framework has been developed in the context of higher education, there is potential for the framework to be applied in other organisational contexts.

The newly proposed framework offers a method to examine the social and cultural norms of an institution, the role of human agency, experiences of Indigenous Peoples within ‘Western’ institutions and the commitment institutions demonstrate towards the Indigenous community. Importantly, the framework extends its focus to the actions of Indigenous leaders with regard to implementing institutional change. Finally, Indigenous Institutional Theory aims to investigate the foundations and political agenda of institutions, and the synergies with institutional rhetoric and compare them to other institutions within the same institutional field.

Indigenous Institutional Theory provides a critical standpoint to investigate Indigenous knowledges and experiences, in relation to others and against institutional rhetoric, across and within intuitional environments. It helps gain a better understanding of the role and subsequent value of Indigenous Peoples in organisational structures. The authors believe it will also facilitate centring the voices of Indigenous Peoples within institutions. Consequently, it aims to assist with designing models of best practice for policy makers within institutions seeking to effectively integrate Indigenous Peoples, allowing them to execute their leadership abilities.

Despite this theoretical approach being applicable to Indigenous research, it has broader relevance by offering a powerful explanatory lens that can be adapted and utilised when examining prejudiced political agendas and bigoted policies of Western institutions, from the viewpoint of minority groups. As such, the framework allows leadership and organisational scholars to investigate the ways in which discriminatory (e.g. gendered and racialised) structures within Western institutions are created, reinforced and, more importantly, culturally challenged. In doing so, the framework provides a mechanism to bring into focus the societal positioning and community-driven actions of leaders from minority groups.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** This manuscript is an original work that has not been submitted to nor published anywhere else.

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