

IFSAM 2022 Award

IFSAM Award for Excellence in Indigenous Management Scholarship

Winner: Prof. Leanne Cutcher

Interviewed by Ying Ying Zangh Zang

Professor Cutcher, thank you for joining us today.

Can you tell us about your journey in the field of Indigenous Management Scholarship? What inspired you to pursue this path?

Yeah, thank you. Thanks for the opportunity to talk about my research. So my journey in Indigenous Management Research has been both a personal and a professional journey, and those two, the destination for those two journeys was the same at the same point.

So I had the opportunity to work with a young Aboriginal woman, Talia Milroy, on a project that was a scheme that the university had set up to support students like Talia to give them an opportunity to work with an academic. And our project looked at the way in which Aboriginal mothers were discursively constructed in Australia's maternity policies. And out of that research, Talia and I formed a friendship.

We also published our research, which was seen as important research, and we also then went on to do further research around the stolen generations and the stolen wages, which are very big issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia. Out of that project, we had a very generous gift given to us by Talia's grandmother, Biggily, and she shared her story, her documents that had been compiled by the government when she made her claim for stolen wages. And really, that extraordinary gift of opening her life to us also encouraged me to think about my own identity.

And I knew that I had Aboriginal ancestry, but in my family, it had never been talked about. It was shameful. So then I began a personal journey of discovering my own ancestry as an Awabakal person, and that's the country that my people come from in Australia.

And so that also led me on a kind of personal journey around my own identity, which of course has also shaped the research that I've done since that early research. So it's been both a professional and a personal journey for me. Yeah, that's interesting and also very inspirational.

What would you say are some of the key milestones in your career that lead to your recognition by IFSAM?

Yeah, so it's, you know, I'd say that was the first step, and part of what I talked about with my relationship with Talia, and also then the generosity of her grandmother, is that I think is, and something that we don't, I don't think talk about enough as management scholars, is being a good colleague, and forming really strong relationships with people, and recognising that in a way everything we do is interconnected. And I've just had so many experiences where someone I knew, you know, two decades ago in a completely different context has opened doors for me in my research. So I think, you know, being kind, being a good colleague, being, you know, I do think you reap what you sow, and so those relationships are really important.

Like, I have had so many fantastic collaborations with colleagues, people I've met at conferences, you know, that I would now call my friends, and sure, we've, you know, we've published things together, and we've been productive, but there's also something more to it. So I think that's really important, and I think that extends to our research partners, and the respondents in our research. I think it's really important to respect the fact that they have, they're being generous in gifting their stories to us, you know, as a qualitative researcher, you know, we get to, we get the privilege of listening to people's stories, you know, they share their insights, their challenges at work, or whatever it is that we're asking them about.

And I just think that's, that's a great privilege. And, and I guess they're the things that if I reflect on my career, are really important that I would never have anticipated when I first started out in academia.

Can you tell us a little bit more about this, any, you know, lesser known stories or experience that played a significant role in this successful journey?

Yeah, yeah. This sort of lesser known stories, it's, it's hard, it's hard to talk about that in a way. But I have reflected on this, and I have written about the role of reflexivity in research. So I mean, we talk a lot about being reflexive researchers, but you know, what does that actually mean? And I think it is important to think about how the research that we're doing is acting on us. And it's changing who we are in the world.

Like, you know, we engage with theories, and theories are, you know, about ways of understanding the world. And we need to think about our own taken for granted assumptions, and especially when you're working in a field of Indigenous Management Studies. So it's really important that you put any kind of preconceived notions to one side.

For example, I recently have been working with an organisation here in Australia, that works with Aboriginal women and children, delivering mostly health services to those people. And you know, I presented a research proposal to them, and I had my theory in there. And they just said, we don't like your theoretical framing, we want to use a decolonising methodology.

And I was like, okay. So I was really impressed that they would actually engage with my proposal to that extent. But I think also, just recognising that, you know, when we're working with people, particularly Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people, but also other underrepresented groups in the management space, we do need to, you know, really question our taken for granted ways of working and understanding.

So I think being reflexive and being learners ourselves, like, you know, people sort of get to being professors, and everybody thinks, well, you know, that's the end of it. But it isn't, you just, you have to keep learning, being open to new ways of thinking. So I guess some of that doesn't make its way into papers, but you know, maybe it should, but it is a really important part of the journey.

Can you tell us some of those you consider as the biggest challenge you encountered during your research and career in this particular Indigenous management scholarship?

Yeah, I guess the thing is, you can, sometimes you can just really get it wrong, like and say, you know, you, you know, I have Indigenous ancestry, but I came to that understanding late. So I've grown up, you know, with white privilege.

And, and, and we just have all these taken for granted assumptions as, as, you know, because whiteness is the dominant framework, it's the dominant discourse. And so I think when you get it wrong, you have to be prepared to say, you know, I'm sorry. I think that's a really important part of being a reflexive ally, which is really important when you're working with Indigenous people.

It's also can be challenging, not so much for myself, but I've noticed for some of my younger Aboriginal colleagues, the challenge for them is this sort of what they call cultural load, where because there are very few Aboriginal people in management schools, they often get asked to do a lot of that, a lot of that work around representing their culture, which takes up a lot of their time. So my I'm always saying to them, it's really important to learn to say no. And that's something that I wish I'd learned earlier on in my career to sort of be a bit more judicious about the opportunities that come your way.

And, and to not, and to realise that when you say no, people aren't going to think badly of you, especially if they know that your focus is on is on something else that particular time in your life. So I think that for myself, I've done a lot of leadership roles in universities, which has been, you know, a great opportunity. But, you know, that has come at a cost to my research.

So I think just being cognisant of, of prioritising your research, I would say that if this, you know, if I'm speaking now to younger scholars, you know, I would say, jealously guard your research time. And so that's a bit of a mixed up answer. But there's a few things there.

But yeah, that's what that's reflecting on my experience, but also observing what can happen to some of my younger colleagues as well.

Do you suggest any other strategy you find the most effective to overcome different types of challenges that you have encountered? Any other recommendations?

Yeah, so when I first started my PhD as a mature age student, I'd, you know, been in the workforce and done lots of different things. But I remember one of the academics saying, you've got to do something, you know, in your PhD that you're really passionate about, because, you know, you're going to be doing it for three, four years, it's going to be the only I'm sorry about that, it's going to be the only thing that you're doing.

So I, and I still think that's true at every stage of the research. I mean, you can get caught up in lots of different projects. And I think the, the push to publish in our field is, is detrimental in the sense that, you know, people often looking around for opportunities, some people, let's face it can be quite kind of opportunistic themselves in looking for those opportunities.

But I think it's really important to follow your passion, and to, and to think about what you think really matters. And I mean, that can be very, very, very different for everyone. But I think following your passion, and, and just the other thing I would say is that I think often as academics and management scholars, we don't think of ourselves as writers, but we are writers.

And I would also say, I think it's important to, to spend time learning how to write properly and crafting writing and writing really clear papers that, you know, people who aren't academics can read or my, you know, Aboriginal research partners can pick up that paper and read it and go, wow, yeah, that's, that's, that's, that's, that's my reality. So I think, I think that's also really important. So follow your passions, you know, right from the heart, but also take writing seriously.

What are some of the most significant learning you have gained? And yeah, what thing do you wish you could have done differently, or improved upon?

Yeah, well, I mean, I guess I've talked about that a bit saying that I wish I'd learned earlier how to say no.

And I also think that early on in my career, you know, it's a bit like bright, shiny objects of like, oh, that sounds interesting. That looks interesting. That looks interesting.

That looks interesting. And I maybe went in too many different kinds of directions. And I think it would have been hard to say, what does Leanne Cutcher do? I mean, well, I mean, I could have crafted a narrative around that.

But you know, some people are much better at carving out a space that says, and I think that's important. That's an important strategy. Earlier on, I would have thought, oh, that's a bit limited.

Isn't that a bit boring. But I do think if you can find an area that you that really resonates with you that you really think reflects the way you think about the world, it also helps you to understand the phenomenon that you're interested in. Then I think, you know, go deep into that and you will have a have a successful career.

I mean, I'm doing that now. I'm focussing very much on being an Indigenous management scholar. And I'm getting a lot of personal growth and joy out of that.

And so I think, yeah, I think focussing and, you know, becoming known for a particular thing is important in our field. And it also just allows us to actually, you know, really know what we're talking about, rather than being in too many different kinds of directions, I think.

How would you evaluate the impact of your research on Indigenous management or this to the broader community? What do you suggest measuring or enhancing this influence of Management scholarship in the future?

Yeah, yes, this is a really important question, I think, because there are a couple of things here. So doing research with Indigenous people takes a lot of time, because it's really important to build trust, and building trust takes time.

And I don't think there's recognition of that in the current way that academia is structured, the way that it's rewarded. You know, again, there's a lot of pressure on junior scholars to publish. And I think that we need to recognise that if we're going to be working with Indigenous peoples and other, you know, groups that aren't normally represented in our scholarship, then we need to allow scholars the time to be able to do that and do that effectively to build those relationships, which could take years, could take months, could take years.

And then on the other hand, I think also, a really important part of doing research with Indigenous people is that it has to be reciprocal. You can't just go in there and kind of take all their knowledge and take their way of being in the world and write it up as a great paper, get it published and walk away. You have to actually be giving them something back that benefits them, benefits their communities.

And sometimes that can be writing, you know, a report for them, helping them prepare a grant proposal, you know, creating resources for them that help them to be a more successful

organisation, which in my case is relevant because I'm an organisation study scholar. So those outputs don't get recognised either. So, you know, so we need to find ways of providing people a bit more time and also recognising that those outputs, which is such important to the establishment and the ongoing, you know, relationships, but also that we've, you know, we've really got to move away from being extractive as researchers of going in and taking.

We have to work out ways of giving back and we all, you know, and then the broader academy has to work out ways of acknowledging that because that's a lot of work, a lot of work on the part of people, but very rewarding, very important work. And so let's think about how we can better recognise that work.