



Social Identities

Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture

ISSN: 1350-4630 (Print) 1363-0296 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/csid20

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To cite this article: Hyacinth Udah , Parlo Singh & Chinyere Udah (09 Oct 2025): Transformative leadership: bridging racial and ethnic divisions in multicultural Australia, Social Identities, DOI: [10.1080/13504630.2025.2570261](https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2025.2570261)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2025.2570261>



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Transformative leadership: bridging racial and ethnic divisions in multicultural Australia

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we draw on a qualitative pilot study to examine how transformative leadership practices can bridge racial and ethnic divisions in multicultural Australia. Through thematic and framework analysis of semi-structured interview and focus group discussions with personnel from Barefoot to Boots, a grassroots refugee support organisation, we explore how participants with experiences of migration engage in everyday practices of disruption, care, solidarity, and creative negotiation of space to reshape belonging, challenge dominant norms of whiteness, and promote equity in settler-colonial Australia. The findings indicate that leadership is not simply about formal authority but rather an ethical, relational and place-based practice rooted in community engagement and justice. The article contributes to scholarship on racial justice, leadership and migration studies by highlighting how minoritised leaders reimagine national identity and belonging. It concludes with implications for anti-racism praxis, leadership development, and equity-focused policymaking within and beyond Australia.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 March 2025
Accepted 26 September 2025

KEYWORDS

Belonging; community engagement and justice; multiculturalism; settler colonialism; transformative leadership; whiteness

Introduction

Australia is one of the most successful multicultural societies in the world. Since the abolition of the White Australia Policy (WAP) in 1973, Australia has witnessed increased migration from China, India, the Pacific Islands, and African countries (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2021). However, despite its increasing diversity, there is a deeper reality of contested belonging, racialised exclusion, and persistent structural inequities. Racialised migrants and communities in Australia continue to navigate systems shaped by the legacy of settler colonialism and whiteness and by systems that privilege certain bodies, voices, and cultural norms while marginalising others. While significant research has examined the difficulties and racialisations that non-white migrants experience in Australia (e.g. Hage, 2012; Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Udah & Singh, 2019), there is less

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research on the ways in which some people through transformative leadership practices respond to, and challenge, the negative positioning of racialised identities. This article addresses this gap.

As questions of who belongs, who leads, and whose voices matter remain central to national discourse, this article argues that bridging Australia's racial divides requires a transformative leadership approach, one that recognises historical injustices, disrupts whiteness and white privilege, and promotes belonging for all. Hence, we ask: How do racialised and migrant leaders create spaces of justice and belonging that go beyond symbolic inclusion in Australia? What does transformative leadership look like in a settler-colonial, racially stratified society? For this study, we recruited personnel from Barefoot to Boots (BTB), a non-for-profit Australian charitable organisation with both domestic and transnational reach.

BTB is dedicated to improving the lives and wellbeing of refugees and community empowerment. BTB is founded by Awer Mabil, a former refugee turned professional footballer, and his brother Awer Bul. The 'boots' in 'barefoot to boots' are football boots, indicating the value of sport in building community ties and bridging divisions. The organisation provides football boots, uniforms, and health-related resources to refugees in Kakuma camp in Kenya. BTB was chosen because of their unique model of transformational leadership. Their work with offshore refugees and onshore communities simultaneously engages with and resists the remnants of Australia's settler-colonial and racially stratified legacy. Also, BTB's focus on sport as a medium of empowerment aligns with transformative leadership.

In this article, therefore, we explore how leaders from BTB work to promote equity, belonging, and justice in multicultural Australia through their leadership practices. Through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, we examine their everyday leadership practices that challenge racial hierarchies, reframe national narratives, and enhance relational inclusion across ethnic and cultural divides. Unlike traditional leadership models that are hierarchical and individualistic, we adopt a transformative leadership lens (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2013; Shields, 2021). We see leadership as an ethical, relational, and justice-oriented practice. Our interest lies not only in what these leaders do, but how they do it and what their work reveals about the possibilities and limitations of belonging in a nation still shaped by colonial logics and whiteness.

Background and context – multiculturalism, race, and colonialism in Australia

Like Canada and the United States, Australia is a settler-colonial nation with a shared history of colonisation, Indigenous dispossession, genocide, violence, and policies of forced assimilation (Liddell et al., 2024; Uдах, 2025). Immigration policies in all three countries have historically favoured white settlers, shaping their demographic and cultural identities. Apart from the First Nations peoples – the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – who have lived in Australia for over sixty-five thousand years (Pascoe, 2018), immigration has contributed to Australia's racial, ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity (Uдах, 2024). Before British colonisation, the Makassan – Yolŋu exchange was one of the earliest recorded pre-colonial intercultural encounters in Australia. Indonesian Makassan traders regularly visited northern Australia. However, British arrival in 1788,

ushered in a new phase of settlement marked by land seizure, displacement and racial violence in ways that marginalised and positioned Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as outsiders within their own lands, denying their sovereignty.

Between 1788 and 1868, over 162,000 convicts came to Australia (Udah, 2024). The gold rush era (1851–1860) led to influx of around 50,000 migrants, including 34,000 Chinese migrants in 1858, who were the largest non-British migrant group. Growing fears of large-scale Asian immigration, coupled with economic and cultural anxieties surrounding cheap non-white labour, led to the introduction of the Immigration Restriction Act, the infamous ‘White Australia’ Policy (WAP), on 23 December 1901, one of the first pieces of legislation enacted after the federation of the Australian colonies (Tavan, 2005). The WAP enforced a strict colour bar and facilitated large-scale European immigration. Explicitly designed to limit non-British migration to Australia, it imposed literacy tests and other exclusionary measures to restrict non-white immigration. Under its provisions, non-whites were permitted entry only on a temporary basis (Udah & Singh, 2019). Its gradual dismantling began in the late 1940s when it became evident that British migrants alone could not meet Australia’s demographic needs. Following the end of World War II, representing a significant compromise and fundamental transformation, other white Eastern Europeans and displaced persons were admitted. While this post-war mass migration from Europe diversified the population, it largely conformed to a racialised hierarchy that privileged whiteness. Despite linguistic and cultural differences, the so-called ‘Beautiful Balts’ were reasonably desirable migrants and accepted on the basis of their perceived whiteness (Persian, 2017).

The Whitlam Labor government abolished WAP in 1973, paving the way for non-white immigration (Tavan, 2005). Its abolition enabled non-European migration and made Australia more multiracial, though still multiethnic and multicultural and very white nation. However, despite Australia’s multicultural rhetoric, the legacy of Australia’s settler-colonial past and racial logics of whiteness continue to shape contemporary debates around immigration, multiculturalism, and national belonging, often privileging certain migrant groups while rendering others marginal.

Australia’s approach to multiculturalism fails to address Indigenous sovereignty or First Nations peoples’ dispossession and disrupt the enduring racialised hierarchies embedded in the national imaginary (Hage, 2012; Moreton-Robinson, 2015). It has resulted to what Coulthard (2014) describes as a politics of recognition without redistribution or structural transformation. While multiculturalism has expanded inclusion, whiteness and settler colonialism continues to define power, space, and identity in Australia (Udah, 2024), shaping the lived experiences of racial minoritised groups. Therefore, the fraught relationship between Indigeneity, multiculturalism, race, and colonialism remains central to contemporary debates on belonging in Australia.

Recent political events highlight the persistence of colonial logics. Despite legal and political progress since the 1967 referendum, which amended Australian Constitution to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the national census and allow the federal government to make laws on their behalf, Indigenous Australians are still unfree and dependent in their own land.¹ The failure of the 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum, which sought to constitutionally recognise an Indigenous advisory body, exposes enduring public ambivalence and resistance towards Indigenous self-determination and the fragility of reconciliation (Visontay, 2023). Meanwhile, the intensification

of debates around mass immigration, border security, and multiculturalism reveals how racialised hierarchies remain embedded in policy and public discourse, reflecting both the limits of inclusion within settler-colonialism (Lyons & Middleton, 2024) and the enduring centrality of whiteness in Australia (Udah & Singh, 2019). As Amit and Dolberg (2023) note, even names and accents become sites of misrecognition and identity policing for immigrants and refugees.

While the WAP has been abolished, its legacy endures in cultural attitudes and institutional structures that position racialised groups as perpetual outsiders, manifesting in systemic discrimination, social exclusion, and limited participation in national life (Amit & Dolberg, 2023). Coulthard (2014) and Foster (2014) critique multicultural policies for serving neoliberal rather than emancipatory ends. Drawing on Fanon (1963), Coulthard (2014) argues that multiculturalism assimilates Indigenous sovereignty claims within settler frameworks and does not dismantle colonial hierarchies. Given the complexities of recognition and the inherent limitations of inclusion within settler-colonialism, Foster (2014) argues that multiculturalism needs to be re-theorised to accommodate different people. Foster (2014) and Coulthard (2014) call for a transformative approach to multiculturalism, one that engages not only with Indigenous sovereignty, but also deals with issues of belonging where people of different backgrounds and cultures are recognised, treated as equals and feel belonged.

The above historical background is essential to understanding how racialised leaders, especially those outside the dominant Anglo-European frame, respond and challenge enduring whiteness in Australia. Racialised individuals seeking to lead must do so within structures that have historically excluded them while navigating expectations of assimilation, deference, and gratitude. Organisations like BTB offer alternative models of leadership, grounded in community wellbeing, ethical responsibility, and a commitment to reimagining belonging beyond whiteness and exclusion. With a particular focus on bridging racial divisions, we examine in this article how personnel from BTB articulate and enact transformative leadership in multicultural Australia.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

In Australia, **whiteness** functions not simply as racial identity but as a system of power, privilege, and exclusion. It is the invisible norm of Australian national identity, framing who belongs and who does not (Hage, 2012; Moreton-Robinson, 2015). Whiteness is normalised as the standard of identity and way of 'being' Australian. As an effect of racialisation, whiteness is 'real,' material and lived (Udah, 2024). It is the absent centre against which others (non-whites) are perceived only as inferior, undesirable, deviant, or points of deviation. As a lived, material reality, whiteness determines the boundaries of belonging in civic and political life (Amit & Dolberg, 2023), informing our understanding of the contradictions faced by community leaders working for racial equity (Udah & Singh, 2019). It operates as what Moreton-Robinson (2015) calls the unmarked centre, shaping who is seen, heard, valued, and legitimised in public life.

White privilege refers to the unearned assets that white people benefit from each day (McIntosh, 1998), with most remaining unaware of the advantages they gain from it. While some may remain unaware of these advantages, their effects are deeply embedded in institutional practices, social expectations, and national imaginaries (Saad, 2020;

Trevillion, 2025). Saad (2020) and Trevillion (2025) draw attention to how interpersonal, institutional, and ideological mechanisms sustain white privilege, kept in place through micro aggressive behaviours, representational erasure, and policy frameworks. For many critical race scholars, whiteness not only privileges certain bodies but also confers dominance and structures public discourse, institutions, and leadership (Crenshaw, 2017; Saad, 2020).

While McIntosh's (1998) work remains foundational, more recent scholarship has expanded understandings of white privilege and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2017; Saad, 2020; Trevillion, 2025). Whiteness in Australia still constructs racial and ethnic minoritised groups, including Indigenous Australians as not belonging, as perpetual outsiders and as passive subjects to be governed, assimilated or tolerated (Hage, 2012; Udah & Singh, 2019). Even after the abolition of WAP, the cultural and structural legacies of white privilege endure. Operating under a presumption of invisibility, white privilege plays a part in determining one's inclusion. It makes race privilege relevant (Udah, 2024), subtly but persistently shaping not only access to certain opportunities and resources (McIntosh, 1998; Trevillion, 2025) but also the capacity to lead, to be believed, and to belong.

Belonging is not simply about legal status or cultural integration, but about recognition, relationality, and power (Yuval-Davis, 2006). It is a political process and extends beyond identification. It is a process constructed through boundary making and shaped by structural conditions of inclusion and exclusion (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Yuval-Davis (2006) identifies three levels at which belonging is constructed: social location (race, gender, and class), emotional attachment to place and community, and the ethical-political values shaping belonging. Within this framework, belonging is multidimensional, comprising emotional attachments, political membership, and sociocultural acceptance. However, it can be regulated by structures of whiteness, colonial entitlement, and exclusion.

In settler-colonial nations like Australia, belonging is contested and remains highly conditional, granted to some and withheld from others depending on proximity to whiteness, conformity to dominant norms, and strategic usefulness to the national project (Udah, 2018). First Nations peoples, despite their sovereignty, remain structurally excluded, while immigrants are often invited into a conditional inclusion premised on assimilation or depoliticised diversity. Racialised individuals and communities struggle to be recognised as full members. Often, they are misidentified, misrepresented, or rendered invisible (Fraser, 2009). The politics of recognition are not merely interpersonal; they are structured by long-standing colonial and racialised hierarchies that determine who is granted voice, legitimacy, and leadership.

Both Said (1998) and Fanon (2008) argue that colonial discourses pathologise non-whites, reinforcing their marginalisation. Responding to indigeneity and immigrant belonging, therefore, demands not only multicultural policies but the transformation of the terms of belonging. It calls for a reconstitution of national identity in ways that centre rather than marginalise (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). Belonging, in this view, is not about inclusion within existing structures, but about transforming those structures to open pathways for fairer social, political, and economic engagement. It requires leadership that critically engages with historical dispossession, systemic racism, and structural inequalities. Such leadership must confront colonial legacies.

While traditional **leadership** models are often hierarchical and individualistic, reinforcing existing power structures, transformative leadership centres ethical responsibility, relational engagement, empowerment, collective action and structural change (Greenleaf, 2002; Shields, 2021). Transformative leadership is relevant in contexts marked by injustice, inequality, and marginalisation (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2013; Shields, 2021), where leadership must not only guide but also disrupt and reimagine. Transformative leadership recognises that leadership is not confined to formal roles or elite positions. It can be exercised through everyday practices of resistance, care, and solidarity. It is deeply contextual, responsive to community needs, and grounded in a commitment to equity. In settler-colonial contexts, transformative leaders must grapple not only with racial injustice, but also with the deeper histories of dispossession, denial, and structural exclusion that shape contemporary life. It must recognise Indigenous sovereignty and empower migrant and racialised communities. For this study, transformative leadership provides a critical lens for analysing how BTB key personnel, some of whom have experienced marginalisation, enact leadership that is relational, justice-oriented, and committed to building spaces of belonging across difference. Their work reflects what Shields (2021) describes as leadership as praxis, a continuous process of learning, unlearning, acting, and transforming both self and society.

Methods and procedures

This article draws on qualitative findings from a pilot study. The study emerged from our discussions about racialised groups being recognised in the Australian of the Year awards. Having studied racism and the experiences of (un) belonging in Australia (Udah & Singh, 2019), as part of our pilot study, we wanted to understand how some Australians use their leadership skills to carry out and implement practical community wellbeing projects. These individuals, we call them social change leaders, actively work to challenge the negative positioning of racialised identities.

In this article, we conceptualised social change leaders as agents who challenge racial hierarchies, disrupt dominant narratives, and engage in advocacy for justice. Their work is transformational and involves grassroots activism, relational engagement, and everyday acts of resistance and defiance against injustice. These leaders understand that belonging must be co-created through reciprocal recognition, care, and justice, not transactional inclusion. Their leadership practices prioritise solidarity, ethical responsibility, and structural transformation (Shields, 2021), aligning with the principles of servant leadership.

Our research attention was focused on how these leaders promote belonging, and challenge racialised hierarchies in Australia through their leadership practices. While some of them have received formal recognition and awards for their contributions to social justice and community empowerment both within and beyond Australia, their contributions remain underexplored, with limited research on their leadership strategies, community-based approaches, and social justice frameworks. The study received full ethics approval from James Cook University Human Research Ethics Committee (H9281).

As a pilot study, we also sought to assess the feasibility of the study. Our research approach was less extractive but more relational and respectful (Udah, 2024). We recruited participants from BTB, who were recognised as experts rather than mere sources of empirical data. Questions were framed and tailored to reflect participants'

expertise. Discussions were characterised by deep listening, and a quest for transformative understanding (Udah, 2024). Online interview (n = 1) and a Microsoft Teams-based focus group meeting were conducted with five key personnel (n = 3 males and 2 females) from BTB to understand their work and conceptualisations of identity, belonging and social justice. All interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in English.

We used framework analysis (Ritchie et al., 2013) to support thematic analysis (Gale et al., 2013), allowing for combining deductive and inductive approaches. Framework analysis is a matrix-based method that provides a structured approach to analysing qualitative data thematically to preserve both analytical structure and participant voice (Ritchie et al., 2013). It is useful when studies are guided by specific research questions, a priori themes, or have policy relevance. As described by Gale et al. (2013), thematic analysis involves identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. It helps uncover how symbolic categories and lived experiences shape participants' practices and perspectives, while ensuring findings reflect participants' values and align with the study's aims.

Our approach began with the development of an analytical framework, comprising a set of codes and categories informed by key theoretical concepts on identity, belonging, and social justice (Hackett & Strickland, 2018). This framework guided the organisation of transcribed data from interviews and focus groups, allowing for both thematic depth and theoretical integration. We read the transcripts closely to identify common concerns raised by participants. Data was analysed and coded iteratively, alongside the three key theoretical concepts, enabling us to think with and about the emergent themes in and through the theoretical conceptual framing. This practice ensured that we did not impose the framework on the data, nor did we use a ground-up method to generate theory from the data. Rather, we used the framework as a sensitising structure to support analysis without constraining participants' narratives. To ensure rigour, two participants were consulted post-analysis to validate the findings and confirm resonance with their experiences. Pseudonyms have been used throughout the reporting of findings to protect participants' confidentiality.

Findings: transformative leadership as praxis in multicultural Australia

In this section, we present key themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews and focus group with BTB personnel. We not only select quotes to reflect participants' voices but also engage with existing scholarship to contribute novel empirical and theoretical insights into transformative leadership as praxis in multicultural Australia. The themes reflect how participants practice leadership not as authority or hierarchy, but as everyday acts of resistance, care, and solidarity. The themes are structured around the central concern of bridging racial and ethnic divisions through belonging, equity, and relational justice.

Theme 1: superficial multiculturalism and genuine integration

Although Australia has a diverse multicultural population, participants suggest a lack of integration in their communities. Participants distinguish between diversity as demographics and integration as practice and critiques Australia's multiculturalism as

performative. Differentiating between superficial multiculturalism and meaningful integration, participants suggest that integration requires more than tokenistic inclusion. For them, it demands genuine, sustained interaction and proactive efforts to bridge racial hierarchies. For example, Robert notes:

There is a diverse group of people but the diversity of working together or knowing each other is not there.

Robert is one of BTB key personnels. Robert left South Sudan as a boy and was received as a refugee in the United States of America, where he completed his studies before moving to Australia to reunite with his family. Although he has the lived experience of escaping conflict, and seeking refuge and resettlement, Robert's insights highlight the gap between coexistence and cohesion. Robert believes diversity without interaction, without relational engagement, is superficial, which resonates with critiques by Coulthard (2014) and Foster (2014). As Coulthard (2014) and Foster (2014) argue, multiculturalism without structural change risks becoming a depoliticised celebration of diversity.

Robert also compares Australia unfavourably to Aotearoa New Zealand. He perceives Māori identity to be more structurally and symbolically embedded in national identity:

You know, there's no self-wrestling within New Zealand itself. New Zealand has taken the Māori as the identity of the country ... Australia needs to be clear about national identity.

Robert idealises New Zealand's position. In the context of integration, the phrase 'there's no self-wrestling' may imply that New Zealand is not grappling with diversity issues in the same way as Australia. In Robert's view, New Zealand has made more visible and structural attempts to confront its colonial past and recognise Indigenous sovereignty. While Robert's comparison of Australia to New Zealand calls attention to Australia's unresolved identity struggles and the ongoing marginalisation of both Indigenous and immigrant voices, recent scholarship provides nuance. Scholars argue that New Zealand has indeed taken significant steps such as formal biculturalism, the Treaty of Waitangi which provides constitutional foundation for Māori and the Crown relations and informs Māori rights and wellbeing policies, and Māori language revitalisation that symbolically acknowledge Māori identity and seek structural inclusion (Came et al., 2021; Coates, 2018). However, New Zealand still grapples with enduring colonial inequalities and tensions between biculturalism and multiculturalism (Wepa, 2015). As such, Robert's statement may reflect a perception of progress rather than the full complexity of the New Zealand context. Nonetheless, this comparison serves as a critique of Australia's hesitance to meaningfully engage with Indigenous sovereignty and multicultural inclusion.

Unlike Aotearoa New Zealand, which continues to debate its colonial past through processes such as truth-telling commissions and treaty settlements, Australia maintains settler logics that marginalise First Nations voices (Lyons & Middleton, 2024). Robert's remarks align with calls by contemporary scholars who advocate for Australia to move beyond symbolic gestures and adopt transformative approaches that integrate Indigenous self-determination and equitable inclusion for racialised migrants into its national identity framework (Coulthard, 2014; Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Trevillion, 2025; Visontay, 2023).

Other participants echo Robert's sentiments, arguing that Australia lacks a collective national identity, which hinders unity and perpetuates racial hierarchies. Participants like Gina emphasises the transformative potential of sport to create spaces of shared understanding, empathy, and mutual respect (Jeanes et al., 2022; Spaaij, 2011). For Gina, the solution to achieving belonging lies in sports:

The tendency for migrants to go to a particular area with their own community doesn't promote integration. It works when cultures come together and they start respecting, understanding, and learning from each other and all the misconceptions and bias disappear. Sports are a great catalyst for integration.

Gina oversees BTB program delivery. For Gina, integration is key to dissolving barriers related to race, colour, and religion. In the above quote, Gina indicates that leadership involves creating platforms such as sports for encounter, recognition, and emotional engagement across racial and cultural lines. For Gina and others, sport offers more than physical activity. It is a culturally safe and emotionally resonant space where people from diverse and often marginalised backgrounds can connect across difference, develop leadership skills, and build confidence. Gina's assertion that sports are a great catalyst for integration and dissolving bias aligns with Ahmed's (2019) work on affective encounters, where embodied experiences break established social hierarchies. When sport is intentionally designed and led, it can function as a form of transformative leadership (Stronach et al., 2016). However, as participants note, sustained change requires leadership, structural support and critical dialogue.

Theme 2: barriers to belonging and the role of whiteness

Participants identify several barriers such as lack of platforms for inter-group dialogue, social boundaries, insular thinking, and misrecognition. Jackson, a white English migrant, highlights Australia's racial division and lack of unity:

One of the most critical challenges we have is lack of unity ... To tackle division and racism, we need to understand that we are all the same.

Jackson's experiences reflect a different social positioning from participants of colour. Despite being privileged, Jackson loves supporting vulnerable populations. In the above quote, Jackson highlights ongoing division in Australia and stresses the need to recognise shared humanity. He demonstrates solidarity through his work in refugee camps and advocacy for social equity. He has taken his own children to Kakuma refugee camp, a transformational experience for his children.

Similarly, Robert points out that fear, internalised hierarchies, and lack of unity and inter-group dialogue can lead to social isolation and interactions barriers:

I find it difficult to just say hello to any person in Australia. Even within my own community, it is hard for them to approach any other community, let alone Australian white community ... There's still a boundary here, and these boundaries need to be unlocked.

In the above quote, the mention of boundaries that need to be unlocked indicates barriers that hinder belonging. The work of transformative leadership, in this context, includes recognising these boundaries and actively working to dismantle them through

intentional outreach, cultural bridging, and emotional labour. For Robert, something needs to be done to improve social connections:

There must be some sort of organisation that could link people to things and things to people.

While Robert expresses a desire for more interactions, Katie another participant, discusses the challenges within schools to fully integrate mixed-race children:

I have mixed-race children ... It is quite difficult for me because of their experiences with racism. There are times, I've ended up in tears. When you are a mother, it really pauses your heart's strength. While schools are trying, they aren't quite there.

Katie is married to an African American and has mixed-race children. In the above quote, Katie's account further illustrates how whiteness operates as an invisible standard in schools and society. Katie's experiences as a mother of mixed-race children reveal the emotional toll of everyday racism, especially within schools.

Scot criticises Australians' insular thinking, which perpetuates racism and hinders integration:

Australia has been a typical white society. We don't think outside our own little homes, and it really needs to change. Australians are so insular in the way they think.

While Scot, a white Australian, is new to BTB, he believes racism stems from being narrow-minded in perception. He suggests that Australians need to change their insular thinking and embrace diversity more fully. Some participants also criticise the media's role in sensationalising race-related incidents without fostering informed discourse. These participants, like Gina, note that there is a lack of informed conversation about racism. For Gina, the media fuels negative narratives:

When racial incidents bubble up, there's a lack of grace. There's a lack of integrity. There's a lack of interrogation. They're turned into headlines without proper context.

In the above quote, Gina indicates that headlines lack grace and interrogation, which echoes Uдах's (2018) critique of racialised media representations and the politics of perception. The lack of grace and integrity by the media can exacerbate polarisation and prevent informed conversations about racism. Gina believes that meaningful engagement is obstructed by media's shallow reporting:

Unfortunately, it polarises opinions and sentiments and emotions. Because of fake news, we, as a society, lose control of a considered conversation about racism in Australia.

For Gina, the media can escalate situations without providing adequate context, leading to polarised public responses that are often reactionary rather than reflective. Indeed, participants accounts suggest that leadership should not be confined to organisational roles. However, leadership needs to be embedded in ordinary moments of resistance and care.

Theme 3: enabling belonging through community wellbeing

Participants' work at BTB is focused on enabling community wellbeing by creating opportunities that improve access for refugees not just in Kakuma but also in Australia. For many participants, belonging is co-produced through access, relationality, community wellbeing and emotional safety not just legal status.

Katie articulates this by stating, *'Belonging is about community enabling and being one, not separate. It involves increase access in society.'* Katie suggests that fostering belonging requires actions that promote community wellbeing. By mentioning 'increase access,' Katie emphasises that access to resources is key to ensuring everyone feels belonged. In this context, leadership is about facilitating structures whether through sport, education, or refugee resourcing that allow marginalised individuals to participate with dignity.

Similarly, Jackson discusses their efforts to enhance belonging through access to resources:

We want people to have access to resources. We're linking a school to work in the camp [refugee camp]. There is a great sense of engagement and belonging.

These perspectives align with Yuval-Davis' (2006) framing of belonging around ethical-political values and emotional attachment. Participants link belonging not just to place but to equitable participation and racial dignity. For many participants, belonging is multi-dimensional and political. It is shaped by both emotional attachment and structural positioning (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Through initiatives that combine sport, education, and community engagement, BTB leaders create affective and material infrastructures for belonging that go beyond tokenism.

Theme 4: recognition, misrecognition, and identity politics

Participants also share perspectives on recognition, which emerged as a key dimension of belonging. They highlighted how Australia's complex, intersecting identities, gender, class, migrant status, and race, create barriers to national belonging. Michael connects recognition with safety and emotional security:

When your community accepts you, you can make a change in your community. Your community is like your family.

In the above, Michael highlights the importance of being recognised and accepted by one's community. Born in Kakuma refugee camp after his family fled civil war in South Sudan, Michael moved to Australia when he was ten years old. Michael's words (above) reflect a communal perspective on belonging, where being accepted provides a foundation from which one can engage and participate within society. His comment also affirms Fraser's (2009) insistence that justice requires both redistribution and recognition.

Recognition is not only about fitting in but also about being in a community where one's presence is valued. Michael also connects belonging to safety, emphasising that creating a safe and inclusive community is key to belonging. Michael notes: *'It's about finding the balance of safety. Safety is crucial.'* As Michael points out, feeling safe(ety) is crucial for physical, emotional, and psychological wellbeing. For Michael, therefore, belonging involves physical presence, as well as emotional and social acceptance. It is also a process that evolves with personal growth.

However, Robert describes experiences of misrecognition based on race, accent, or appearance:

They would mix me up with another and say that I come from Africa, but they never know I'm from South Sudan.

In the above quote, Robert feels a disconnect between their identity and how they are perceived by others, reflecting the broader issue of misrecognition in Australia, where diverse identities are oversimplified. In contrast, participants such as Jackson, Scot and Gina acknowledge their racial privilege and the ease of moving through public spaces unchallenged. Unlike Robert, Jackson, who identifies as a white English migrant, now Australian, rarely experiences this: *'Occasionally I might be asked, 'Are you English?' But it's very rare.'* Similarly, Scot says *'I have not experienced it. I'm white Aussie.'* Gina acknowledges her privilege as a white Australian: *'I certainly haven't experienced what other people have. Australia is very white, and I recognise that privilege.'*

These examples resonate with Moreton-Robinson's (2015) critique of whiteness as the unmarked centre and default reference point for Australian identity, where racialised individuals are perpetually positioned as outsiders. While Gina's privilege arises from her skin colour, appearance, and heritage, this points out the predominance of whiteness in Australia (Hage, 2012). Whiteness shields Gina from certain types of questioning and discrimination that racially and culturally minoritised individuals face.

Hence, transformative leadership requires reimagining spaces where minoritised identities are recognised. Michael believes Australia's immigrant population can help reshape national identity and reimagine belonging, adding, *'We immigrants must relate! The only non-immigrants are the Indigenous people. It's about appreciating where you are.'* Michael's definition of being an immigrant is inclusive. Michael considers recognition of individual differences as crucial for belonging.

Theme 5: practices of equity and everyday justice

Participants describe equity as their core leadership commitment not just in policy terms, but as daily practice. Through their everyday work at BTB, participants actively advocate for inclusive policies, especially policies related to refugee treatment and perception in Australia and overseas. Scot describes how living among Indigenous Australians completely changed his outlook on life:

I had some prejudices but living near Indigenous Australians for two years completely changed my outlook on life, social justice, and everything else.

Scot is a former law enforcement officer, who lived overseas for over thirteen years before returning to Australia. The shift in Scot's outlook suggests that proximity and relational engagement can enhance deeper ethical awareness (Nxumalo & Tuck, 2023). Scot acknowledges that equality does not always mean treating everyone the same: *'Social justice is all about equality, but equality does not mean equal for everything. Everyone's idea of equality is different and same with equity.'* Scot's words stress the need for context-based fairness. For some participants, social justice means equal access to opportunities such as housing, education and healthcare. For example, Robert emphasises the importance of equal access to resources like housing and employment which supports integration and sense of belonging:

Social justice is when you can share resources or basic needs and distribute them equally ... It means to be able to come to Australia and have access to equal opportunity, access to housing and job.

For Gina, 'social justice is about providing opportunities for women and young girls to access education, sports, and live a life with more opportunities.' Katie focuses on 'respect for [ALL] humanity.' For Katie, 'it's important that that each person, no matter where they come from, who they are, what they are, is treated with respect for their needs.'

These definitions of social justice reflect a capabilities approach (Nussbaum, 2007; Sen, 1999), one that sees leadership as creating conditions where everyone has a 'fair go.' However, several participants view representation as necessary but insufficient without structural change. For example, Jackson defines social justice as access, equity and fairness and recommends increased diversity in leadership. Jackson stresses that diverse leadership is essential for systemic change, not just for optics:

It is very rare to see people of colour in leadership roles. It is only through having more people from diverse grounds that we can get there.

Jackson's emphasis on representation in leadership echoes Crenshaw's (2017) call for intersectional inclusion. In the above quote, representation is not symbolic. Jackson sees it as a structural intervention that shapes policy, perception, and belonging. For Jackson, the underrepresentation of racially and culturally minoritised people in leadership roles is a significant barrier to achieving full equality in Australia:

Representation promotes a sense of belonging and unity. It also challenges existing barriers and shapes a more inclusive identity.

Jackson argues that representation unites people, and breaks down barriers, reinforcing the idea that people are united by common goals rather than divided by race or ethnicity. Jackson also critiques racial inequality in Australia, noting a disconnect between Australia's multicultural identity and the realities of racism:

Australia calls itself the most multicultural nation in the world ... but there's a great effort that needs to be made on racial equality. I don't see racial equality for a country that says it's the most successful multicultural nation in the world.

Katie thinks that her children's experience with racism and prejudice reflects the failure of multiculturalism in Australia. Hence, Robert suggests practical steps they take:

Social justice can be done through something you do. For example, we give sanitary pads to women and distribute computers to people equally. We give education to everyone that needs it. This is social justice because we are serving people and helping them equally. We are giving a fair go to everyone.

Theme 6: inclusive leadership, activism, and social change

Participants' leadership extends beyond traditional charity work, but functions as a vital means for empowerment and systemic change. Participants describe leadership as relational, and iterative in its impact. For example, Scot highlights their ongoing efforts to challenge racism, drawing attention to negative perceptions in Australia:

Occasionally, I speak out against negative comments ... Unfortunately, negative comments come back. For me, it's about growth and development, not just for us but also for those we assist.

Scot's statement showcases a personal challenge against racism. While Scot makes effort to challenge negative comments, Katie grounds justice-oriented leadership in day-to-day interactions, whether on school grounds, in supermarkets, or through conversations with their children's friends. In fact, Katie's leadership manifests in protective advocacy and public education in everyday settings:

It's about influencing one person through the day-to-day conversations that I have in the supermarket, on school grounds and with young people, friends of my friends or my children's friends. It's those things that I can do to help influence social justice, by speaking up for what's right.

Katie's activism stems from the need to educate:

For me, it's the day-to-day small things that really matter. Being able to share the information, especially to the young generation, so that they may grow up in respect for others.

This resonates with Shields' (2021) transformative leadership, which values moral courage, collective empowerment, and relational accountability. Katie's efforts are proactive attempts to create a more just and equitable Australia. Like Katie, other participants create spaces where citizens of different backgrounds and cultures can feel seen, heard, valued, and respected. Like Katie, the lived experiences of marginalisation drive many participants to pursue social justice initiatives. Jackson highlights the role of sports in BTB's mission:

We promote identity and belonging, and football is a great part of this, using sports as a gateway. The boots we give create a sense of belonging, equity, and access in the community.

Jackson's account sheds light on how sports (and soccer boots) can create spaces where individuals from diverse backgrounds can connect. The incentive to engage in their organisation, Jackson adds, is driven by 'the experience of working with people who have faced extraordinary hardships.'

Participants stress the need to educate others, challenge racist remarks, and build solidarity through conversation and encounter. Among participants, real change is driven by education, personal growth, experiential learning, and an ongoing commitment to social justice. Scot echoes this belief, noting 'It's about getting out there, experiencing it and educating others. It's about becoming involved and speaking to people. It is a matter of education.' For Scot, people can break the barriers of insularity by stepping outside their comfort zone, physically putting themselves in diverse situations and attempting to engage, see and understand the world from others' perspectives.

Rather than simply offering material support, participants focus also on supporting and empowering refugees with skills and knowledge to participate in society. Robert explains the impact of their work:

We're not just giving handouts. We're giving them knowledge so that they can better themselves and compete with us in the world.

Through resource and knowledge sharing, many participants say they empowered themselves and others to challenge stereotypes, grow, and develop in ways that contribute to a more just society. Their activism involves redefining leadership itself not as visibility or command, but as relational courage and ethical presence. Through their activism, participants challenge racialised identities, exemplify how lived experiences, and practical

leadership can drive transformative praxis. Their activism and leadership reveal how social justice efforts, even small ones, can create far-reaching impacts, reimagining a more just and equitable Australia for all (Shields, 2021).

Discussion

In multicultural societies, belonging is important when considering social change initiatives and the experiences of minoritised groups. Our participants' experiences highlight the gap between the rhetoric of multiculturalism and its reality. Their accounts affirm that belonging is not granted by policy alone, but it is actively co-produced through care, access, and solidarity. Across the themes, what emerges is a form of leadership that disrupts racial hierarchies, challenges the invisibility of whiteness and the boundaries of belonging, reclaims relational spaces, and contests the colonial logics in multicultural Australia.

Although not the main focus of this article, sport emerged in participants' accounts as a powerful area for practising transformative leadership. Several highlighted how sport creates environments where people, especially those from migrant and refugee backgrounds, experience mentorship, recognition, and a sense of belonging. This supports a growing body of scholarship that positions sport as a productive site of social inclusion for marginalised communities (Jeanes et al., 2022; Spaaij, 2011). Beyond recreation, sport serves as a cultural and political space where identities are negotiated, leadership is cultivated, and social bonds are forged (Persson & Eriksen, 2025; Spaaij, 2011). It provides embodied, collective experiences that foster empowerment, discipline, and resilience (Ahmed, 2019), offering an alternative platform for recognition and engagement (Stro-nach et al., 2016).

However, the promise of sport is not without limits. Scholars have cautioned that its inclusionary potential can be conditional, reproducing racial hierarchies if not critically examined (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011). Leadership through sport must guard against tokenism and assimilation, where racialised migrants are included only on dominant terms. Nonetheless, participants in this study leveraged sport alongside education and advocacy as a transformative structure for reimagining belonging and leadership. For many, sport was one of the few spaces where inclusion could be tangibly felt and witnessed. As such, it remains a vital yet under-recognised site for policy and community investment aimed at redressing exclusion and fostering cross-cultural solidarity.

Participants also indicated the limits of multiculturalism in Australia. As participants articulated integration requires more than surface-level diversity but demands genuine, sustained interaction and proactive efforts to bridge racial and ethnic divisions. This is consistent with existing critiques of contemporary multiculturalism (Coulthard, 2014; Foster, 2014; Fozdar & Hartley, 2014; Moreton-Robinson, 2015). While Australia celebrates diversity, the multicultural rhetoric frequently overshadows the structural realities that maintain hierarchies. As critics argue, multiculturalism in Australia remains depoliticised, often reducing diversity to celebration without redistribution or structural change. Multicultural policies, instead of creating space for social and racial justice where citizens of different backgrounds and cultures can see themselves and each other as equals, maintain structural inequalities and serve neoliberal ends by regulating the boundaries and hierarchies of belonging (Fozdar & Hartley, 2014; Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Udah, 2018).

Our participants also identified multiple barriers to inclusion, including difficulties in forming meaningful relationships across diverse groups. In many ways, belonging remains politicised, ethnicised, hierarchical, and conditional (Fozdar & Hartley, 2014), effectively marginalising those who do not fit into the white dominant cultural norms (Hage, 2012; Udah, 2018). As participants reveal, there is a perceived lack of unity and a shared identity. They emphasised how intersecting identities – gender, class, migrant status, and race – hinder practices of belonging by creating hierarchies of belonging. This aligns with the understanding that existing colonial ideologies shape politics of identity and belonging (Moreton-Robinson, 2015), leading not only to minoritised groups' vulnerabilities but also the justification for their ongoing marginalisation (Udah, 2024), through practices that uphold the invisibility and normalisation of whiteness (Hage, 2012).

Furthermore, our participants' accounts illustrate that belonging in Australia is influenced by systemic structural issues that are historical and persistent. As Australia continues to grapple with its legacy of racial injustice, particularly regarding First Nations peoples and other marginalised immigrants, the anti-racism movement is a crucial space for advocacy and activism. To effectively bridge racial and ethnic divisions, it is necessary to critically analyse how whiteness and racism is perpetuated. As a dominant racial identity, whiteness remains a structural advantage, and an unmarked cultural norm that influences belonging. It determines who is fully recognised as Australian (Udah, 2018; 2024), reinforcing racial hierarchies of belonging. Hence, this article calls for a critical rethinking of how belonging is defined and whose histories are centred. In this context, the recognition of precolonial intercultural relationships, such as the Makassan – Yolŋu exchange, challenges dominant narratives and opens space for alternative visions of Australia that recognises Indigenous sovereignty.

Achieving Indigenous sovereignty and racial justice requires, therefore, recognising First Nations peoples' distinct political rights, which should not be subsumed within multicultural policies aimed at immigrant integration (Coulthard, 2014). A decolonial approach is also needed not only to promote inclusion but to dismantle whiteness and colonial power structures that continue to shape the boundaries of national belonging (Udah, 2024). The long-standing history of Makassan – Yolŋu exchange indicates then that migration must be understood not merely as demographic change, but as part of a broader historical and political struggle over space, identity, and justice in Australia. Based on participants' accounts, there is a need for strategies aimed at promoting a society where individuals' capabilities are maximised, and threats to wellbeing minimised through tangible access to resources. There is also a need for a relational approach to belonging, one grounded in care, reciprocity, shared human values, and universal rights and responsibilities, rather than transactional nationalist ideals that demand assimilation into dominant cultural norms (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Through participants' leadership practices, activism, and community involvement, we see both personal and broader emancipatory and transformative justice goals emerging. Their activism show that social justice is not only about providing access to resources but demands structural change. Importantly, the findings highlight uneven public empathy. While participants' work with refugees in Kakuma was often celebrated and received more positively, similar works with marginalised communities in Australia received less support. This echoes what Ilcan and Rygiel (2015) describe as distant humanitarianism, a national willingness and readiness to help others far away while remaining reluctant

to confront inequalities at home. As Ilcan and Rygiel (2015) note, aid efforts abroad often serve to deflect attention from domestic systemic inequalities. In Australia, helping refugees abroad is politically acceptable than local support for asylum seekers or migrants locally. In other words, there is a willingness to assist those overseas while ignoring injustices at next door.

Our findings also point to a form of leadership that is decolonial, intersectional, and place-based and transformative. Participants, through their work with BTB, do not just serve within existing systems, rather they challenge them. Their leadership is relational and explicitly aimed at dismantling exclusions. This aligns with Shields' (2021) transformative leadership, which focuses on equity, and the moral courage to confront systemic injustice. Transformative leadership is often exercised not through formal institutional roles but through community-based activities, everyday advocacy (Shields, 2021) and a commitment to equity. To address racial and ethnic divides, Australia requires, therefore, leadership that goes beyond diversity rhetoric.

Transformative and justice-oriented leadership calls for structural change and create inclusive spaces for participation and voice (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2013; Shields, 2021). Participants' justice-oriented leadership practices are decolonial. They prioritise relational accountability over hierarchy and reconciliation over assimilation. In this sense, our findings reaffirm the need for leadership as a lived, daily practice of reimagining belonging. It begins with truth-telling and extends to building new solidarities across racial, cultural, and generational lines. Thus, we position transformative leadership as a justice-oriented process that challenges systemic inequities, interrogates dominant power structures, amplifies marginalised voices, and bridges the gap between theory and lived experience. By actively engaging in organisational work, advocacy, and activism to create inclusive spaces, participants position themselves as agents of transformation. Their leadership extends beyond traditional charity work and functions as a vital means for empowerment and systemic change (Shields, 2021).

Our findings suggest that leadership is not the preserve of elites but a daily commitment to justice and recognition. Thus, social change leadership in settler-colonial contexts requires not only critical reflexivity but also an ethical engagement with Indigenous sovereignty and migrant racialisation, which are dimensions often absent in mainstream leadership theory. Such leadership is not merely about representation or diversity in positions of authority, but about transformative practices that disrupt systems of inequality and re-centre marginalised voices. Justice-oriented leadership in education, community development, and policymaking requires a commitment to historical redress, and the co-creation of spaces where Indigenous and racialised communities can exercise agency and voice (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2013; Shields, 2021). This involves not only amplifying Indigenous and migrant voices but also reshaping institutional cultures, dismantling racial hierarchies, and building solidarities across difference. Therefore, leadership for social change works in tandem with a politics of belonging to enable more equitable participation in the national story.

Conclusion

This article has engaged with Australia's settler-colonial foundations to understand how histories of exclusion continue to shape contemporary experiences of belonging, and

how some leaders, particularly within the work of Barefoot to Boots, reshape the racialised terrain of multicultural Australia through transformative leadership practices rooted in relationality, recognition, and justice. Through participants' reflections, we have explored how leadership understood as ethical, relational, and justice-oriented praxis can bridge racial and ethnic divides. Operating within a settler-colonial state shaped by the ongoing logics of whiteness and exclusion, these leaders create everyday spaces of resistance, recognition, and belonging. They challenge both the rhetoric and limitations of Australia's multiculturalism. While diversity is formally celebrated, participants' accounts reveal that belonging remains conditional, and misrecognition persists. Against this backdrop, their transformative leadership practices prioritise community wellbeing, solidarity, and structural equity over symbolic inclusion.

Though a pilot study, the article makes contribution to three key areas. First, it extends understandings of leadership in racialised contexts by foregrounding the voices of grass-roots actors whose work remains under-recognised in dominant leadership discourse. Second, it advances critical scholarship on racial equity and belonging by demonstrating how inclusion is actively co-produced through access, care, and relational justice. Third, it offers insights into the value of relational, ethics-driven research in amplifying minoritised perspectives.

Our findings have implications for policy and practice in the areas of leadership, equity, and community engagement. The themes reveal how transformative leadership practices rooted in everyday resistance, relational belonging, and equity work to bridge racial and ethnic divisions in Australia. As a pilot study, it is limited in its scope and generalisability. The sample size is small, making it impossible to generalise findings. However, the limitations are offset by the depth of qualitative insight and the potential for future research to build on this foundation. Further studies might explore and evaluate the impact of similar leadership dynamics across multiple organisations, geographies, or cultural contexts in more depth.

More importantly, the article calls for a rethinking of leadership in multicultural Australia. Also, it provides an avenue for rethinking what it means to belong. Transformative leadership, as demonstrated by participants, is not just about increasing representation; it is leadership rooted in truth-telling, solidarity, and the co-creation of justice. It requires confronting historical injustices and moving beyond symbolic gestures to structural change. This includes creating space for social justice and reconfiguring the structures, relationships, and narratives that define who belongs. It involves moving beyond conditional inclusion to creating structures where every individual feels recognised and belonged. As Australia continues to grapple with its colonial legacy, failed reconciliation efforts, and racialised migration debates, the work of these leaders offers a blueprint for a more inclusive future. Their practices invite us to imagine a society where belonging is not contingent but shared, not conditional but co-created and where everyone has the right to belong, and to thrive.

Note

1. On 27 May 1967, Australians voted to change the Constitution so that like all other Australians, First Nations peoples – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – would be counted as part of the population and the Commonwealth would be able to make laws

for them. A resounding 90.77 per cent said 'Yes' and every single state had a majority result for the 'Yes' vote. It was one of the most successful national campaigns in Australia's history.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Hyacinth Udah:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Parlo Singh:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Supervision, Visualization; **Chinyere Udah:** Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by College of Arts, Society and Education, James Cook University.

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