

CHAPTER

9

Sumak Kawsay
among Indigenous
Women Leaders of
Ecuador

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Above 3,000 meters, the landscape of the Andes of Ecuador is breathtakingly beautiful. A deep blue sky is often the background for yellow, green, and brown mountains. When the wind blows, white plump clouds form a dense mist that can cover deep valleys in shroud in a matter of seconds. This is the highlands, home to the descendants of Incan and other pre-Columbian groups who preserve many of their ancestral traditions. They solve some disputes through indigenous justice; treat maladies with fragrant medicinal herbs; and live in their *ayllus* or groups of families connected by blood ties (Estermann, 1998). They also work the fields as their ancestors did. They mostly grow corn, lima beans, and potatoes — the staple Andean diet — which they supplement with other grains, rice, beef, chicken, and guinea pig. Within the communities, women manage a challenging workload. They take care of children, household chores, family vegetable gardens, and farm animals. However, this rural image should not be misleading. The roles of women in Andean communities are constantly being negotiated, creating a unique setting for studying leadership. With the expansion of women's grassroots organizations since 2009 and other societal changes, more indigenous women are stepping out of private spaces and holding leadership positions in

rural communities (FENOCIN, 2015). When these women lead, they accomplish formal organizational goals while also promoting environments that support a healthy world. Within the Andean culture, healthy and sustainable communities are those that respect nature, provide citizens with material and spiritual resources, and are able to preserve their unique cultures for future generations.

With a qualitative approach to studying leadership, I examine in this chapter how indigenous female leaders exercise the Andean principle of *sumak kawsay*. Roughly translated as *good living*, it is a model that leads to a healthy world by encouraging a way of life that agrees with nature, social responsibility, and the well-being of individuals and communities. Based on this definition, this chapter addresses the following two questions:

1. How do Andean women understand the principle of *sumak kawsay* as guiding their actions as leaders of grassroots organizations?
2. How does leadership in this part of the world reflect the local culture, values, and practices?

Understanding the Andean Concept of *Sumak Kawsay*

At the national level, Ecuador has taken important steps regarding the recognition of rights of indigenous peoples and of women through legislation. An example is the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution (Constitución Política de la República del Ecuador, 2008) that was ratified after the progressive leadership of some legislators and pressure from different societal groups. With a more gender and ethnic inclusive nature than the 1998 document, the 2008 Constitution purposely integrates the words *men and women* into the text and expands the collective rights of the indigenous peoples. It is important to point out that this is the first national Constitution in the world — later followed by Bolivia in 2009 — to incorporate in its text the indigenous principle of *sumak kawsay* and to legally grant rights to the *Pachamama* or Mother Earth. These additions to the Constitution are noteworthy both in content and form as they oppose the current market-oriented approach to the earth that dominates Western cultures and have been incorporated in the original Quechua

(or Kichwa) language. They also share similarities with ecofeminist voices, such as Carolyn Merchant's (2008) critical assessment of a mechanistic approach to nature.

Based on the Andean notion of *sumak kawsay* integrated into the 2008 Constitution, the Ecuadorian National Institute for Statistics and Census developed *el buen vivir* [good living]. The objective of this index scale is "to inform about the population's well-being and to design public policies that are coherent with the real needs of Ecuadorians" (INEC, 2015a). Therefore, in addition to using Western instruments to measure the welfare of people — such as income level, GDP, Gini coefficient, or life expectancy — Ecuador has provided legitimacy to an indigenous model of living on a national scale through institutional initiatives that were unseen less than a decade ago.

Sumak kawsay has been explained by scholars and activists in several ways, including "a new economic and political model for society and state, and a new vision with respect to nature" (Vega Ugalde, 2014, p. 73) or "an opportunity to collectively build new ways of life as alternatives to the current Western's goals of advancement and development" (Acosta, 2012, p. 62). From an ecofeminist perspective, Magdalena León (2010) presents the idea of an *economy of care* as part of this principle that values economic diversity, solidarity, sustainable ways of production, and a subsistence economy traditionally carried out by women.

There are some well-established definitions of *sumak kawsay* in the literature, although there is no consensus on whether this principle should be understood only within the Kichwa worldview or if it is an ideal for everyone, indigenous or not (Manosalvas, 2014). Other issues are whether the concept of *buen vivir* has been "borrowed" or "stolen" from the indigenous world, if leaders and activists committed to the indigenous cause should be the only ones defining *sumak kawsay* (Houtart, 2011; Vega Ugalde, 2014), and whether the official discourse of the government has lately given preference to the Spanish term *buen vivir* over the Kichwa term (Manosalvas, 2014). Finally, Houtart (2011) points out that the activists and scholars' discourses concerning *sumak kawsay* have great room for interpretation, with a variety of connotations (p. 12). Despite the fluidity of the concept, there is agreement that *sumak kawsay* relates to societal health. Although the relationship with nature is most central, *sumak kawsay* also includes other elements, such as social responsibility, equality, solidarity, and justice.

The Ecuadorian and Andean Contexts

Before exploring how Andean women carry out leadership, we need to understand the context in which they live today. With a population of 16.1 million (INEC, 2015b), Ecuador has had its share of social, political, and economic turmoil for decades and, as a consequence, women leaders from all groups of Ecuadorian society have frequently exercised leadership in unstable conditions. After a period of eight presidents in 10 years, the election of Rafael Correa to the presidency in 2007 brought a period of relative stability. Nevertheless, his governing style has been fraught with controversy. Supporters argue that Correa's legitimacy lies in having won free elections three times and in the government's important public and infrastructure investment in roads, hospitals, and schools. His opponents point to the president's authoritarian style, limitations to an independent judicial branch of government, and restrictions to the rights to free press and free speech (Basabe-Serrano & Martínez, 2014; De la Torre, 2013). In addition, Correa's latest plans to develop a primary extractive economy are seen as a menace to the environment and to indigenous cultures. Concerns from indigenous leaders and activists are frequently expressed in social networks and media these days.

In terms of national diversity, there is a rich heritage in Ecuador, with 14 indigenous nationalities and 18 indigenous peoples officially recognized (CODENPE, 2015). As I was taking field notes and interviewing participants for this research, I witnessed many cases in which Western culture and newer technologies are present in the highlands. The following passage from my observations illustrates this phenomenon:

When I arrived to interview Jacinta (a pseudonym), her computer was on and she was working on an Excel spreadsheet. As the president of a community-based bank that provides small loans to farmers, she spoke in Kichwa to her two children and in Spanish to me. She was wearing a characteristic Kichwa-Salasaka white blouse covered by a shawl (in this case purple, as a sign of mourning) held by a *tupu* [metallic pin] and a mid-calf long black skirt fastened by a multicolor sash. Her 22 year-old daughter — a medical student at the Universidad de Santiago de Cuba thanks to an agreement between the two governments — wore Western clothes and browsed Facebook in Spanish while speaking to her mother in Kichwa.

The example above shows how Western culture combined with the effects of migration and more access to technology are reshaping the traditional ways of living of indigenous groups. Additionally, besides having to adapt to external demands from the Ecuadorian society and the whole world, indigenous groups have historically suffered great inequality in Ecuadorian society. Indigenous women from rural communities have been especially vulnerable (Abramo & Valenzuela, 2008; INEC, 2010). They face gender and ethnic-based discrimination as well as inequities due to class, education, and language. As a result, they may not always take part in making political, economic, and reproductive decisions that affect them (Bown, 2013, p. 23). Other issues that continue to affect indigenous rural women are domestic violence, lack of rights in reproductive and sexual health, and limited access to credit, water, land, and technical and professional development (Mena, 2009).

Female Leadership in Contemporary Ecuador

Despite of the challenges mentioned above, several studies point to the important presence indigenous female leaders have had in politics during the last century. Female leaders were active in the indigenous mobilizations of the nineties (Prieto, Pequeño, Flores, Cuminao, & Maldonado, 2010), some becoming public figures at the national level when the indigenous movement was institutionalized (Picq, 2013). In their leadership positions, the women of the 20th century focused on structural changes to move Ecuador toward a multiethnic and intercultural state. Some scholars suggest that presently there is an absence of public indigenous female leaders or that they have been coopted by the government (Picq, 2013; Vega Ugalde, 2014). I argue that in the last 15 years they have continued advancing in politics, education, and business, but many are doing so at the grassroots level. By successfully leading organizations, they provide new sources of income and of knowledge about important issues — such as new laws, political rights, and sexual education — to women who live in rural areas. So, although female indigenous leaders do not have the visibility of the women of 15 or 20 years ago, they continue to enhance the lives of individuals as they exercise *sumak kawsay* in practical ways at a local level.

Cross-cultural research, such as the GLOBE study (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004), reveals that Ecuador's profile is similar to other Latin American countries in terms of leadership attributes, identifying the charismatic/value based leadership dimension as the most desirable. Robert House et al. (2004) indicate that this leadership dimension "reflects the ability to inspire, to motivate, and to expect high performance outcomes from others on the basis of firmly held core values" (p. 14). Since cross-cultural research has been mostly restricted to urban, male leaders, it could be illuminating to investigate whether Andean women leaders possess similar accepted attributes, like those associated with charismatic leadership. The concept of adaptive leadership may be particularly helpful for understanding how Andean women lead in ways that reflect local culture, values, and practices. Drawing from biology and comparing organizations to ecosystems that can evolve and adapt, Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky (2009) define adaptive leadership as "the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive" (p. 14).

Data and Methodology

This chapter draws from a larger in-depth qualitative study that identifies new forms of leadership among women from indigenous communities of Ecuador. Using a basic interpretive and descriptive qualitative design (Merriam, 2002), data were primarily collected from semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 19 Kichwa women. The interviews included questions about their experiences as leaders in grassroots organizations, the ways they influence gender equality, and the contextual factors that affect their leadership. Data also came from document analysis and observations that served as a means of *data triangulation* by providing additional confirmatory and descriptive information about the context and role of these women in their organizations (see Denzin, 1989).

I selected the participants and the communities with a combination of *typical case sampling* — which describes what is typical of a culture to people not familiar with the setting studied — and *maximum variation* — to identify important common patterns that cut across a wide range of variation. Both are effective strategies when there is not much information about a certain population, such as rural citizens in developing countries (see Patton, 2002). I specifically sought out a sample of women from different

age groups, education levels, indigenous communities, and types of organizations. Three key informants helped me in their selection: FODEP's legal adviser, a representative of the *Kanaris* before CODENPE, and an activist and art teacher from the province of Azuay.

The 19 women leaders interviewed in 2012, 2013, and 2015 were from eight Andean communities located in seven different provinces. Some led community-based cooperatives that manufactured typical crafts, such as Panama hats or embroidered textiles, while others directed private or public organizations that offered intercultural education, health programs, or financial support. The youngest was 24, and the oldest was 60 years old. Seventeen were married and had on average two children each. In terms of education, the two older interview partners had attended primary school, six had completed high school, eight had Bachelor's degrees, and three Master's degrees. Language and dress are two of the most visible elements of indigenouness. Seventeen of the women were fluent in Spanish and Kichwa, and two spoke only Spanish. Eighteen wore their traditional attire during the interview and wore this clothing on an everyday basis.

I recorded and transcribed the interviews, and all quotations are verbatim. I then coded the interviews, observations, and documents with the computer software ATLAS.ti (Version 7). I followed Richard Boyatzis's thematic code development approach, which is a process of organizing the data by topics and themes, and coding it into categories or patterns to uncover the manifest content (directly observable in the information) and the latent content (underlying the phenomenon) and to convert them into narratives (1998). Data analysis followed the three stages of coding recommended by William Neuman (2012). Through iterative processes of open, axial, and selective coding, four major subcategories under the category *sumak kawsay* emerged "protecting the environment," "preserving the culture," "impacting the workplace," and "impacting the community."¹ These subcategories were used to respond to the two guiding questions in this chapter.

The data analysis includes coded segments from documents and observations and direct quotes (translations mine) of the women leaders' own thoughts about the Andean principle *sumak kawsay*. I am a native speaker of Spanish with extensive experience in the Ecuadorian culture, yet I acknowledge the possibility

¹For more details on the coding process, see Carolina Bown (2013).

of misinterpretations in cross-cultural research. To increase the trustworthiness of my interpretations, I used techniques recommended by several qualitative researchers, including member checking, reflexivity, peer debriefing, prolonged engagement, data triangulation, and an audit trail (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Padgett, 1998).

Regarding the first question, "How do Andean women understand the principle of *sumak kawsay* as guiding their actions as leaders of grassroots organizations?" I noticed that the participants elaborated on different elements of *sumak kawsay*, whether they actually used those words or not. Whereas only 5 out of 19 participants (26%) mentioned the exact term *sumak kawsay*, this finding is still significant considering that the interview protocol had not been originally designed to address this theme. While for some of these women, *sumak kawsay* is basically linked to protecting the environment, for others it relates to the well-being of the communities, whether this means helping women preserve the use of natural medicine, treat alcohol dependency, or teach women about reproductive rights and managing money.

Sumak Kawsay in Ecuadorian Grassroots Organizations

Antonia, director of the Environmental Management Department of a central province in Ecuador, has two Master's degrees, a remarkable career, and a busy agenda. The night before our interview, she had received a call from a politician requesting her to explain her perspective on food sovereignty before the National Assembly (the Ecuadorian legislative branch) in Quito, the capital. While riding in the back of a pickup truck, we conducted a 90-minute interview. I asked her about her role as a leader and she gave me a detailed description. Among other topics, she spoke of the important relationship between nature, women, and the betterment of communities:

The environment and *sumak kawsay* have to do with women. Why? Because it is we, women, who are in charge of water, the family vegetable garden, the weeding, transforming trash into fertilizer, and because we are more connected to the Pachamama, food sovereignty, climate change, and anything that affects our communities.

Since the relationship with nature is the most known component of *sumak kawsay*, it was not surprising to find an excerpt under the subcategory "protecting the environment." However, what caught more my attention was that Antonia made a connection between *sumak kawsay* and gender when referring to environmental sustainability in the province of Cotopaxi. According to her, women are the true protectors of the earth, water, and food sovereignty. Women in the community work the soil using ecologically oriented techniques, but still fear the effects of climate change. The view Antonia expresses is consistent with current ecofeminist perspectives, such as Merchant's (2008) environmental paradigm, as well as with the rights granted to the Pachamama in the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution. Antonia communicates her concerns to community members so their traditional way of relating to the Mother Earth can subsist for future generations.

In addition to effectively attaining formal organizational goals, such as successfully running a bilingual intercultural school, a community-based bank, or a Panama hats cooperative, indigenous female leaders have a positive impact on women's lives outside the specific organizations' boundaries. Cecilia, a teacher and healer from the southern province of Loja, brought up the principle of *sumak kawsay* when discussing the use of natural medicine. Again, this reflection was not a response to a direct question about *sumak kawsay*, but to a question from the interview protocol about her role as a leader influencing gender equality. At the time of the interview, she was a representative of her community before a national organization of indigenous people of Ecuador. She was also debating about accepting a full-time teaching job in a different town:

The notion of *sumak kawsay* has always existed among our people. The fact that we care about our well-being with spiritual and ancestral natural medicine shows that this principle has always been part of our way of life. As an auxiliary healer, because I am not a shaman, I make sure to treat malaise in a holistic way, respecting nature.

In her role as a teacher, Cecilia has a podium not only to deliver her content (social studies) but also to teach the practices of natural medicine. The *sumak kawsay* subcategory, "preserving the culture," refers to all of those leader's initiatives conducive to maintaining local traditions. Continuing the practices of holistic healing is important in their society, similar to Merchant's (2008)

view on nature that favors a holistic approach to the well-being of people.

I also found examples of *sumak kawsay* through co-occurrences during the data coding process. Co-occurrences are those instances when two or more codes are linked to the same quotation or segment (Contreras, 2012). In other words, whenever a participant is talking about theme X, she is also talking about theme Y or Z. An example of co-occurrence in this research was that several portions of the interviews were coded as both *food sovereignty* and *sumak kawsay*. In contrast with food security, food sovereignty means ensuring enough to eat for citizens as well as the kind of nourishment that is aligned to each community's culture and needs. Thus, when an Andean leader provides coworkers with non-GMO seeds and plants, and another leader encourages them to preserve native plants like the mashua tuber (*Tropaecolum tuberosum*), even though doing so may not be lucrative, they are addressing *sumak kawsay* through leadership.

Another important co-occurrence refers to the application of *sumak kawsay* in the public school setting. Tránsito, director of a bilingual intercultural school in the province of Cañar, asked rhetorically during the interview: "How can we tell our children to follow the notion of *sumak kawsay*?" to which she answered "By teaching this concept through actions." Tránsito was referring to a connection she perceived between the Andean principle and solving drinking problems: "Since additions are a great problem here, I tell employees that alcohol or even showing up smelling like alcohol is not allowed on the school's premises. It may be a small step but it can spark a change." Tránsito believes that it is her role as a leader to guide her employees toward temperance, a reflection of healthy living. Initially I had coded her actions under the subcategory "impacting the workplace." Given the iterative nature of this research, I later recoded these initiatives under the subcategory "impacting the community" as well, since, as she stated, "in some cases arrangements were made to take her female employees' husbands to A.A. meetings." According to Heifetz et al. (2009), adaptive leadership is "specifically about change that enables the capacity to thrive" (p. 14). Tránsito began this change within the organization, by addressing the problem of alcohol dependency in every Monday meeting; however, the effects of her actions extend even beyond the organization's boundaries. From a traditional Western perspective of leadership, "this step" — as she called it — would be unexpected from a leader and rather considered unacceptable. But, in the

context of the Andes, Tránsito has the community's approval to impact not only her followers but also their extended families.

Similar to the concept of *democracy* in modern Western societies, *sumak kawsay* is an ideal of the Andean world that can be achieved through many actions, even if the term is left implicit by the leaders. Other initiatives carried out by Andean women that reflect the principle of *sumak kawsay* and lead to societal health are preparing women for political and leadership positions through civics classes, bringing health resources to women in their homes, participating in the literacy program "Yo sí puedo," and running workshops on education opportunities, nutrition, and domestic violence.

With respect to the question of how leadership in this part of the world reflects local culture, values, and practices, I found new ways of exercising leadership that flourish in grassroots organizations, but also extend beyond organizational boundaries. In effect, many of the women interviewed expressed having additional responsibilities beyond their formal organizational goals. I specifically asked them about their leadership strategies to support followers in the workplace, and many spoke about their influence in their followers' private spaces. At first, I thought that they had not understood my question; but later, during the data analysis process and by unveiling the latent content (Boyatzis, 1998), I realized that for them, there is no clear boundary dividing public and private spaces.

The following example comes from my field notes taken on a Saturday afternoon in the province of Tungurahua. The hamlet of Yatzaputzán is an isolated place high in the Andes, with no cellphone reception and the temperature barely above freezing. The day I was there, a professor of Economics and six of his graduating students from Pontificia Universidad Católica were leading a two-day workshop for members of this cooperative. The themes were budgeting and how to prepare this organization for a possible expansion. There were four men and twelve women, two of them with infants on their backs, attending the workshop. All the attendees were in a circle and alternated the abstract materials with meal breaks and *dinámicas*, or activities planned every two hours to relax participants. PowerPoint, textbooks, and a whiteboard supported the presentations by the university students and the attendees, which was clearly a cooperative approach to learning. When I asked the president of the cooperative whose idea it was to hold this workshop, she responded, "If we want to get out of poverty, we need to learn about the rules of banking." From

her perspective, teaching women from a rural cooperative how to get a loan from a bank or how to create a budget is conducive to financial sustainability and it falls under the subcategory "impacting the community." Even though they have much to do at home and in the fields, this leader encourages followers to attend this two-day workshop because she believes that developing financial skills will have a positive long-term effect in the community.

Another important theme in the analysis concerns how indigenous female leaders empower other women regarding domestic abuse. According to official data, violence against women is prevalent across all provinces, educational levels, ethnicities, and age groups in Ecuador. Indigenous women are the most affected, with 67.8% of them suffering one or more types of domestic violence (INEC, 2015c). Since addressing this issue leads to healthy communities, I included those initiatives that help other women to confront this problem as part of *sumak kawsay's* subcategory "impacting the community." When the president of a cooperative that exports Panama hats speaks, she shows that she is proud of the effect she has on younger or more timid women: "I like having my (female) peers coming to me and asking me, 'What did you do when your husband did that?' Or even asking me about what I do when my husband comes home angry." It was an emotional moment during the interview when Rocío narrated how she had persuaded a physically abused member of the cooperative to confront her spouse. She empowered her peer by telling her what to say and what to do (to grab an iron-cast pan) if the husband attempted to hit her. As an adaptive leader, Rocío considers it an obligation to promote change and, to paraphrase Heifetz et al. (2009), she tailors her interventions to the individuals involved and to the unique characteristics of the situation facing the leader (p. 10). For Rocío, to serve the community, the cooperative must support members at risk, including when the risk is at home. In other words, the well-being of their organizations, followers, and communities is interconnected for Rocío and other female leaders.

Female Andean leaders adapt leadership strategies to their local cultural context. They use, for example, *conversar* (talking things out) as a form of persuasion and mentoring. *Talking things out* helps peers to overcome shyness in public speaking or to hold leadership positions. It also helps them address problems and disputes in followers' homes. *Talking things out* is more "intrusive" than is typical in Western cultures, whereby followers

expect their leaders to inquire about their private lives and to address issues such as marital life, domestic abuse, and the virtue of filial piety. A clear example of this more "intrusive" leadership style is two participants' public campaign to treat alcohol dependency among male employees as well as among the spouses of female employees. A female leader telling an employee that she has arranged an appointment with a doctor for her husband or offering to take her husband to an A.A. meeting can be an acceptable expression of leadership in the Andean world.

Conclusions

I draw two primary conclusions from this study. First, by following Boyatzis' (1998) thematic analysis, I found that the Andean concept of *sumak kawsay* — which was defined as a model that leads to a healthy world by encouraging a way of life that agrees with nature, social responsibility, and the well-being of communities — guides how Andean women carry out leadership in grassroots organizations. In addition, and opposing the current Western belief that corporations have rights as individuals, the Ecuadorian legislation favors the indigenous notion of *sumak kawsay* and grants rights to Mother Earth. Although this eco-feminist approach is aligned with Merchant's ecological view of nature, assessing the actual impact of the 2008 Constitution on the health of Mother Earth or on the lives of the communities is challenging. The innovative laws have been approved, but they are not always enforced.

Second, Andean women leaders are both similar to and different from women leaders in developed countries. Still dressed in traditional clothing that reflects their communities of origin, they connect the past with the present by encouraging followers to preserve their unique cultures, values, and practices. Heifetz et al. (2009) pointed out that "adaptation is a process of conservation as well as loss" (p. 23). By drawing on this concept of adaptive leadership in this way, these indigenous women are not backward-looking traditionalists, but wise leaders. By working under the principle of *sumak kawsay*, they promote health and sustainability by moving into the future what is most worthy and precious in their culture, benefiting the next generations. Additionally, as adaptive leaders do, Andean women "tailor their interventions" (see Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 23). When Andean women lead, they bridge spaces of the

workplace and private lives and empower followers across spheres of their lives.

During the interviews, these women leaders addressed me as *compañera* [comrade] and I considered them my peers in this research endeavor. With this approach, I have helped make their voices heard in a wider context, an important outcome since these women are not typically considered formal organizational leaders. In this way, the lens of leadership studies has been turned in a new direction with a dual result: (1) the principle of *sumak kawsay* has been defined within grassroots organizations, an approximation to an emic definition, and (2) I have found new context-contingent ways of exercising leadership.

With the recent expansion of women's grassroots organizations, female leadership in rural and indigenous communities may be having a greater impact than anticipated. Therefore, governmental and nongovernmental policymakers who wish to promote positive changes in the Andean world should know that supporting grassroots organizations directed by Andean women could be an effective way to promote healthy environments in this region of the world. As an example, Ecuadorian women working in a local cooperative in the highlands earn their own income and also get the benefit of having access to information about nutrition or the new laws against domestic violence. As a result, a positive reciprocal relationship between grassroots leadership and leadership at the level of policymaking is essential for the health of these communities and our planet.

Future research on grassroots leadership among indigenous groups in Ecuador should address how the other players of Ecuadorian society, including men, urban citizens, and the government, may practice the notion of *sumak kawsay*. Investigating how the currently ratified laws regarding the rights granted to the Pachamama are impacting the health of the earth and of the communities would be of most importance.

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Emerald Group Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2016

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78635-146-3
ISSN: 2058-8801 (Series)



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