

Enough talking – more walking – achieving deadly outcomes

I was at a big conference in Darwin and I was talking about this history aspect of action research. Afterwards an Aboriginal woman came up to me and she said, “You know, its even older than that. We’ve been doing it for 40,000 years!” – *Yoland Wadsworth (teleconference, August 2003).*

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The past resonates in the present. Fear and lack of trust between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people have become embedded over the generations and today whatever faith we as Aboriginal people have in others is fragile and easily disturbed or destroyed.

Research in Aboriginal communities has had the same troubled history as the settlement of this country. There has been a failure of non-Aboriginal researchers to recognise and respect us and our cultural ways. Non-Aboriginal people have come into our communities and imposed their views about what questions to research and how to plan and conduct research. Today, many of us are distrustful and not convinced there is a need for research within our communities.

This paper is about doing research in and with Aboriginal communities. It seeks to find some answers about what may prevent Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people from achieving useful research outcomes for our people. I am Aboriginal and this paper is written from an Aboriginal perspective and based on Aboriginal experiences of research. My message is that we have done enough talking. It is time for action so we can achieve some deadly outcomes that will make a difference.

Research and resulting media reports raise public awareness about issues in Aboriginal communities. One example is the over-representation of our children on State Orders and the high rate of incarceration of men and women. Research reveals a 225 per cent increase in the incarceration of Indigenous women over the past decade (HREOC 2003). These findings point to the many problems faced by Aboriginal people in their communities, problems we have experienced over the generations. And research

suggests reasons for these problems – welfare dependency, discrimination, isolation, and lack of employment.

It also shows how these issues are linked and experienced at individual, family and community levels. For example, research I conducted into workplace practices within two Victorian Aboriginal organisations confirmed the entrenched difficulties faced by Aboriginal people today (Burchill 2003).

One board member had the following to say:

“Our men are unable to secure employment; they can’t provide for their families; it means their role as providers within the family has been taken away from them. This form of rejection leaves the men feeling totally inadequate, to ease the pain they go out and get on drugs and alcohol and the cycle has just perpetuated itself from one generation to the next and so on.”

I am a worker with the Stronger Families Learning Exchange (SFLEX) at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. As such, I travel to communities across Australia. Aboriginal people and Elders often express frustration about the situation in their communities and for their families. One person said:

“Enough is enough, we want change, we want to see our children and grandchildren have a better life”.

Research is not *the* answer to these issues but it can help to create change. Research can reveal issues, needs and strengths, suggest strategies for development, and influence Government and policy makers. My experience suggests that it is particularly valuable when it is undertaken either by Aboriginal researchers or with them. When this is not possible, it is extremely important that new ways are found for us to all work together productively. We need to yarm up, not down (see accompanying box).

Yarning down: our experience of research

- Our knowledge and skills don’t get recognised.
- Gubbas often have different agendas. This means those agendas are sometimes not the same as ours.
- Funding organisations expect us to do things their way but sometimes this means that we lose control of the work.
- Gubbas come and go. They take our stories, end a project, and then we are left to deal with what is left. This can be hard work for us especially when they have written and developed a new program in the “flash language”.*
- Well-meaning people come to work with us but they do the work and we don’t learn how to do it.
- Sometimes Gubbas feel guilty about the past, often they are scared of saying or doing the wrong thing. In many cases their guilt often stops them from being honest and speaking openly.
- Some of our people are very good at fooling Gubbas.

*When people write or speak in words that are difficult to understand rather than use language spoken or written in plain English, then Aboriginal people will call it “flash language”, “flash words”, and such people “flash talkers”. This often generates resentment causing Aborigines to exclude these people whatever their race.

Yarning up, not down

Yarning up is about listening to community knowledge, concerns, experience, and aspirations and building trusting respectful relationships between the researcher and the people.

In recent years work has been done to identify practices to be considered when working for and within Aboriginal communities (Atkinson 1994; Burchill 2003; Crawford, Dudgeon, Garvey and Pickett 2000; Dodson and Smith 2003; Hurley 2003; NHMRC 2003; Tsey 2004). Much of this literature has been written by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal academics concerned to improve and bring about change for Aboriginal people. The work includes ethical considerations, guidelines, protocols and suggested processes for effective work. Writers have stressed the need for cultural sensitivity, good governance and sustainability, evaluation and best practice and the literature focuses on building relationships within Aboriginal communities in meaningful, lasting and respectful ways.

A starting point for many guidelines is “process” – a simple but important rule to follow in order to work within Aboriginal communities. The recently endorsed National Health and Medical Research Council’s (NHMRC 2003) guidelines for ethical research in Aboriginal communities list six values that are to be considered and demonstrated at each stage of research. These are: spirit and integrity; reciprocity; respect; equality; survival and protection; and responsibility (see accompanying box).

Non-Aboriginal writers have also suggested ways for non-Aboriginal people to work within specific communities. For example, Crawford, Dudgeon, Garvey and Pickett (2000) advise that outsiders need to recognise key customs and concepts around naming, death and dying and time; they need to know about Aboriginal communities, meetings and decision-making; and they need to be careful about making promises that cannot be fulfilled. Hurley (2003) advises researchers that they get to know the community, consult, get permission, communicate, respect ethics and morals, and follow correct procedures.

It is both depressing and heartening from my perspective as an Aboriginal researcher

that it has taken so long for information like this to be of interest to practising researchers. Unfortunately, in spite of the wealth of guidelines and protocols that have been developed, a huge gap still exists between the words and actually getting people to come together to yarn productively.

If we are to yarn about research we need to know how to turn words into ongoing actions. The problem remains: how to do it?

From words to doing – ways of building bridges

In this section I explore some of the ways to bridge the gap between the words of protocols and the action of doing research within Aboriginal communities. This is based largely on my experience and work undertaken by the SFLEX team with early intervention projects across Australia.

Getting to know the community

The SFLEX team has observed the strength and bond of cultural identity, history, experience and relationships in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities around Australia, whether they are in remote places with a relatively short and less dislocated contact history, in rural areas, or in the cities. One team member with experience in remote, rural and urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities commented:

“What bonds people is their Indigenous identity. Whether it is

the inner city or the remote out-back it is important to take the time to get to know the community, build relationships, and respect people’s experience and what is important in their lives.”

For the non-Indigenous person, getting to know the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community includes developing understanding about identity and diversity in communities. It involves acknowledging the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, traditions, culture and spirituality. It includes learning about family and social structures and appropriate behavior, following correct procedures and building relationships. And it means developing an appreciation that communities and culture are not static – they are continually changing and each community is unique. While some understanding and sensitivity can be developed through reading and cross-cultural training, the reality is that it takes time to develop relationships. The challenge is to put these ideas into practice.

Aboriginal people often comment that only rarely is there enough time taken by outsiders to get to know people and for trust to develop sufficiently for things to be talked through. The protocols suggest some of the things that non-Indigenous people need to know if they want to work with us. But how do you get to know a community?

Extracts from . . .

Values and Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research – NHMRC (2003)

Reciprocity

In the research context reciprocity implies inclusion and means recognising partners’ contributions, and ensuring that research outcomes include equitable benefits of value to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities or individuals.

Respect

Respectful research relationships acknowledge and affirm the right of people to have different values, norms and aspirations.

Equality

In research equality involves valuing knowledge and wisdom, ensuring equality of partners, and ensuring the distribution of benefit.

Responsibility

Responsibility takes into account doing no harm to individuals, communities or the things they value and ensuring that accountability is clear.

Survival and Protection

Survival and protection issues in research include consideration of values based on solidarity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, respect for social cohesion and commitment to cultural distinctiveness.

Spirit and Integrity

Spirit concerns “continuity between past, current future generations.” Integrity concerns behaviour that “maintains the coherence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values and cultures.”

It is important to be able to reach the people who are going to give you the right information about the community rather than telling you what they think you might want. This is largely trial and error. As you listen to people you will gradually learn who knows most about the community. Taking time to listen to various viewpoints and understanding that we all have different views about our community is important.

I think it is important to go into a community with a view that you are a learner not “the expert.” One way of doing this is to leave your jargon at home – make sure that plain English is always used. Yarn in plain English; don’t use flash words. Aboriginal people want to share in the dialogue rather than be intimidated by flash talkers.

If you are non-Aboriginal try to go to a community with an Aboriginal person in at least the first instance. You can learn from us about how to be in communities. Some of us are willing to be mentors to you when we think the research is worthwhile.

It is a real problem when non-Indigenous people make assumptions that because we are Aboriginal our communities will somehow be the same. They are not! Going with an open mind rather than an assumed expertise in “Aboriginal issues” is respectful and more likely to lead to a deadly yarn up. If you go as the expert rather than the learner you are doomed to be seen by the people in the community as a “hairy man/woman” (white or black people who have a high opinion of themselves and a personal perception that they are superior or better than others).

While there are aspects of culture that may vary there are some values which hold across all Aboriginal communities. Whether you are interacting using the Jalindari ways in remote Western Australia, or meeting with sub-groups of the Arrente people whose land stretches across Alice Springs or closer to my home with the Yorta Yorta people from Northern Victoria, the six values of spirit and integrity, reciprocity, respect, equality, responsibility, survival and protection are important in all you do.

Some non-Indigenous researchers work within communities to “solve problems”, to try and find out what people need. These can be useful ideas but before focusing on these issues it is essential to ask the questions: What do people know and what do people value? (Weeramanthri 1996) If

Feeling confident within the community

“Well, you can do all the research, talking, planning and once it starts you’re still going to get those same ones who say, ‘Why wasn’t I told?’ When you know the community you know which ones say that and you know the talking and planning you’ve done. There are the negative ones. I like to work with the positive people. And we [the two Indigenous workers for this Stronger Families and Communities Strategy project] get criticised too. It’s the ‘tall poppy’ and you have to feel confident about yourself in the community and about what you have achieved to put up with it.” (Noel, Indigenous project worker)

these questions are not asked, then the knowledge and experience of people living in the communities is not valued.

Observations made by the SFLEX team testify to the obvious advantages of employing Indigenous project staff. Some come from the community where the project is based. Others may not be local to the community, but their deep understanding of cultural issues and respect for local protocols, together with their lesser involvement in local politics can enable them to engage most effectively. Their understanding and place within the community also gives them a confidence to deal with some of the local dynamics.

Towards honest yarning

We need to be able to develop trust and talk honestly with each other. In the following conversation, a non-Indigenous SFLEX worker, Anne Garrow (AG) and I (MB) talk about ways Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can collude in dealing with their respective guilt and anger about the past. Dialogues like this demand honesty and trust and they need to happen if we are to find ways of working together that recognise our different strengths and power.

Yarning for outcomes

In the past, many Aboriginal people have felt that research was done to them, their

Cultural sensitivity wrapped with guilt – where does it take us?

AG: There are many non-Indigenous people who want to see things change and who want to find ways to work together to make a real difference. But the issue is whether in trying to be so sensitive and inclusive we are contributing to a new paternalism.

MB: Yes, I can think of lots of examples of this. Sometimes in a project you see a small change and non-Indigenous people will come in and write it up as a huge achievement. It’s their way of being culturally sensitive, but they can end up promoting something that really wasn’t worth promoting. It’s a reaction to history. They’re apologetic, but then Aboriginal people get a false sense of their own achievements if the partnership really is not an equal one.

AG: Yes, I’ve done that. I guess it is about building on strengths and trying to affirm what people are achieving, but unless it is followed up and built on further it can lead to a false sense of achievement.

MB: We must always think about cultural sensitivity and about accountability and outcomes. Cultural sensitivity has created dilemmas in education. If we are going to bring about change we must put more emphasis on education. Not enough of our people have mainstream qualifications. People set up courses for our people and often the course does not qualify them to do a mainstream job. Aboriginal people get a false sense of achievement because they think they are fully qualified and don’t realise they have only qualified to work in an Aboriginal organisation. People are protecting them and preparing them to remain working in Aboriginal organisations. They are not given the opportunity to make individual choices. It creates a them and us gap.

AG: I’ve seen this happen, but the big dilemma is how to bridge the education gap after generations of neglect. Affirmative action like this can provide an opportunity for employment for this generation and role models for the next who can then take their education further. On the other hand, I agree with one non-Indigenous writer who said: “We try to protect Aboriginal people from the difficult stuff, such as education, and thereby protect them from its complex and multiple benefits.”

MB: A result of this is that Aboriginal people miss out on the opportunity to see how white institutions work. They haven’t had the schooling to know how big the gap is. Now Aboriginal people are being educated just to work in Aboriginal organisations. We should be able to operate on the same level as everyone. That’s equality – when Aborigines are able to feel confident they have the skills to apply for a position in the white or black job market.

stories were removed, and little changed in the way people lived. The research outcomes did not seem to be of benefit to them and their community. Today people are saying “enough is enough”. Research needs to be focused on those issues that are seen to be important by people in the particular community. When a researcher enters our community with their research agenda set and a view about what they are going to do with it then we are not able to be involved in a way that is constructive, realistic or relevant.

However, researchers have to be careful to not only listen to a few Aboriginal people with strong voices who set the agendas. Such agendas are not always what those with softer voices want and need. When only the strong voices are heard in research then gaining good outcomes becomes really difficult. The outcome can be that people don't own the research or its results, they don't get the chance to find out ways to do things about issues that concern them and they are left trying to sustain work and ideas that they have no part in.

It can take courage for people within a community to voice issues that are concern to them. Domestic violence is a good example of this. Once the issue is named by a few, then it can become better known and addressed. But yarning for outcomes has to be carefully done and involve those who are not always the strong voices.

A research model for yarning up

There is no one right way to do research with Aboriginal people but taking account of our ways of doing things and including them in research designs is a good step. One Aboriginal Elder described action research as “so close to the Indigenous way of working” (Elder Barrawanbang Girrwa, cited in Bredhauer, Johnson and Northey 2004).

Conclusion

We need to work together toward a more honest and trusting research relationship. The values of spirit and integrity, reciprocity, respect, equality, survival and protection, and responsibility underpin an honest and trusting relationship. Getting to know the community, getting to know each other and involving community people so the research is relevant to them are ways to further act out these values.

I have been a researcher for five years, working within communities. Because I was Aboriginal, people felt that they could trust me. For this reason I was told really deep and meaningful things about people's experiences – things that they probably would not have told to someone



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who was not Aboriginal or who was an organisational worker. By listening to these otherwise silent voices I came to understand much more about the issues that they confront.

For me this has also meant a huge responsibility. I have had to deal with my own emotional reactions and to find ways to respond to what was often a plea for help. Over and over people told me how they wanted to give their families and children opportunities that equalled those of non Aboriginal Australians. This is a heavy load for one Aboriginal researcher to carry. People coming together and “walking the talk” can ease the burden and maybe bring about some deadly outcomes.

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