

Entering the field of Research – A Beginning Indigenous Researcher’s Experience

Refereed Paper

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Abstract

Entering the field of research can pose many dilemmas for beginning researchers. Learning the meaning of new terms; developing new knowledge and skills and applying all this to the practical situation can be a daunting experience. Working as an individual on your own project also adds to the pressure of acquiring skills one needs to become confident in achieving outcomes. Entering the field of research can be even more complex for beginning Indigenous researchers who may be faced with dealing with conflicting knowledge and values, as traditionally research has been very much in the non-Indigenous domain therefore reflecting such values and methodologies. This symposium paper examines the experiences of a beginning Indigenous researcher in identifying and addressing the issues involved.

Introduction

The word itself, ‘research’, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary. ... Just knowing that someone measured our ‘faculties’ by filling the skulls of our ancestors with millet seeds and compared the amount of millet seed to the capacity for mental thought offends our sense of who and what we are. It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that it is possible to know of us, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of us. (Tuhawai Smith, 1998)

The purpose of this paper is to outline my voyage as an Aboriginal woman stepping cautiously into the domain of research through tertiary studies as a Masters student. I will highlight my experience of attempting to acquire skills and knowledge in a world of foreign terms with new distinct meanings, while facing conflicting values and beliefs in an area dominated by choice less imported non-Indigenous world views. Identifying and addressing the issues as they became evident will also be examined.

Background

At the time of my decision to further my education I was employed as the Indigenous Liaison Officer with the Northern Territory Police Service. During my life I have been involved with Indigenous and non-Indigenous people through my employment as a service provider, as a

colleague and as a parent and grandparent. My work as the Indigenous Liaison Officer took me to remote Aboriginal communities where people often live two separate lives, one in acknowledgement of their ancestors and the other based on their recognition of the necessity to survive through engaging in imposed non-Indigenous ideologies. Seeking advice, opinion and instruction as measures in preparing needs assessments for various policing issues relating to Indigenous people was part of my role as the incumbent of the position. I also assisted with the recruitment of and the competency-based training program for the forty-nine Northern Territory Aboriginal Community Police Officers.

Recognition of differing world views

In a world where the USA is slowly but surely succeeding in its bid to globalize culture as a means of controlling the world market, Indigenous peoples' world views are becoming even less significant. (Ife, 2002) The intricate system of Indigenous Australian society and their affiliation with the land has only as recently as the twentieth century been given recognition by European social scientists. Unfortunately, there are even today many non-Indigenous people who probably would not understand or know of the existence of this complex lifestyle. (Malin, 1994).

In her paper 'A Cause to Celebrate' Anne Marshall (1998), describes the life of an Indigenous Australian community.

In traditionally living communities, many of the rituals of celebration still occur in the traditional way – songs, dances and ceremonies celebrating the land, living creatures and plants, the Dreaming and the many rites of passage that occur throughout the whole of life as well as having fun or developing social and performance skills or gaining knowledge of the Law.

There are many significant contrasts between the beliefs and values of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This is very evident in relation to policing, for example Indigenous Law was created to look after land, lore and family and is a significant component of the knowledge necessary to survive as an Indigenous person. This law mainly based on mutual respect remained unchanged. Since colonization, legislation that has been introduced changes constantly and does not provide protection for Indigenous lore. This practice forces many Indigenous people to live between two worlds, one which they understand and one which requires a significant increase in knowledge and skills to be placed in a position to interpret the legislation.

As a researcher, acquiring, accommodating and acknowledging the diversity of Indigenous peoples and their centuries old worldview is paramount in recording and reporting accurate data. In the position of

Indigenous researchers the task becomes more difficult as we strive for equity and recognition in this field dominated by non-Indigenous values. I believe our obligations are threefold; accommodate the community's expectations which can be difficult if facing opposition due to previous unscrupulous experiences, report accurate, truthful data and educate non-Indigenous researchers to hear what the people are saying, to look outside the square and avoid making assumptions.

Indigenous Australians and tertiary education

My experience in accessing tertiary education is similar to that of other Indigenous Australians. I attended high school in the late 1960s to year ten when I left at the age of sixteen to pursue employment, this was common practice for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous families unfortunate to have not been born in possession of a 'silver spoon'. Generations of Indigenous Australians have struggled to exist through government policies, segregation, inferior education systems, denial of rights and stolen opportunities. (Lane, 1998)

Most Indigenous Australians pursue higher education as mature age students seeking to attain a degree followed by a masters, as opposed to the non-Indigenous population who may spend their late teens and early twenties attaining a degree followed by honors, postgraduate studies and emerging with a PhD in their early thirties. Mature age Indigenous students are blessed with the essence of life experiences and skills often acquired through the school of 'hard knocks'. The choice to participate in tertiary studies as a mature age student may result from different experiences. These may include offensive experiences in secondary education, lack of financial resources and support to continue on from secondary education, an urge to improve conditions and assist other less fortunate people or the decision to further skills after raising extended families.

My experience of accessing tertiary education and as a lecturer of undergraduate students has been both enlightening and frustrating. Many non-Indigenous students have preconceived ideas relating to Indigenous beliefs, values and practices. Some so ingrained it is difficult to change their views. This is the result of two hundred years of learned non-Indigenous prejudices, most of these opinions formed and documented by non-Indigenous researchers who failed miserably in capturing the truth of Indigenous Australia.

Research terminology

Research terminology was a whole new concept for me to consider. I was living in Darwin when I enrolled in the Master of Indigenous Studies which is offered through James Cook University in Townsville, Queensland approximately thirty hours away by road. Contact with the lecturer and other students would be undertaken by e-mail and phone, apart from the one week block I would attend in Townsville. On

receiving the course materials, I commenced reading and immediately reached for the dictionary, new words were popping up with almost every sentence, paradigm, ontology, epistemology and the list seemed to go on forever. (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) I attended my first block in Townsville where the lecturer kindly explained the correct meaning of this new vocabulary from a research perspective. I remember thinking to myself, “You want me to learn what language?” “I don’t even know anyone that I can converse with in this language.”

Following the overwhelming desire to quit before I started, I carefully assessed my predicament and looked at the words not as foreign imposed hurdles that I had to cross but rather as having meaning and a relationship to my work and my personal being. For example ontology I connect to worldview and the critical realists who believe reality of life under natural laws is so complex that they will never be fully understood. Epistemology I can relate to as knowing how I know things, who I am, how am I influenced in understanding the world the way I do. (McGinty, 2002) From experience I can equate becoming acquainted with research terminology to entering a foreign country and learning a new language. To gain recognition, acceptance and survive one must comprehend and speak the language, however many foreign countries provide a more compassionate atmosphere to learners unlike the world of academia.

Methodologies

Methodology is defined as ‘how we go about finding knowledge’, ways of researching, data collection and analyses. (McGinty, 2002) For thousands of years Indigenous peoples have been collecting and analyzing data as a matter of survival. The Australian Aborigines were accountable as guardians of their land, they lived by the clock of the seasons taking care not to damage or desecrate the environment. This was shared knowledge handed down through each generation. Given this fact and the knowledge that Indigenous Australians had survived on this earth for more than 40,000 years without non-Indigenous intervention, I am at a loss as to why our credibility as knowledgeable people is questioned. Indigenous activists are now challenging the research community in relation to ‘racist practices, attitudes, ethnocentric assumptions and exploitative research’. (Tuhawai Smith 1998).

Maori academic Linda Tuhawai Smith (1998) provides an overview of the views of some researchers in this statement:

Some methodologies regard the values and beliefs, practices and customs of communities as ‘barriers’ to research or as exotic customs with which researchers need to be familiar in order to carry out their work without causing offence. ...

For two hundred years Indigenous Australians have been forced to learn new ways, a new language, participate in non-Indigenous research and embrace the belief that science conquers all. Is it not time for non-Indigenous researchers to sit quietly, hear and learn the Indigenous way of knowing?

Addressing the issues

Part of my studies required that I complete a small research project that led to the choice of a research question relating to my field of work with the competency-based training of the Aboriginal Community Police Officers. This provided an insight into the different issues that could arise in the gathering of data from Indigenous Australians. Some of the issues that I encountered may to some researchers appear insignificant, however working alone on this project was at times daunting.

Two of the most significant issues included communication and remoteness of participants. Many Indigenous Australians reside in remote communities and speak English as a second language; therefore communication is limited to very simple English or Kriol (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1994). Communication between researchers and participants needs to be in accordance with the diversity of the group's skills and availability of technology. Therefore the gathering of data may be restricted to verbal communication with in some cases the assistance of interpreters. Questions need to reflect relevance from the participants view and researchers should be prepared to take the time necessary to sit and 'yarn' rather than create an atmosphere of discomfort through direct questioning. Which could result in a judgment of the community based on the researcher's assumptions. As an Aboriginal person I am also aware of the intricacies of the undocumented policies that have existed as an all-encompassing web of governance over all things Aboriginal since the time of creation. These policies of governance may restrict the amount and flow of information made available to researchers where protocols are not adhered to appropriately.

The remoteness of participants may increase the cost of research being conducted, as it would be difficult to contact participants for lengthy conversations or request surveys to be completed in writing due to language barriers. Unfortunately these facts are not often taken into account by researchers and organizations manned by mostly non-Indigenous employees such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics who conduct their research through the completion of written surveys. While these were the two of the most important issues, as an Aboriginal person there were other significant protocols that I had to consider to maintain my status and credibility as a member of the Aboriginal community.

Conclusion

The paper reflects my personal thoughts and processes in my journey as an Aboriginal woman, student, teacher, parent and grandparent to acquire the skills necessary to meet the challenge of participating as a member of a research team rather than being placed under the microscope. I believe the key to improving the accuracy of research reporting in the Indigenous context lies with the Indigenous Australian community and their ability to rise up against the assumptions and cultural arrogance to support post-graduate Indigenous students who are ambassadors for the future of Indigenous Australian research.

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