Paper for Refereeing

Keeping the bastards at bay: Indigenous

community responses to research

Les Mack and Graeme Gower

Author 1:

Family Name: Mack

First Name: Les

Title: Mr

Institution: Edith Cowan University

Mail Address: 2 Bradford St. Mt. Lawley WA 6050

Home Address: 7 Devon Rd Bassendean 6054

Phone: 08 9370 6683

Fax: 08 9370 6055

Email: l.mack@ecu.edu.au

Author No. 2:

Family Name: Gower

First Name: Graeme

Title: Mr.

Institution: Edith Cowan University

Mail Address: 2 Bradford St. Mt. Lawley WA 6050

Home Address: 7 Chiswick Place Kingsley WA 6026

Phone: 08 9370 6558

Fax: 08 9370 6055

Email: g.gower@ecu.edu.au

Keeping the bastards at bay: Indigenous community responses to research

Abstract:

Researchers are not always readily welcome in Indigenous communities. The failure of researchers to adequately explain the research they are conducting or provide useful feedback to communities, as well as the potential to use the data to condemn the participants to a deficit position in society has resulted in many Indigenous communities being unwilling to host researchers. In this paper, the implications for the conduct of a research project that will operate in a number of urban and remote communities will be discussed.

Introduction

The reaction to the book *Broometime* [Varga and Coombs, 2001] is indicative of Indigenous peoples' sensitivity to being researched. While this book is not research in the academic sense its publication serves to reinforce the commonly held view amongst many Indigenous Australians that non- Indigenous researchers of Indigenous peoples are self-serving bastards who do not understand Indigenous Australians and are not concerned about the potential for harm that their research may cause. Unfortunately, in the context of the controversy surrounding the publication of *Broometime*, the insensitivity of non-Indigenous researchers was reinforced in Varga and Coombs's reply to their critics (*The Weekend Australian*, 26-27 May, 2001, p27) where they argued that writing "about blacks in much the same way as one writes about whites" is the fair minded and even handed thing to do. They failed to acknowledge that the cultural and historical experiences of Indigenous Australians impacts on their interpretation of what is written about them and in so doing implied that Indigenous Australians enjoy equal socio-political status with the wider Australian community. Clearly this is incorrect. It is only through acknowledging these differences that research with Indigenous communities can proceed positively.

This paper will consider Indigenous responses to research. It will argue that these responses are legitimate and need to be acknowledged through the development and implementation of appropriate research frameworks which include opportunities for the incorporation of Indigenous sensibilities in them. Historical problems with research in Indigenous contexts will be explored initially. This will be followed by a description of some of the theoretical and policy influences that inform Kurongkurl Katitjin: School of Indigenous Australian Studies at Edith Cowan University's, approach to managing a large education research project.

The research project being conducted by Kurongkurl Katitjin is an investigation of the educational consequences of conductive hearing loss in Indigenous students in urban, rural and remote environments. The challenge for this project, in relation to the Kurongkurl Katitjin's commitment to community involvement, lies in the diverse contexts in which it is being conducted. Although the project is in the early stages of its implementation, a number of issues are beginning to emerge. These will be reflected on in the concluding section of this paper.

Indigenous historical experiences and responses to research

Many Indigenous communities have been the subjects of research which has disempowered them by undermining and devaluing their decision making mechanisms and disregarding community-based social, cultural and economic priorities. It is not uncommon to hear Indigenous people cite examples of research being conducted in a covert manner leading, in

some cases, to individual and community humiliation through the publication of findings which reflect a value system which is foreign to them. As a result of this type of experience many Indigenous people hold the view that they are the most researched sector of Australian society as illustrated by address to the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in 1979:

> For years [Indigenous Australians] have been researched to death, first by anthropologists, later by social scientists, and, in more recent years, they have been almost inundated by almost everyone else.

Researchers' misinterpretation and failure to recognise the cultural values and worldview of Indigenous people is often caused by the application of ethnocentric research models (Foley, 2000) which are "neo-colonial and paternalistic" in nature and offer little substantial benefit to those being researched . For many Indigenous Australians research is seen as another form of dispossession where knowledge is the commodity at stake and custodianship of it is often lost to non-Indigenous individuals and institutions that are not accessible to them.

> White people have destroyed a lot of our culture, they have stolen our land, and stolen our children. They have learnt our languages to use for their own advantage. They will not be allowed to steal our knowledge. Aboriginal people can no longer share the intimacy of their identity.
>
> (Barbara Shaw, cited in [illiams & Stewart, 199])

Shaw's sentiments reflect the level of hostility that exists in Indigenous communities towards research and the frustration borne from the sense of powerlessness that they experience in this area. These feelings need to be acknowledged in the development and application of research methods in Indigenous contexts.

The methods used by researchers who conduct research in Indigenous contexts should be informed by Indigenous interpretations of the advantages, potential to cause harm and issues concerning confidentiality. This requires researchers to accept the notion that "equality does not mean identical treatment" . The unequal relations of power between the researcher and the subjects of research is widely understood and has lead to the establishment of ethical protocols in institutions which conduct human research. What is not widely appreciated, however, is that the unequal power relationship between the researcher and the researched is more extreme when the subjects of the research are Indigenous. This is caused by a number of factors. The primary one is the limited ability of the majority of Indigenous people to exert any authority over the research process because of intergenerational marginalisation from access to wider community resources, particularly education. This has lead to the denial of "access to the prerequisites of effective participation in a system developed and controlled by more powerful interest groups" (Eckerman, 1981, p6). The researcher is, therefore, obliged to establish a relationship with Indigenous subjects which aims to develop partnerships based on equivalent levels of authority.

Theoretical and policy influences that inform Kurongkurl Katitjin's, approach to research

Kurongkurl Katitjin's 2000-2004 Strategic Plan's primary research objective is to ensure that "Indigenous Australian people are involved in and have control over research involving Indigenous people" (p 11). This objective is informed by the historical experience of Indigenous Australians described above, by ideas that have been developed by Indigenous academics and education leaders, such as Williams and Stewart (1992) and West, and Indigenous centres in universities such as Curtin University's Centre for Indigenous

Research, and by the research experience of Indigenous academics working at Kurongkurl Katitjin. It is also supported by trends in National and local Indigenous education policies.

Case for a participatory model

Williams and Stewart (1992) argued that many of the issues described in the previous section can be resolved if the notion of Indigenous self-determination underpins the approaches used in the research process. They also argue that it is possible for research to be an empowering process for communities when developed and implemented on the basis of mutual benefit, a position supported by [aldram (1998]. While such a notion is different to conventional approaches to research, it is important as it addresses a fundamental issue that concerns Indigenous people: "power and control over research" .

Williams and Stewart's paper is a positive response to Errol West's call, in his 1991 address to the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Conference, for a process through which Indigenous people can reclaim their historical and contemporary intellectual property. They argue that research should be about the advancement of Indigenous communities and therefore needs to be embedded in community-based and controlled decision making processes "without creating further impositions" on them.

They also draw extensively on the ideas of McTaggart (in Williams and Stewart, 1992, pp 6-8) who advocates the use of participatory action research in education. This involves the creation of new understandings and knowledge through processes where researchers and the researched are partners and where the objectives of investigations and the methods used are relevant to communities.

They see this as "the most appropriate and powerful research methodology for achieving…a self-sustaining process of critical analysis and enlightened action" (p 6) for Indigenous communities as it "operates on the basis of collective and collaborative decision-making, implementation and analysis" (pp 6-7). Their support for this approach is grounded on the research experiences of Yirrikala community, in North-East Arnhem Land, which they describe as "an outstanding example of [transforming] critical thought into emancipatory action" (p 9) through the application of participatory action research methods in the area of curriculum and pedagogical development in an Indigenous context. Referring to Marila, Dayngawa and White's (1989) paper, which describes the features of the Yirrikala experience, Williams and Stewart argue that education research can be successfully implemented within a community-based Indigenous framework provided it is founded "on the principles of community control and self-determination" (p 10).

Trends in Indigenous Education Policy

The trend in the rhetoric in government statements concerning Indigenous community involvement in education is towards the use of the term "partnerships". This trend is illustrated by comparing the way Indigenous involvement is treated in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP) (1989) with more recent statements, such as the National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NIELNS) (2000).

In National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy the term "involvement" is used to describe Indigenous participation in the education process. This term implies passive participation in initiatives controlled by one party at the invitation of the dominant party and does not necessarily entail any form of dialogue or the dynamic exchange of ideas. This contrasts with NIELNS which identifies Indigenous community and education provider partnerships as the "first element of the Strategy" and goes on to state:

> … that a strong partnership needs to be built between schools and the families of Indigenous students. This partnership must acknowledge the experiences of Indigenous people. It must respond to their needs and aspirations and deliver opportunities to become equal partners in the management of the education process. In turn, Indigenous students must commit to attending school regularly while the whole community contributes to making schooling a success. (p 18)

The use of the term "partnership" is significant as it indicates that policy makers are seeking the establishment of more mature relationships, based on equal authority, between education providers and Indigenous communities. The importance of this element is reinforced by the NIELNS Western Australian Implementation Plan 2000-2004. This document contains a number of initiatives including one which focuses on the relationship between literacy and numeracy attainment and conductive hearing loss. This initiative identifies research as a "key step" that aims to clarify a number of areas including "the benefits accruing from involvement of Indigenous community members in the resolution of the consequences of conductive hearing loss among [Indigenous] children in early childhood" (p 30). This aim is consistent with Kurongkurl Katitjin's primary research objective and provides direction in the interpretation of the NIELNS statements concerning education partnerships with Indigenous communities. These same partnerships must be the foundation for the research process and requires the research team to develop and implement strategies which allow Indigenous communities to participate on their terms.

Defining Kurongkurl Katitjin's Primary Research Objective

The negative and often degrading research experience of many Indigenous Australians, the political and methodological positions articulated by Indigenous education leaders, national Indigenous education policy trends, and policy trends in other Australian universities all support Kurongkurl Katitjin's primary research objective of ensuring that Indigenous Australians have control over research which involves them. How Kurongkurl Katitjin interprets this objective will be presented at this point by describing a formative set of principles that have been drawn from these sources and the research experience of the School.

Commitment to Indigenous Self-determination

Kurongkurl Katitjin supports Williams and Stewart's (1992) view that for self-determination to be meaningful, in the context of research, the researchers need to acknowledge and support Indigenous processes of making decisions and judgements about the relative merits of the research. Local Indigenous decision making frameworks must be the starting point for all research in Indigenous contexts. This is necessary for two reasons: to ensure that the Indigenous communitys' role in any investigation is founded on real authority and to enable researchers to gain insights which go beyond their cultural framework and experience.

Research as a Process of Empowerment

Research which involves Indigenous communities must be implemented in a way which creates opportunities for empowering the community. This is a notion which is supported by Williams and Stewart (1992) who see research as being a process whereby Indigenous communities can "confront continuing forms of social and cultural domination and imposition" (p 3) and a mechanism through which the development of knowledge can be liberating and empowering. The key to this idea lies in the nature of research partnerships and the conditions under which they are established.

Informed Consent

The development of partnerships commences with the process of gaining informed consent. Informed consent must be founded on "mutual [and tangible] benefit through short-, medium- and long-term reciprocity" . This involves the commitment of resources to negotiation processes that need to occur over timeframes that take into account Indigenous community modes of decision making.

The notion of informed consent arose through the development of the Nuremberg Code, an outcome of a tribunal which tried doctors who were responsible for horrific experiments involving human beings in Nazi Germany. The key principle underlying this code is the requirement that human subjects provide consent voluntarily.

> The consent is to be free from fraud, deceit, over reaching ulterior forms of constraint and coercion. Subjects are to know and understand the nature, duration and purpose of experiments, the methods and means by which they are conducted; and to know all the risks of harm or inconvenience (Bibby, 1997, p 82).

The code also maintains that a subject can withdraw consent at any time and must be competent to give consent.

The process of obtaining informed consent should not be coercive in nature. The community finds itself in a position where it is unable to refuse to participate and, therefore, becomes a reluctant partner. For negotiation processes to be genuine the researchers need to be sensitive to the sometimes subtle community responses to proposals. They should be prepared to withdraw from communities at any stage of the research process – even, at times, at the expense of the research.

Research Partnerships

Kurongkurl Katitjin's position is that self-determination must go beyond the initial consent processes, which is a standard first step for all forms of human research, and must involve Indigenous people as partners in all stages of the research. Partnership between the researcher and the researched need to be established where Indigenous sensibilities are acknowledged and incorporated through a process of ongoing negotiation and review. Research partnerships of this nature are recognised as being important internationally and across disciplines, as illustrated by Palca in relation to AIDS research in Africa, Young (1994) on the conduct of adult education in Canada, the Arctic Research Consortium of the United States research on the Arctic Circle research (no date); and, pharmaceutical research in the Philippines (Cohen, 1996).

Indigenous Community Researchers

Gaining informed consent will require researchers to employ local people who understand the culture, ethics, relationships and language of the communities. Their role should be aligned with the interests of the communities, keeping them informed of the true nature of the research while at the same time advising the researchers of the appropriate modes of engaging the community. Community researchers have a key role to play in the establishment and maintenance of partnerships . They also have a significant role to play in the process of verifying the validity of data as it is gathered, offering advice and interpretations of discourse and incidents that are important to the research.

Community Cultural Priorities

The next principle that informs Kurongkurl Katitjin's approach to research concerns the maintenance and support of the cultural priorities of the communities involved in it. It is important that the investigations do not interfere with the cultural fabric of the Indigenous communities and operate within the social and cultural framework that the community has defined through their way of life and stated protocols. This should be possible if the research is conducted within community decision making mechanisms and if it is informed by advice from community members of research teams.

Data Analysis

The analysis of data should be undertaken with a view to refining the research partnership and considering how the findings can be used to benefit the development of the community. This is the most important element in the research cycle from an Indigenous community point of view as it is through a process of informed reflection that the community is empowered by the findings and insights that may be created. Discussion on the appropriate outcomes from the research findings should be handled through community decision making structures.

Publication of findings

The final principle concerns the publication of the findings. This aspect of a research project is often the stage that causes the most tension as it has the potential to harm communities by placing intimate details of their lives in the public domain. The small scale of Indigenous communities in Australia makes personalities relatively easy to identify and therefore susceptible to harm in a way which is not experienced by the wider community. Material prepared for publication therefore needs to be vetted through mechanisms that are appropriate to the Indigenous communities concerned.

Practicalities of Managing Indigenous Involvement and Control over Research

The diverse context in which the conductive hearing loss research project is being conducted presents a number of challenges in relation to the researcher's commitment to community involvement in the process. The incorporation of Indigenous decision making frameworks and securing informed consent are two of the primary challenges. These will be discussed below.

Operating in Diverse School Community Contexts

The researchers are is conducting this project on the premise that they cannot make generalisations about the strategies that are used when working with the different school communities. What is appropriate in one school community may not be appropriate in another and therefore the nature of the research partnership must be negotiated at a local level. Below is a brief overview of the current contexts in which the research project is operating.

As mentioned earlier, the research project is being conducted in school communities in urban, rural and remote locations. They include schools from all sectors including the Education Department, Catholic Education and the Aboriginal Independent Community Schools. At this point in the project only State and Independent schools have become involved. All of the remote schools, one rural Independent school and one urban Independent school are located in discrete Indigenous settlements.

The Independent schools have a system of school governance where the governing bodies membership is entirely Indigenous. Most of the schools have Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) groups, while some have after school hours homework classes for Indigenous students.

Unlike the Independent schools, the State schools appear to have a relatively high turn over of teaching staff and all of the schools, with the exception of the one remote Independent school, experience high mobility among their Indigenous students.

Incorporating Local Indigenous Decision Making Frameworks in the Research Process

It appears that the Independent Schools, which have Indigenous governing bodies, are in a better position than the Education Department schools to support research processes that incorporate the principle of operating within Indigenous decision making mechanisms. In the metropolitan State schools it is difficult to identify Indigenous community decision making mechanisms through which the research can be managed. This creates limitations on the ability of the project to develop research partnerships on a community-wide scale.

It will, however, be possible to establish partnerships in the State schools with interested individuals from the community and Indigenous members of staff. Members of the ASSPA groups and the homework class supervisors will also be approached. The difficulty, however, lies in their ability to represent the parents of children in early childhood classes. This is also an issue for the urban Independent schools whose governing bodies are not representative of the parents of the students.

The approach that the researchers have taken, in response to this issue, is to work within existing structures and endeavour to create opportunities for the families of the students to become more directly involved through these mechanisms. This has meant that team members have had to work closely with the Indigenous staff with a view to establishing links with families in school communities.

Gaining Informed Consent

Obtaining informed consent from the students' families in the metropolitan area has become a major exercise for the government and independent schools involving multiple visits to households. This is a responsibility that the schools have undertaken because of their access to the community. However, they have found it difficult and onerous.

In one remote Independent school it was found that the community had provided consent on the basis of advice from the principal of the school without a real understanding of the nature of the research. Their consent was given willingly but it was formed on the community members relationship of trust and deep affection for the principal and not upon the their understanding of the research. Kurongkurl Katitjin's response to this situation was to provide ongoing advice and information about the nature of the research and remind participants that they are under no obligation to cooperate (Journal entry, 29 May, 2001).

The research team is relying heavily on the staff of the schools to obtain consent for the project. This may prove problematic in some communities, and one case a local Indigenous parent has been employed to gain consent. This person's local knowledge and relationships enables more informed consent.

Conclusion

Historically, research in Indigenous communities in Australia has been Euro-centric in nature and often provided no tangible benefit for the communities that are the subjects of investigations. This has had the effect of disempowering Indigenous people. It has been argued, however, that by using the notion of Indigenous self-determination to underscore research processes with a view to establishing partnerships informed and framed by Indigenous social, cultural and decision making processes, Indigenous communities could reap significant benefits from research and be enriched and empowered by it.

In the context of the early stages of this research project it would appear that these principles will be difficult to realise in most of the urban schools and some of the rural schools that are participating in the study because of the difficulty in establishing Indigenous community decision making mechanisms. This is consistent with the Senate inquiry, *Katu Kalpa – Report on the inquiry into the effectiveness of education and training programs for Indigenous Australians* (2000) finding that recognised that self-determination may be defined as "control" in discrete Indigenous communities and "involvement" in urban environments. The researchers will continue to explore the boundaries of research in Indigenous communities with a view to clarifying such distinctions. The principal goal sort in working with these communities, however, is to eliminate the perception of researchers as bastards who should be kept out.

References

Actic Research Council of the United States (no date). *People and the Artic: A Prospective for Research on the Human Dimensions of the Artic System (HARC) for the National Science Foundation Artic System Science Program*. Fairbank.

Cohen, M. (1996). People Power: bioprospectors learn to work with indigenous people. *Eastern Economic Review, 159*(2).

Commonwealth of Australia. (2000). *National Indigenous English Literacy, Numeracy and Attendance Strategy 2000-2004: Western Australian Implementation Plan*.

Department of Employment Education and Training. (1989). *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy*.: Commonwealth of Australia.

Dodson, M., & Pritchard, S. (1998). Recent Developments in Indigenous Policy: the Abandonment of Self-determination. *Indigenous law Bulletin*.

Eckerman, A. (1981). Learning Styles, classroom management, teacher characteristics and rural-urban Aboriginal people: some thoughts.*The Aboriginal child at school, 16*(1), 3-19.

Foley, D. (2000). Indigenous Research, Differing Value Systems. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Research, 28*(1).

Kurongkurl Katitjin: School of Indigenous Australian Studies. (2000). *Strategic Plan 2000-2004*.: Edith Cowan University.

McNamara, N. (1979). *Aboriginal Participation in Research*.Unpublished manuscript, Perth.

Palca, J. (1990). African AIDS:Whose research rules? *Science, 250*(Oct).

Richter, R. K. (1997). Dovetailing biological diversity, indigenous knowledge, traditional medicine, and drug discovery for reciprocal benefit: collaborations between Shaman Pharmaceuticals and African communities and organisations. *The American Journal of Botany, 84*(6).

Senate Employment Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education Reference Committee. (2000). *Katu Kalpa - Report on the inquiry into the effectiveness of education and training programs for Indigenous Australians*.: Commonwealth of Australia.

Varga, S., & Coombs, A. (2001). *Broometime*. Melbourne.

Varga, S., & Coombs, A. (26-27 May, 2001, 26-27 May, 2001). *The Weekend Australian*.

Waldram, J. B. (1998). Anthropology in prison: negotiating consent with a "captured" population. *Human Organization, 57*(2).

Williams, S., & Stewart, I. (1992). *Community Control and Self-determination in Aboriginal Education Research: The Changed Roles, Relationships and Responsibilities of Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Communities.* Paper presented at the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Conference.

Young, D. (1994). *"Elders' Vision": The Saskatchewan Older Aboriginal Adults' Learning Needs Assesment Project - Phase One, final Report*. Canada, Saskatchewan.