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Research in Aboriginal communities: cultural sensitivity as a prerequisite

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Abstract

Most research in Aboriginal communities has been based on survey methods. This study, using a qualitative interview methodology, uses cultural sensitivity as its fundamental principal.

Cultural sensitivity has been maintained by employing a number of methods. Reference Groups, active engagement with community leaders, training and employment of Aboriginal research assistants and keeping in contact with stakeholders are all used to build trust and conduct the research from the perspective of respect for persons and culture. Respect is further demonstrated by the development of a partnership between the community leaders and the researcher and feedback maintained via to the research reference group who provide ecological validation of the developing research analysis.

The research model is proposed as a model for further research in Aboriginal communities. It is argued that respect for persons and cultures are critical elements built into the method. Respect is reflected in each of the steps undertaken to gather and analyse the data, validate the findings and present research outcomes in ways which communities find comprehensible, accessible, and facilitative of their growth and continued development.

Introduction

This paper reports the process adopted to gain and maintain cultural sensitivity in the design of the methods for a research study, which used face-to-face interviews to obtain data about Aboriginal youth attitudes to suicide.

Qualitative research methods comprising of participant observation, and qualitative interviewing were utilized because they were considered appropriate and sensitive to the cultural and language differences that exist in Aboriginal communities in Western Australia.

The purpose of the research study is to develop a better understanding of the cultural, behavioural, and social aspects of Aboriginal youth with respect to the major problem of youth suicide in the remote Aboriginal communities of the Kalgoorlie and Esperance Regions of Western Australia. This research study focused on the attitudes and responses of Aboriginal youth and especially their “thinking” about why there is an increase in youth suicide in their communities.

This research proposal is founded on three principles:

1. Aboriginal people have different cultural and language backgrounds to mainstream society and therefore researchers need to develop models of inquiry that are both sensitive and recognize these cultural differences.
2. Any attempt to solve problems on Aboriginal communities should be done in partnership with, and the consent of, the Aboriginal community.
3. The research was developed with the underlying assumption that it is important to give voice to Aboriginal youth and that their opinions and attitudes are important and worth hearing. Equally the opinions and attitudes of their community members are worth hearing in relation to the problem of suicide in these communities.

The research was developed to exemplify a model for doing research in Aboriginal communities using the NH&MRC ethical guidelines 2003 on conducting research with Aboriginal people.

The subject of the paper

This paper is not reporting the research that was conducted on Indigenous youth suicide. This report focuses on an approach to the development of cultural sensitivity through the engagement of community members in the research process. It attempts to provide a report of the researchers attempt to develop a research model that would provide a framework for understanding and developing collaborative initiatives between indigenous people and non-indigenous researchers based on building partnerships and mutual respect of both parties.

Background to the research study

This research has been designed in the qualitative genre of ethnography and the researchers believe this approach will allow the researcher to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of Aboriginal youths' construction of the suicide issue in their communities, and attempts to understanding the complexities of the social, cultural and economic factors impacting on them.

Through the use of participant observation, immersion in the field, and interviewing the researchers are attempting to gain a deeper understanding of how youth themselves construct their reality. The research study was approached from the perspective that we are not interested in testing theories of youth suicide that focus on risk factors and disease association commonly undertaken in the health science using experimental designs because that may remove the variation and complexity of real life (Tatz 1999). Associated with this thinking the researchers believe that qualitative approaches are more appropriate tools for researchers working with Aboriginal people and they are likely to yield information that could better address youth suicide in this population. In other words this research study is interested in obtaining an in-depth understanding of the meanings and events by obtaining "thick descriptions" from the participants (Geertz 1973).

The problems in collecting data on Indigenous populations are summarized by Cantor et al, as follows:

“ Suicide in Australian indigenous populations has not been adequately addressed, despite best efforts of a number of researchers dedicated to the health and welfare issues of these people. The quality of data available is not acceptable by any scientific standards and relates to major obstacles to research. These include a relatively small proportion of the Australian population that are indigenous; the low base rate of suicide in any population; different definitions of Aboriginality (see Coory & Saul, 1998); routine failure to record ethnicity in coronial and other death data; the sensitivity of the issue; the difficulty of accessing remote indigenous populations; and cultural barriers (p.107).”

The little data that is available suggests that Aboriginal youth suicide is increasing at an alarming rate and only by studying the phenomenon more closely with representatives of the relevant communities is it likely that this problem will be adequately addressed (Cantor et al 1998). Qualitative research methodologies have a better chance of identifying the extent of the problem, because they use sampling strategies that are better suited to dealing with small samples.

Method

The study was designed in such a way that a safe environment would be created, that would allow Aboriginal youth to express themselves freely and openly as much as possible, and importantly to give them voice.

The principal researcher has well-established networks and considerable experience working with Aboriginal people. The researcher was therefore entering the field with considerable knowledge of the region to be studied, having already established relationships with key members of the Aboriginal community. The researcher also has a strong belief that any approach to undertaking research with Australian Aboriginal people should be guided, informed, driven and the outcomes owned at the local level by the Aboriginal community.

Although the researcher had well-established networks, it took 12 months before the study commenced to gain the necessary approvals. The researcher visited the region, held meetings and discussions with key opinion leaders, to outline the purpose of the study, to gain the support and trust of the local community members. Community leaders were involved in the proposed design of the research methods. Considerable lead-time was required with time spent in the field on the part of the researcher before the study could commence to gain the necessary ethics approvals from community members. Time and expense needed to be allocated to early meetings with key opinion leaders to establish mutual trust and respect, recognise and understand values and cultures on both sides. This could only be achieved through a number of visits to the field before the study commenced. It took time, care, and patience to build a robust relationship so that partnerships were developed with the Aboriginal community ensuring their involvement in the research process.

The research study has encapsulated the principles as outlined in National Health and Medical Research guidelines (NH&MRC Guidelines 1991b, and 2003) and The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies (2000). Some of the key themes are summarized as follows:

1. Recognise and understand that different values and culture takes time, care and patience. The building of a strong working relationship is dependent on respectful research relationships that affirm the right of people to have different values norms and aspirations.
2. Research will involve youth and their families in a collaborative exercise through stakeholder involvement and consultation.
3. Trust among stakeholders is essential to successful and ethical outcomes and has to function at all levels of the research process. Between participants and researcher, between research partner and sponsor and between researcher and the wider community.

This research design differs from other research undertaken in the region in the following ways:

- Qualitative research methods utilizing interviews that are both complimentary and facilitative to Aboriginal culture and language were developed.
- The Aboriginal community was involved in decisions concerning whom, when and where the research will be undertaken, through the establishment of a local Aboriginal Reference Group.

- Aboriginal Youth from the communities to be studied were invited to participate in a training course in qualitative research methods.
- At least four Aboriginal Youth from the local community who attended the training course were selected to work as Research Assistants and to conduct the interviews with youth.
- The sample was selected by key informants i.e. Reference Group members who also organised the venue and interviews in their respective communities.
- Interviews were also held with parents, elders and community members to obtain their perspective and opinions of the youth suicide problem in their communities.

Establishing partnerships and collaboration

The research was designed to ensure the Aboriginal community would be consulted and examined in a holistic way, with the endorsement and involvement of the elected community representatives in each community/town that took part in the study. Other researchers into Aboriginal youth suicide in Australia have reported that Aboriginal suicide has unique social and political contexts and must be seen as a distinct phenomenon (Tatz 1999). This and other works suggest that in considering Indigenous Australian suicide the concept of risk must be broadened to a social or community level to consider 'community at risk' (Hunter, et al 1999).

The research method incorporated Aboriginal representation and involvement through the establishment of a local Aboriginal Reference Group comprising of members from the 5 towns of Kalgoorlie, Coolgardie, Leonora, Laverton and Esperance in the regions. This approach is consistent with the National Health and Medical Research Council (NH&MRC, 1991b, and 2003) guidelines on undertaking research in Aboriginal communities.

The Aboriginal Reference group comprised of key opinion leaders selected by Aboriginal people living in the 5 communities to be studied. The Aboriginal Reference group played an important role in assisting the researcher in whom, where and when to interview and to promote the research in their communities. At the same time, reference group members were involved in the selection and training of the Aboriginal research assistants in qualitative research methods.

The strength of this research proposal was in the use of existing networks within the Aboriginal community and the establishment of a local reference group to ensure the researcher is culturally in tune with the community, and was an essential element of the research strategy (see Mental Health Promotion & Prevention National Action Plan 1999). Involvement and ownership by the Aboriginal community is a central element of this proposal (Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Report 1991).

The Aboriginal reference group is the first layer of obtaining consent to undertake the research at a community level and is additional to consent at the individual level. This aspect is important in terms of cultural sensitivity to Aboriginal culture and recognizes the importance of gaining approval from the Aboriginal elders in the communities to be visited as well as individual participants.

It was equally important to get the Aboriginal reference group to approve the line of questions for the interview protocol. An important step in the process was to pilot test the interview protocol and obtain participant feedback before being fully implemented in the field.

Agreement was obtained from the reference group to record all interviews using a tape recorder, plus the transcription of taped interviews, to ensure data is gathered that is representative of what happens in real life. This also ensured the reliability of information gathered.

Collaborative arrangements with Aboriginal communities are costly in terms of the time taken to consult in the development of the research study as well as the actual delivery. However the benefits out way the costs for all partners in the research exercise. Some of the benefits of partnerships are outlined as follows:

Benefits for the local community

- Local Aboriginal people receive training and employment
- Builds community capacity and resilience -youth are trained to become role models
- Leads to other work opportunities for research assistants
- Skills remain in the community
- Increases community awareness of the issue and problems and consultation processes
- Ownership of the issues and problems
- Demystifies research and academia

Benefits for the researcher

- Gains a deeper level of access knowledge and information
- Tap into tacit knowledge of the people themselves
- Gains trust and acceptance of the community
- Get community support and encouragement
- Access to more participants

Access to Aboriginal communities

Access to Aboriginal communities and individual participants was negotiated at a number of levels with the input from the Aboriginal reference group.

A critical aspect of gaining access was by obtaining the support of the local community council, and the chair of each community council was invited to become a member of the reference group. The researcher was relying on their good will to use their facilities where the interviews can be conducted to facilitate personal disclosure from participants.

At the individual participant level, approval was also sought from the Aboriginal Reference group to gain access to youth in their communities. Originally it had been thought that formal consent forms would not be culturally appropriate but this proved to be incorrect. The researchers found the process of explaining the contents of the consent form, together with providing a copy of the researcher undertaking proved to be an important step in gaining the trust and respect of participants in the study. A formal form was signed by each participant, outlining how the information will be used, type of security, and what will be done with the tapes, transcription and reporting was obtained. Although the researchers anticipated there could be language and cultural barriers this was not the case in practise. The Aboriginal Reference group was consulted on the best approach and they endorsed the importance of formal consent.

Training and employment of research assistants

To ensure cultural sensitivities are observed and work towards valid data collection methods as well as analysis, local research assistants were selected and trained to interface between the research team and the local Aboriginal community. The training program was aimed at local Aboriginal youth who could be employed as research assistants and its focus was to raise personal, local skill levels as well as achieve meaningful data in these remote communities. The training course for research assistants was aimed at developing a set questions for the interview protocol, and then get the interview protocol questions endorsed by the reference group members.

The training course was aimed at local Aboriginal youth that were representative of the sample age group of 16-24 years of age, drawn from these same communities, to interview within the communities. Firstly,

the sense of a group of Aboriginal research assistants was seen as an improvement and added richness of the research project rather than another level of complexity. Secondly, it was clear that this group of research assistants would need to be carefully selected and carefully trained. Thirdly, that this group of assistants would enable further dimensions of the research field to be better explored. Lastly, as community members were to be critical data sources for this project, research assistants of each gender would be required (Vallance & Tchacos 2001).

The reference group representatives from communities were invited to nominate possible trainees to attend the training course. These contacts were requested to nominate people suitable for the role of research assistant. A flyer was sent to the local Aboriginal Resource Agencies and committees inviting nominations. It was decided to accept all those who made contact. As a number of people would be coming from remote communities, funding would support their travel expenses, a nominal per diem, training materials and daily accommodation and meals over the training period. At the same time a venue (campus of the local tertiary institution) was located because it was neutral territory and sympathetic to the aims of the project, and well regarded within the community.

The training ran for six full days of a week and was seen as the most reasonable timeframe balancing participants' other commitments and obligations with the desire to maximise learning.

Eight participants commenced the training period. While the eight were equally divided by gender and whether they lived in a remote or the town community, their ages ranged from 17-27 years.

The main work of the training was problem focused. Recognising the difficulties of developing an interview protocol from the ground up, the researchers developed an outline and later a series of questions for the protocol. These questions were then discussed with the group to gain an understanding of the problem: after understanding why this information would be important, how can it be asked in culturally sensitive ways?

Once the interview protocol was developed with the group it was used in practise sessions within the group. Small group work, all-in discussion, role plays, fish-bowl practice interviews, imaginative exploration of the variety of possible interviewees and their responses honed skills explained and modelled. Multiple types of interview practice were used. Practice in small groups, with an audio tape recorder either one-to-one or in front of the group, was employed. The research interviews were to be audio taped. So, while part of the training course was about familiarising each person with the technology and format of a research interview, it was also about confidence building, exploring personal responses and how the emerging interview protocol 'felt' for the prospective research interviewees (Vallance & Tchacos 2001).

Those trained came from diverse ages, backgrounds in terms of urban or remote community living and cultural immersion. After completion of the 6 day training course each trainee received a certificate of completion from the University of Notre Dame. Trainees were invited to indicate whether they wanted to take up employment as Aboriginal research assistants for a period of three months. It was decided to allow trainees to self select, on the understanding that they had been through an intensive training course and the subject of the training may be too heavy for some of the participants. Of the six participants, one was employed directly after the training; another found the training too intensive; and four Aboriginal youth were employed as research assistants following the successful completion of the six day intensive training course. This acknowledged the need to employ youth who were both successful and culturally acceptable to the communities to be visited and allowed for cultural differences, trust and respect to be developed.

The Sample

The primary focus of this study was Aboriginal youth aged 16 to 24 years. The Aboriginal population sample is 3,475 in the 5 towns, of which the population of 16 to 24 years olds in the region comprises 534 youth (Census of Population and Housing, ABS 2001). While the focus of this study was on youth themselves, the parents, elders, and other community members were also included in the study to obtain a

holistic view of the social and cultural issues facing youth in these communities. Service Providers were also part of the study and included teachers, clergy, youth workers, mental health workers and police liaison officers and service providers in health, education and community organizations.

The sampling techniques used were snowball sampling and purposive sampling (Marshall & Rossman 1999). The researchers propose to ask key community opinion leaders or key informants to advise on the selection of individuals for face-to-face interviews. Purposive sampling was used for one to one interviews to achieve saturation (Rubin and Rubin 1995; Creswell 1998).

Purposive sampling involves the idea that the sample deliberately includes those who are indicated as being informative of the research question. This means that advice of Aboriginal community leaders, those already participating, those with specialist or a different view, were sought to allow the sample size to grow with the purpose that it be maximally informative (Creswell 1998; Punch 1998). Allied to this is the sense of 'saturation', that sampling will be developed while informants are providing new data. (Punch 1998).

Gathering Data

A broad set of questions to guide the interviews was developed to ensure the four Aboriginal research assistants gathered consistent information on youth attitudes. The interview protocol covered all key information areas (cultural, mental health, social, and family relationships), including opinions on intervention services and their cultural appropriateness for Aboriginal youth.

The interviews with Aboriginal youth needed to involve both Aboriginal male and female research assistants, since the youth were not likely to relate key issues to a non-indigenous female. The aim of the qualitative interview being to capture Aboriginal youth meanings, definitions and descriptions of events to uncover their thoughts, perceptions and feelings and how this influences their actions (Berg 1998, Minichiello et al, 1995). The Aboriginal research assistants play a critical role in the research design to ensure our line of questioning is done in a culturally sensitive manner, using their own language.

The opinions of the Aboriginal research assistants were also sought to make sure the wording and format of the interview protocol were culturally sensitive. The fine-tuning and language for the line of questions to be used in face-to-face interviews involved discussion with the Aboriginal Research Assistants and Aboriginal reference group members who as key opinion leaders wanted to approve the final protocol.

The strength of this study lies in the employment of local Aboriginal research assistants. This meant our approach was more sensitive to the cultural and language differences that exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers. They were also selected and endorsed by reference group members as acceptable individuals to visit their communities.

The research assistants became part of the research team that visited all communities to gather the data. At no time was any of the research assistants left to work alone without the principal researcher being available. The research team visited communities and conducted interviews over a three month period. Members of the team were often away from home for over a week at a time visiting the remote communities.

During fieldwork, at the end of each day of interviewing a formal debrief was conducted with all research assistants to discuss how the data collection was going and to go over any concerns regarding the content of the interviews. This was a critical element of the process as participants often gave the research assistants sensitive personal data. It was important for them to discuss this in the debrief with the principal researcher.

After Data Collection

This research study by its nature obtained sensitive and confidential data on individual youth life experience and perceptions of what was going on in their communities. It became obvious towards the end of the data collection phase that there was a need for one week to be set aside to conduct a full debrief with the research assistants. This process allowed number of issues to be addressed as follows:

- How the research assistants would behave if a participant or their parent approached them with a problem.
- How to maintain confidentiality and respect for the participants.
- How to access support services available once the researchers left the community.
- The development of individual career plans and a mentor support program with the principal researcher.

The principal researcher agreed to be a mentor for the research assistants at the request of the Aboriginal reference group and has continued to maintain contact with each of the research assistants via a bimonthly phone contact to discuss their progress with work and career aspirations. The individual career plan is used as the basis for these discussions.

Conclusions

The above outline is a brief overview of the approach taken. It is important to acknowledge from the outset that flexibility is a key requirement when working with Aboriginal peoples to ensure they are able to have a say and be equal partners in the research study and that the research design is responsive to the needs of the population under study.

Aboriginal people commented on being sick of being researched, although Aboriginal people recognise they need research, they want to be involved in the research to be conducted in their communities. From our own experience we found that the members of the Aboriginal community who were involved in the research study moved from feelings of initial frustration to conviction and consciousness raising. The researchers in turn benefited considerably by involving Aboriginal peoples in the research exercise.

Reflecting on this research has led the authors to understand some of the factors of this research study that were critical to successful research in the Aboriginal communities:

1. Involve Aboriginal stakeholders in the establishment of the need, expectations and values of the research study in the early stages of developing the proposed research study.
2. Develop an understanding of cultural differences and be willing to incorporate Aboriginal ideas and cultural awareness into the research methods.
3. Establish trust and respectful relationships with Aboriginal communities and individuals.
4. Get Aboriginal communities involved in developing and implementing the research methods.
5. Inform Aboriginal stakeholders and community leaders of the ethical requirements for the research study and involve them in the processes to gain approval.
6. Help to develop skills of Aboriginal people through their training, employment and mentoring.

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