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### **Abstract**

The state of health of Indigenous Australians is appalling. Compared to non-Indigenous Australians they have poorer self-assessed health, higher rates of hospitalisation and higher prevalence rates, experience an earlier onset of disease, and suffer a burden of disease two and a half times greater. They also suffer higher rates of mental illness, are twice as likely to report high to very high levels of psychological distress, and are likely to have higher general practitioner encounter rates. Most significantly they have a life expectancy at birth that is 17 years less than non Indigenous Australians. Despite decades of research, there has been little or no improvement. Part of the problem that has been identified is the ineffectiveness of research based on non-Indigenous cultural values. In this article we look at research methods and suggest ways that researchers can undertake research that is more likely to meet the needs of Indigenous Australians.

**Keywords:** Aboriginal, Australia, Research, Cross-cultural, Qualitative, Narrative

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## **Matching Research Methodology with Australian Indigenous Culture**

Social justice must always be considered from a perspective, which is grounded in the daily lives of Indigenous Australians.

Social justice is about what you face when you get up in the morning.

It is awakening in a house with an adequate water supply, cooking facilities and sanitation.

It is the ability to nourish your children and send them to school where their education not only equips them for employment but reinforces their knowledge and appreciation of their cultural inheritance.

It is the prospect of genuine employment and good health; a life of choices and opportunities, free from discrimination (Dodson, 1993).

If we aspire to social justice for Indigenous people, especially in the area of health, then we must undertake appropriate research that addresses the needs of Indigenous people as they perceive them in a way that fits within their frame of reference.

We wish to make it clear that the use of the term “Indigenous” throughout this article to refer to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples does not in any way imply that they are one cohesive group. The term is used solely to avoid the constant repetition of the more accurate but very long title. We have capitalized the term Indigenous in keeping with the accepted style when referring to Australian Indigenous peoples as opposed to indigenous peoples in general. We have followed the same tradition when referring to Australian Aboriginal peoples.

### **Background**

Indigenous Australians have poorer self-assessed health than non-Indigenous Australians, have higher rates of hospitalization and higher prevalence rates for many diseases, experience an earlier onset of disease, and suffer a burden of disease that is two and a half times greater. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people also suffer higher rates of mental illness, are twice as likely to report high to very high levels of psychological distress, and are likely to have higher General Practitioner encounter rates (Pink & Allbon, 2008).

Notwithstanding the above and the obvious need for research to help address these appalling statistics, Aboriginal peoples have long argued that research conducted in their communities does not benefit them or lead to improvements in their health (de Crespigny, Emden, Kowanko, & Murray, 2004; Eades SJ, Read AW, & Bibbulung Gnarneep Team, 1999; Henry et al., 2004; Holmes, Stewart, Garrow, Anderson, & Thorpe, 2002; Hunter, 2001).

In this article we look at some of the reasons why research may not have achieved the improvement in Indigenous Australian health that was hoped for, and propose some ideas about how research methodology and Australian Indigenous cultures can be better matched, and therefore be more likely to address their health needs.

## **Cultural factors**

One of the key underlying reasons for potential conflict between research and Indigenous peoples is the fact that formal research in Australia has evolved from Anglo-Celtic cultural values. Most key stakeholders in funded research, such as funding bodies (both Government and non-Government), universities, and research centers, are steeped in Anglo-Celtic cultural values. Even the researchers themselves have been trained by universities to undertake research according to well established protocols developed within that same cultural framework. Other cultures have different values and beliefs and different expectations of how people will behave, including beliefs related to health (D Gorman & Best, 2005; D. Gorman, Nielsen, & Best, 2006). Whilst some researchers, particularly quantitative researchers, may argue that research is culture free, i.e. collecting data and analyzing it; when the data is to be collected from people then the interface between researcher and participant is affected by culture and cultural differences can create serious barriers. The impact of cultural difference is even more complex for qualitative researchers interested in the subjective experiences of their participants. Culture is highly complex, involving all aspects of a social group, but there are some aspects where Anglo-Celtic and Indigenous Australian cultures differ that are of obvious relevance to researchers. The key cultural beliefs the authors have chosen to look at are beliefs about knowledge, its ownership and how it is transmitted; and the purpose/benefits of research.

### **Knowledge/Data**

Indigenous knowledge is collectively owned, with each group having ownership of its particular heritage and often with an individual or group as custodians of a particular aspect in the best interests of the community as a whole (T Janke, 2005). Only the group may consent to sharing this knowledge through specific decision-making procedures. This sharing creates a relationship between the givers and receivers with the traditional owners retaining the authority to ensure that knowledge is used properly (Terri Janke, 1998).

Aboriginal societies have always had a means of transmitting knowledge about the land, history, kinship, religion and the means of survival even if this knowledge was never written in books or stored in libraries as non-Aboriginal people have done. Younger generations learn from older generations by participation, observation or imitation. Much learning is unstructured and takes place in social contexts amongst kin. Certain types of knowledge, such as religious and ritual knowledge, are imparted at specific times and in an organized and managed way, often as part of initiation ceremonies (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992).

### **Oral culture and story telling**

Australian Aboriginal culture is an oral culture and for 60,000 years or more, it has been passed down from generation to generation. Aboriginal story telling is used to pass on important information within the context of an oral dialog. Lemon (2006) proposes that by nature, people are story tellers. Through stories, or narratives, people's identity and personality are formed. Aboriginal people relied on their own memories to store and then retrieve information they were given.

Storytelling is an integral part of life for Indigenous Australians and from an early age, storytelling plays a vital role in educating children. The stories help to explain how the land came to be shaped and inhabited; how to behave and why; where to find certain foods, etc.

For a living culture based on spirit of place, the major part of maintaining culture and therefore caring for place is the continuation of the oral tradition that tells a story (Terri Janke, 1998).

Gathered around the camp fire in the evening, on an expedition to a favorite waterhole, or at a landmark of special significance, parents, Elders or Aunts and Uncles use the stories to instill values, history and memories of past events into the child, including complex kinship systems. Then, as children grow into young adults, more of the history and culture is revealed. Adults then take responsibility for passing on the stories to the following generations. In this way, the Stories of the Dreaming have been handed down over thousands of years (Australian Museum, 2004).

Given that Indigenous culture is constructed through oral language and forms part of a complex culture, collecting stories of experience seems to be a valuable way of collecting data. Wilson (2007) emphasizes that it is the process, the telling of the story that is important, rather than the outcome.

These values and beliefs about knowledge can conflict with those of non-Indigenous researchers who commonly consider that the research process leads to their discovery of knowledge and therefore ownership of it by them. Ownership of intellectual property by the researcher is central to their success. There is also an expectation that the findings of research will be made available to the wider community (published) whilst acknowledging the researchers' intellectual property. Unless these issues are clarified beforehand, they can lead to major conflicts between researchers and their Indigenous participants.

### **Purpose/Benefits of the Research**

Given the cultural importance of knowledge and its ownership, it is clear that from an Indigenous perspective, outsiders should only be privileged with access to it if there is an understanding that the knowledge still remains the property of the community (Anderson, 2005; T Janke, 2005). and that its use will have a real potential to benefit that community (Wand & Eades, 2008). This does not mean that the needs of the researcher cannot be met e.g. publications, but the benefits to both parties must be clearly agreed to prior to undertaking the research.

## **What are the key factors for good research with Indigenous people**

Indigenous Australians are one of the most researched groups of people in the world. Intellectual property until recent times did not exist for Indigenous Australians and many researchers have used unethical practices when obtaining information.

Guidelines for ethical Indigenous research have been developed by a number of organizations such as the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of New South Wales, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and the

National Health and Medical Research Council (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2000; National Health and Medical Research Council, 2003; The Aboriginal Health & Medical Research Council of New South Wales, 1999) as a direct response to concerns about the appropriateness of research undertaken with Indigenous communities. The three sets of guidelines produced by the organizations referred to above, all make an important contribution to the conduct of ethical research with Indigenous peoples.

The National Health and Medical Research Council (2003) identify the following values that underlie ethical research with Indigenous peoples:

- \* Spirit and Integrity
- \* Reciprocity
- \* Respect
- \* Equality
- \* Survival and Protection
- \* Responsibility

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS)(2000) identify the following principles:

- \* Consultation, negotiation and mutual understanding
- \* Respect, recognition and involvement
- \* Benefits, outcomes and agreement

The Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of New South Wales (1999) identify the following ethical matters that need to be addressed by researchers if they are to undertake ethical research with Indigenous peoples:

- \* Aboriginal community control
- \* free and informed written consent
- \* provision for withdrawal of consent
- \* appropriate forms for consent
- \* need for written objectives for research and purposes for data
- \* culturally appropriate questionnaires
- \* provisions for modification to research
- \* adequate time frames
- \* employment of Aboriginal people in research
- \* Aboriginal ownership
- \* publication procedures and protocol
- \* confidentiality
- \* storage and archiving
- \* access to data and security

As it can be seen from just the above documents, the process of undertaking ethically sound research with Indigenous peoples is highly complex. Whilst it may be argued that many of the issues raised could be relevant to non-Indigenous participants in research as well, the history of perceived abuse by researchers makes it critical that approaches are utilized that ensure the appropriateness of studies to the Indigenous communities involved.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to address all of the issues involved with undertaking Indigenous research, therefore the paper will concentrate on identifying a methodology which we will argue conforms to the principles identified by AIATSIS.

## **Narrative: An Indigenous research methodology?**

Narrative research relies on the story telling process, which has been identified as central to Indigenous Australian culture (Terri Janke, 1998; Lemon, 2006; Wilson, 2007). Gartner, Latham and Merrit (1996) claim that through narrative enquiry learners are able to access their own knowledge and experience, and Wilson (2007) also suggests that they establish a new line of thinking.

The information gathering process in narrative is developed in consultation with the participant who determines what information will be used and how.

A collaborative approach between researchers and Aboriginal communities is pivotal to developing a research project consistent with Indigenous cultural values and health concepts, with the potential to improve services and outcomes for Aboriginal peoples (Wand & Eades, 2008). Ideally interviews are undertaken by Indigenous members of the research team, preferably from the participant community, to increase cultural appropriateness, and increase the likelihood of trust and acceptance by the community. This has the added benefit of increasing the capacity of Indigenous communities to undertake their own research.

Some researchers refer to narrative as a study of epiphanies, rituals, routines, metaphors and everyday experiences (Barton, 2004). Narrative research according to Lieblich and Tuval-Machiach (1998) uses or analyses narrative material. Lemon (2006) extends this by illustrating that access to peoples stories links others to their identity and further states that narrative provide insights into interconnecting forces enlightening relationships between the individual and society. Wilson (2007) also defines narrative enquiry as a way of connecting events, actions and experiences and moves them through time. This draws the researcher and participant together, making the relationship more productive if it is collaborative and enhancing the understanding of experience. According to Lieblich it gives respondents the venue to articulate their own viewpoints and evaluative standards (Lieblich & Josselson, 1994). Data can be collected as a story provided in an interview or in a different manner such as field notes or even in a personal letter. It can be used for comparison among groups, to learn about social phenomena or to explore individual personality traits (Lieblich & Tuval-Machiach, 1998). There are many forms of narrative models including (Holloway & Freshwater, 2007);

- \* The everyday story
- \* The autobiographical story
- \* The biographical story
- \* The cultural story
- \* The collective story

The every day story tells of everyday experiences, with a time line of “now” extending no further than a week or even a month. The autobiographical and biographical story extends further into the past and makes links to the present and even the future. The autobiographical model attempts to link the individual to events that are distinctly different from another’s perceptions, often of the same event. Biographical narratives also connect the individuals; however they feature the story teller in third person, recalling the event of another. Cultural and collective stories are used to make meaning visible in a particular social context. Holloway and Freshwater (2007), suggest that cultural and

collective stories have transformative possibilities, meaning that the stories can change as they are reinterpreted over time.

### **How is it Used**

All of the narrative models have common features. There is no defined rule on how to carry out narrative research other than premises that guide the framework of the narrative. All narratives must have a beginning, middle and an end. Like any story there is always a narrator and a particular audience (Amos & Wisniewski, 1995).

There is an increasing interest in narrative among qualitative researchers, particularly in the area of anthropology and humanitarian studies. The collection of stories from minority groups, such as indigenous people is providing vital information about sociological factors. Wilson (2007) suggests that recounting narratives through history has been a way for people to make sense of their experiences. Barton, (2004) a researcher from Canada examined the significance of narrative and its place in research among aboriginal groups. She used the study to examine aboriginal epistemology in relation to the methodology of narrative enquiry. What she found is that narratives provided a dimension of interaction between the researcher and story teller that gave an insight into cultural beliefs as well as a connection to arts and storytelling itself as a way to express and pass on oral history. She said that “Narrative offers me a way of understanding experience, and of imagining how I might research it. I propose that through the interactive activities of both the researcher and participants, the process of co-participating and co-constructing stories inherent in narrative enquiry reveals a circular way of understanding experience” (Wilson, 2007).

Lieblich and Josselson (1994), who have both done extensive work in the area of narrative, also support the notion that through story telling an understanding of the participant is attained and can be particularly powerful in shedding light into sociological problems. Barton (2004) also suggests that shifting the responsibility of the story onto the story teller, gives the storyteller ownership over the information being provided. Amos and Wisniewski (1995) depict narratives as a type of discourse that draws together diverse events into goal directed processes.

Wilson (2007) also sees merit in applying narrative methodologies to Indigenous groups, he suggests the story teller provides important information about the group and individual, based on the storyteller’s frame of reference. This information is often the only way of extracting clues to many historical and social issues disabling Indigenous groups.

### **What are the Problems with Narrative Enquiry**

Like all research methods there are advantages and disadvantages. It has been identified that the main area of research in narrative enquiry is in trying to understand personal identities, lifestyles, culture and the historical world of the narrator (Lieblich & Josselson, 1994). Wilson (2007) highlights some problems he encountered when gathering information from librarians in regards to historical records dating back to the 1930’s. He became painfully aware that the stories are always open-ended, inconclusive and ambiguous, subject to multiple interpretations and identified three main strategies to increase validity in narrative enquiry, these are;

- \* Use multiple sources of evidence
- \* Establish a chain of evidence
- \* Draft a case study report to be reviewed by participants in the study.

The adoption of these strategies increases validity of data collected by the researcher. Holloway and Freshwater (2007) also argue that narrative is a positive way to conduct research. However, they maintain that there are certain areas of concern. Firstly the critique of the narrative is not based on evidence. Therefore data collected is based on personal experience and could be misconstrued or not seen as valid. Secondly, because of the methodology it can be interpreted as journalistic and not valued as much as some of the quantitative research.

Overall narrative has the advantage of approximating the Australian Indigenous way of sharing knowledge. It is a bridge between the cultures, and therefore has the potential to enable researchers and Indigenous participants to achieve their goals.

## **Conclusion**

Australia has evolved from an Anglo Celtic Culture and has adopted many of that culture's values which have subsequently become established as the protocols for research today. However, due to the cultural differences between Anglo Celtic and Indigenous Australian peoples, this has proven created barriers for researchers collecting information from Indigenous people. Aboriginal societies have always had an oral history, transmitting knowledge from generation to generation through stories. The conversation that takes place during dialog between Indigenous people is unique. The values and beliefs about knowledge can conflict with those of non Indigenous researchers who commonly consider that the research process leads to their discovery of knowledge and therefore ownership of it by them. This conflict over intellectual property between non Indigenous researchers and Indigenous people has led to the development of ethical guidelines that now need to be followed when conducting research. The core values that underline research include respect and confidentiality as well as benefits, outcomes and agreement around the research between the two parties.

Narrative enquiry has been identified as one effective way of collecting information from Indigenous people. Based on story telling principles, it allows the participant to communicate information in a way that is conducive to cultural and historical methodology. Narrative enquiry is a powerful way of extracting information about sociological problems and gives the story teller ownership over the information provided. Whilst it has its weaknesses such as ambiguity, information being interpreted in multiple ways or inconclusive insofar as it gives the participant an opportunity to tell their story its merits out way them. It has the potential to be empowering to the participant. However it should be emphasized that a strong rapport between the researcher and the participants is critical for this kind of research to take place. The development of rapport should also facilitate the overcoming of any barriers experienced by the researcher.

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