Using a Qualitative Approach to Research to Build Trust Between a Non-Aboriginal Researcher and Aboriginal Participants (Australia)

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the qualitative methodologies employed in a research project developed in collaboration with Aboriginal advisors and gaining an in-depth understanding of Aboriginal Victorian peoples’ connection to their ancestral lands. It outlines why qualitative methodologies were used and highlights the ethical dimensions of working with Aboriginal Victorian communities. A research partnership was developed between Aboriginal Victorian communities and the non-Aboriginal researcher and this process was emphasised because in the past Australian Indigenous people have been grossly exploited in health research. The methods of semi-structured interviews and focus groups were used to gain a better understanding of this topic. The novel point of this article is that it provides an honest reflection of the benefits and limitations of this qualitative research process from the perspectives of a non-Aboriginal researcher and an Aboriginal participant, when emphasis is placed on a collaborative approach. The paper outlines what a successful qualitative research project looks like in Victorian Aboriginal communities. This can be used as a blueprint not only for working with Aboriginal Victorian communities, who have been marginalised within Australian society, but may also be relevant to other culturally diverse communities throughout the world.

Keywords: Aboriginal Victorian people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ethical guidelines, semi-structured interviews, focus groups.

The Healthy Country, Healthy People project was started in 2005 during a Masters project at The University of Melbourne to better understand the connection between Country and Victorian Aboriginal peoples’ health. The research was necessary as the life expectancy of Victorian Aboriginal people is 17 years less than the non-Aboriginal population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006; Oxfam, 2007). The relationship Aboriginal people have with their land, creatures and plants, is central to health, emotional and social wellbeing (Burgess & Morrison, 2007; Garnett & Sithole, 2007). Therefore the link between Aboriginal people and the land was seen to be a vital component in reducing health inequalities.

After the Masters project was complete the research evolved further. A DVD documentary was developed to communicate the importance of the research, as an educational tool funded...
by Parks Victoria (a Victorian State Government Department). In this documentary, Aboriginal land management employees from around Victoria were interviewed to provide their perspective of the land, its history and their connection to it. A partnership was built between the research and some participants which involved co-presenting and co-authoring conference presentations (Kingsley, 2006; Kingsley & Phillips, 2007; Kingsley & Phillips; 2008) and peer review publications (Kingsley, 2008; Kingsley et al., 2008; Kingsley et al., 2009a; Kingsley et al., 2009b). This article explains the ethical guidelines and methodological considerations that were integral parts of the Master’s research project. The article goes on to explain how these guidelines affect both the researcher and participant in different ways through a personal reflection section.

**METHODOLOGICAL BACKGROUND**

Unless data can be turned into stories that can be understood by all, they are not effective in any process of change, either political or administrative. (Duhl & Hancock, 1988, p. 23)

For this project, qualitative methodology was used to collect data because it offered a greater insight into an individual’s understanding, meaning and experiences, and thus provided for the building of a story around the studied topic (Berglund, 2001; Ward & Holman, 2001). Qualitative research provides a platform for ‘discovering novel or unanticipated findings’ (Bryman, 1984, pp. 77–78). Such findings allow for ‘information rich cases’ to gain a better understanding of the research area (Rice & Ezzy, 1999).

While it must be noted that in research it is difficult to disconnect from an individual’s experience, ‘theoretical framework[s] used in any study become lenses through which a researcher sees that world that s/he is studying’ (Hester, 2003, p. 6). The project explored the structures of consciousness in human experience and shows how individuals make sense of the world around them. In this case such perceptions refer to people who have traditional knowledge and a strong relationship with the Australian landscape. Therefore the researcher has adapted a phenomenological perspective (Creswell, 1998), which refers to research that focuses on human experiences, consciousness, and the meaning of how humans view the world. The researcher aimed to understand concepts from an Aboriginal perspective through constant communication and consultation with individual Aboriginal Victorians. Therefore, an epistemological position was taken for this research that involved the interpretation and examination of data through the Aboriginal informants’ eyes of the world (Bryman, 2004).

The method of triangulation, involving a number of qualitative methods (semi-structured interviews and focus groups) and consultative initiatives (establishment of a reference committee) was developed and employed in this research so the findings could be double checked, and for the Aboriginal participants to have increased involvement (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Studies, 2000; Bryman, 2004). Trust is essential to the success and ethical outcomes of research in Aboriginal communities (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2003). These multiple qualitative methods, including consultation, allowed for a stronger relationship to be built between the participants and researcher. Henry et al., (2004, p. 11) highlighted that methodologies should be selected ‘that have the potential that research with Aboriginal people can be more respectful, ethical, sympathetic and useful’. Although it also has been shown that Aboriginal people prefer qualitative methods such as ethnography, oral history/narratives and collaborative inquiry (Henry et al., 2004), there is
a danger of invalid results due to inaccurate assumptions and interpretation of data from a non-Aboriginal viewpoint.

**ETHICAL ISSUES**

It is essential that Indigenous people be participants in any research projects that concerns them, sharing an understanding of the aims and methods of the research, and sharing the results of this work—founded on respect for Indigenous peoples’ inherent right to self-determination, and to control and maintain their culture and heritage. (AIATSIS, 2000, p. 2)

Research where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people participate involves guidelines to ensure that ethical frameworks are achieved between the researcher and Aboriginal peoples (AIATSIS, 2000; Henderson et al., 2002). McAulay, Griew and Anderson (2002, p. 9) noted that these ‘guidelines tend to cover… consultation, community involvement, cultural appropriateness… data and information ownership… collaboration, consent, involvement and feedback’. These guidelines have been enforced (in this research project by an Aboriginal reference group and The University of Melbourne’s Ethics Committee) because of the ‘negative experiences’ Aboriginal Australian communities have generally had towards research with a lack of community control, benefits and influence on the interpretation of data (Henderson et al., 2002; Henry et al., 2004). This inadequacy has led to the ‘gross exploitation of Indigenous peoples being involved in an invasive and disrespectful “experimentation”, the theft of beliefs and knowledge, and the portrayal of their societies and cultures in a way that merely reflects the values, prejudice and preoccupation of the vague entity that has come to be known as “the West”’ (Humphery, 2000, p. 5). Thus this research, although undertaken and reported by a non-Aboriginal person, aimed to reduce bias by maintaining neutrality. This was done when the researcher first sought approval from the selected Elders and Traditional Custodians (who were identified as key members within their community during the initial design phase and consultation of this project) through the establishment of a Reference Group. Personal contact also increased the validity of this project and developed an ongoing partnership, relationship and feedback with these communities. This position has been acknowledged because:

Clearly, there have been shifts in the way non-Indigenous researchers and academics have positioned themselves and their work in relation to the people for whom the research still counts. It is also clear, however, that there are powerful groups of researchers who resent Indigenous people asking questions about their research and whose research paradigm consistently permit them to exploit Indigenous people and their knowledge. (Tuhiriwai Smith, 1999, p. 17 cited in Henry et al., 2004)

To ensure this did not occur, the researcher attempted to involve the local Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal policy makers, park rangers, academics and workers from related fields in the three selected Traditional Custodian groups (the Yorta Yorta Nation, the Bangerang clan, and the Boonwurrung clan) and research fields from the start of the project so that information was jointly understood and trust could be established (Henderson et al., 2002). This is not just an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander phenomenon; literature has identified that the most disadvantaged communities around the world need to be involved in the co-production of research affecting them and, if left out, could experience a potential lethal hazard (Corburn, 2007). The researcher tried to uphold and enforce all basic guidelines in completing the project which involved: negotiation/agreement, mutual understanding,
respect, recognition, involvement, shared ownership, orientation towards community action, reciprocality, skills development and methodological flexibility (AIATSIS, 2000; NHMRC, 2003; Henry et al., 2004; Humphery, 2004). However, the three most important ingredients the researcher maintained were to keep giving participants feedback, allowing Aboriginal people the opportunity to assist in the work, such as co-authoring academic journal articles with an Aboriginal staff member from Parks Victoria, and developing a Reference Committee, to ensure that all contributors and Traditional Custodians were acknowledged appropriately (McAullay, Grew, & Anderson, 2002). This also involved the researcher accepting and recognising that there may be cultural differences between him and the Aboriginal participants, and between the Aboriginal participants from the different groups, which would in turn impact on the research. As the National Health and Medical Research Council (2003, p. 3) observes, ‘failing to understand differences in values and culture is a reckless act that jeopardises ethics and quality of research’. However, the researcher recognised that the success of the project was more dependent on the relationship he formed with the relevant Aboriginal participants than on adhering to any particular set of guidelines: ‘The responsibility for maintaining trust and ethical standards cannot depend solely on rules and regulations. Trustworthiness… is the product of engagement between people’ (NHMRC, 2003, p. 4).

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY USED IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The first phase of the research project involved a semi-structured interview schedule being designed and used to guide the collection of data in interviews. Semi-structured interviews involved talking with key informants and asking open-ended questions in conversation with minor divergence to elicit descriptive responses thick in qualitative data that would assist in answering some of the research questions (Creswell, 1998; Minichiello et al., 1999). The interview schedule was developed in response to the literature search and research aims in order to obtain the appropriate information (Mason, 1996; Bryman, 2004; Minichiello et al. 2004). Ten ‘essential’ and one ‘extra’/ ‘throw away’ question were developed with ‘probing’ used throughout the interview process. Minichiello et al. (1999) noted that such questions could be classified as either ‘essential’, ‘extra’, ‘throw away’ or ‘probing’. The purpose of the ‘throw away’ questions was to build rapport and consolidate responses as well as provide a ‘cool off’ stage in the interview (Minichiello et al., 1999, p. 402). The draft interview guide was then tested initially on a non-Aboriginal and then Aboriginal colleague and subsequently modified for the occasion. The major themes addressed in the interview guide were:

- Identify health and wellbeing benefits associated with contact with ‘Country’ and land management projects that involve caring for ‘Country’ for Aboriginal people;
- Factors (cultural, political and social) that would need to be taken into consideration when focusing on developing Aboriginal land management projects;
- Strategies allowing land management projects to be established in Aboriginal communities;
- Aspiration of the specific group in association to caring for ‘Country’.
Probing questions were used throughout the interviews to develop the discussion. The interviews were not constrained by the interview guide, rather the researcher tried to allow the informants to lead the way, and flexibility in questions was used to explore other issues. The time length of the interviews varied from one to four hours.

The focus group method is a qualitative tool that delves into ‘perceptions, interpretation, and beliefs of a selected population (in this case the Aboriginal policy makers and government employees) to gain an understanding of a particular issue from the perspective of a group of participants’ (Khan & Manderson, 1992 cited in Rice & Ezzy, 1999). The focus group involved the same processes as the interviews with a schedule/guide of questions developed. However, the difference was that the focus group discussion did not allow for flexibility to move onto other topics because of the time restrictions and the need to keep the group focused. Also not all questions could be answered because of the time constraints but the key questions within the ten ‘essential’ questions were all covered. The focus group lasted two and a half hours.

Data was transcribed verbatim promptly after the interviews and focus group meeting. All informants were sent a copy of their transcript with a request to make any amendments or delete any sections. It was agreed that the researcher would make available the Masters thesis to all participants as well as placing reserve copies in The University of Melbourne library, the Koorie Heritage Trust and providing copies to government and the not-for-profit groups who were involved in the project and requested it.

In order to ensure the subjects’ anonymity and privacy, all identifying information was removed. These ethical issues are even more compounding because of the issues surrounding intellectual authorship rights. Therefore, throughout this project, the researcher ensured (through the Reference Group) that all information was accurate and allowed to be used.

DATA ANALYSIS

Immediately after the interviews and focus group were conducted, a summary form was completed by the researcher. This included practical details (for example the geographical location, body language, tone of voice and facial expressions), emerging themes and details about the content of the conversation that assisted in the analysis of the data (Dawson, 2002). Thematic analysis was used to identify themes that stood alone in the data (Browne, 2004). Content analysis was also used which focused on the contextual meaning of the data and text (Flick, 2002).

Once the researcher had completed the transcripts, mind maps were drawn to gather the major themes from the interviews and focus group meeting on large pieces of paper. Mind maps are visual displays of the themes and similarities within the data set (Ryan & Barnard, 2000). The researcher read the transcripts a number of times to immerse himself in the data and drew out common themes and perceptions expressed by the participants to ensure replication, reliability and validity could be upheld (Bryman, 2004; Strauss & Corbin, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In this case, both open coding and axial coding were applied to improve the quality of the study. These terms refer to categorising topics into properties (Creswell, 1998). Open coding involved thinking about words, sentences, paragraphs and all the details of interviews and trying to interpret the answers to the topic (Minichiello et al., 1999). Axial coding ‘assembles the data in new ways after open coding’ (Creswell, 1998, p. 57).
A code page was developed and interviews were coded accordingly, with each code being given a description. The coding was done to categorise the different themes emerging from the data. Coding was achieved using different coloured highlighters to identify recurring themes within the interviews. These themes were then broken down into sub-themes whereby codes were placed on the side of the written text. This involved ‘synthesizing’ the data by ‘merging several stories, experiences… to describe the typical patterns or behaviors or responses of the group… becoming aware of certain points of juncture, or critical factors, as significant and then [being] able to explain variation in the data’ (Morse, 1994, p. 30–31). The coding was then double checked by one of the lead researchers’ family members and by a qualified colleague of the researcher who undertook a quality control test to confirm the codes were accurate using the test called the Confusion Matrix (Robson, 1993).

LIMITATIONS

There are a number of limitations which may have affected the quality of this study. Firstly, the limited skills of the researcher in working with Aboriginal Victorian people may have led to gaps in knowledge. Being a non-Aboriginal researcher may have led to some bias in the interpretation of findings through not clearly understanding culturally appropriate methods. Ideally, there is a need for people who are ‘non-Indigenous researchers to be supervised to ensure their actions are culturally appropriate’ (Henderson et al., 2002, p. 5). However, such supervision was only available to a limited extent as the formal supervisors were non-Aboriginal themselves. In addition, with constraints in both time and resources in the Masters program, not all key informants could be interviewed and reliability checks followed up with face-to-face interviews could not be done in all circumstances.

A BRIEF RETROSPECT FROM THE RESEARCHER: THE AUTHOR’S PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF COMPLETING THIS RESEARCH

As a non-Aboriginal researcher this study was at times hard to undertake and involved me developing and improving my qualitative research skills. It took time to gain confidence in my ability to attain understanding in this area. This was due to my only previous experience of working in Indigenous health being with Aboriginal groups in north-western Australia for six months prior to commencing the study. This steep learning curve highlighted my restricted knowledge of Aboriginal communities in Victoria. My supervisors helped me through these challenges; however, since both were non-Aboriginal, I found I often had to look outside of my research team for answers to cultural questions. This proved to be a positive opportunity for me as a researcher and person to learn more about the Traditional Custodians in my home state and to build long lasting relationships.

As a researcher I had carefully planned my project to obtain as much relevant data as possible and to ensure the ethical guidelines were appropriately met. At times, I felt a great degree of personal limitation while dealing with some cultural differences that impeded research which I overcame through working hard to improve my cultural knowledge of Victorian Indigenous communities. An issue confronted and overcame was a lack of trust of my work by Aboriginal people and Aboriginal politics, where certain individuals would not participate in the research. My personal position was to be highly inclusive, by including as many Aboriginal peoples’ perspectives as possible on this topic. In the long run this approach
was respected by my participants who trusted me and I reaped many personal benefits by increasing my knowledge in this field.

Some of the cultural differences were compounded by the limited timeframe of the Masters project that did not allow, at times, for proper relationships to be established. With only fifteen months to complete data collection and write the thesis, there was little time left to build the clear trust and reciprocity required to go beyond research data/narratives in ways that could assist Aboriginal Victorian communities and to actually develop a sustainable project that could adequately reduce inequalities. Although there were a number of personal barriers, I felt that this research became a positive journey for me. I have learnt so much more about the local traditional cultures of the country I have grown up in. This in turn has also enabled the building of many strong friendships with Aboriginal individuals whilst improving my research skills.

A BRIEF RETROSPECT FROM A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

As one of the early participants of Jonathan’s (‘Yotti’’s) research, I guess I was intrigued, partly doubtful of his success and a bit guarded. After hearing Yotti’s story and realising his interests were well intended, I felt personally obliged to give him guidance and warning as to what he was walking into. The groups he had selected to interview for his research had been surrounded by a lot of Aboriginal politics I felt I should make him aware of. I stepped back and found to my surprise that he still proceeded to carry on with the research. After the first couple of meetings I realised there was a commitment in trying to understand Victorian Aboriginal peoples and it was genuine with no prior judgment. As time went on, Yotti became increasingly aware of Aboriginal perspectives and protocols. His patience, flexibility and transparency became a comfort and it became possible to share knowledge with him, especially as he reassured us that it was going to be kept confidential and that he would get our approval for anything he writes about us. This was something of a turning point to building trust and working together. When a non-Aboriginal person puts so much time into understanding your culture and sets out to educate others on the impacts of colonisation, you develop a healthy respect for their efforts in trying to right some of the wrongs done in the past. The dedication and drive Yotti has shown towards the challenges facing him has proven to be one of the keystones in the success of his research. In addition to that, he has made sure that this information is held in partnership and remains within our communities too. It has been an amazing learning journey for me too and an inspiration to know what can be achieved with the right kind of approach. Five years ago I never would have thought that there would be a hardcover book in libraries, or co-authored articles in national and international journals and especially not a DVD promoting Healthy Country, Healthy People. One thing I have learnt is that to do something that is culturally sensitive and respectful, you must have the right people to do it, with the right approach. As we used to say, Yotti will guide academia, I’ll guide the cultural protocols, and we make a ‘deadly’ team.

CONCLUSION

The Healthy Country, Healthy People Masters project was a journey not only for the researcher but also for the participants involved in the project. Ethical guidelines ensured that this was the case and that the community and researcher reciprocally benefited during the Masters research period. This is not to say there were not plenty of limitations that the re-
researcher and participants encountered during this period. The non-Aboriginal researcher felt at times out of his depth with not being able to build trust in the short period of time, while dealing with highly complex political issues. The participants were at points rightly sceptical of the non-Aboriginal researcher’s intentions, due to past negative experiences. But looking back to 2005 and thinking about what has been achieved since this time, it is quite amazing. There is growing interest in this research field and until this public health research was undertaken, there was nothing like this project occurring in Victoria, compared to other places in Australia. This would not have happened without trust being built between the researcher and participants of this study.

The Healthy Country, Healthy People project should be used as a model for other researchers to develop qualitative research projects in this field. Emphasis should be placed on local Aboriginal researchers working with their communities to show how their Country improves the health and wellbeing of the community. Such projects would lead to a better understanding of what Aboriginal communities want out of projects on their traditional land and should improve the trust between the researcher and the researched. Non-Aboriginal researchers can use this article as an introductory reading to improve their understanding of the complexity of such a study and as a guide throughout their studies.

What made this project unique was that it placed emphasis on community control and working in partnerships where strong relationships are built. Still today, research projects struggle to meet these simple requirements and there are a lot of ethical problems with data being collected appropriately to meet the needs of Aboriginal Victorian communities when non-Indigenous people undertake research. This article can provide a blueprint for improving qualitative research that involves Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities throughout Australia and other disadvantaged communities throughout the world. This paper highlights the need, timeliness and opportunity for deeper thinking and greater clarity in a highly complex area of qualitative research, where greater inroads are needed to reduce health inequalities and to truly ‘Close the Gap’.

NOTES
1 Throughout this paper, Aboriginal Victorian people or Aboriginal person refers to a member or descendent of the Aboriginal race, who identifies as an Aboriginal person and is accepted by the Aboriginal community as an Aboriginal person in the region of Victoria (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2007).
2 Encapsulated ancestral lands described as clan estates and group gathering places during pre-colonisation. After colonisation this evolved to included missions where Aboriginal ‘people’s families were impounded for generations’ and removed from their traditional lands like Cammeragunja (Broome, 2005). Urban spaces have also evolved into the identity and ‘Country’ of Aboriginal people; examples include Fitzroy in Melbourne and Redfern in Sydney.
3 ‘a person(s) or group who by right of tradition have inherited a custodial role of caring for Country though bloodline connections’ (Kingsley et al., 2009). It refers to stewardship or custodial roles, which have become relevant and politically motivated after Native Title legislation was enforced in Australia.

REFERENCES


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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Since 2004, Jonathan ‘Yotti’ Kingsley has worked in many remote Aboriginal health organisations in Australia. In 2007, he completed a Masters degree focused on the health benefits of traditional land to Indigenous Victorians. Afterwards he worked in the Department of Human Services advising on ways to improve Indigenous people’s health and then the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation. Jonathan sees our natural environment as central to health and as having the capacity to bridge health inequalities (the basis of his PhD currently underway at Deakin University and Visiting Academic position at Cambridge University). He has published numerous articles on public, ecological and Aboriginal health, won environmental awards and sits on multiple steering committees related to Indigenous and environmental health.

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