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# **‘With’ not ‘About’ – New paradigms in research methodologies focused on Remote Indigenous Teacher Education.**

***By Lisa Hall***

## ***Abstract***

*This paper will examine questions and considerations regarding methodology. As a non-Indigenous researcher working within an Indigenous domain it is important to recognize the historical legacy left by researchers of the past as well as a new generation of Indigenous researchers who are speaking back to the Academy about an indigenous research paradigm. This paper will seek to locate an appropriate methodological approach for my research within this discourse. It will explore questions such as:*

- *What are the post-colonial legacies of research for indigenous peoples?*
- *How has the emergence of a generation of indigenous researchers impacted on the choices being made around research and in particular research methodologies?*
- *What other types of methodologies are being proposed and used in this new paradigm?*
- *What is the most appropriate type of methodology for research focused on the successful learning journeys of indigenous teachers?*

## **Prologue**

This focus on research methodologies sits within the broader work of a PhD project about improving pathways into Teacher Education for Indigenous people living in remote communities. It has grown out of relationship and partnership between the researcher and a group of indigenous teachers who have been successful in their quest to become fully trained Teachers. Their stories hold much value, both as testaments to the teachers themselves and their determination, commitment and dedication, but also as signposts to the ‘systems’ they work in – the university system that trained them and the school system they were trained to work in. What can we learn from these stories about the elements that support and those that hinder success when remote indigenous people embark on the journey to become a teacher? And how does one go about asking for, listening to, documenting and sharing these stories in a way that respectfully honours their journey? These are the questions this paper seeks to answer.

## Introduction

No researcher can plan to do research involving indigenous communities without first examining the post colonial research reality that has been brought about by a history of research that has damaged, disempowered and silenced indigenous peoples. It is especially important for non-indigenous researchers to acknowledge the role that their cultural ancestors have played in this and to make a firm commitment that they will not make the same mistakes. Fortunately we are now living in an era where many indigenous researchers are speaking back to the Academy and not only naming the impact of the damage that has been done but also claiming their right to rethink the underpinnings of the research process through the indigenous lens. This is leading to an exciting new research paradigm that has at its heart indigenous ways of knowing, indigenous worldview, indigenous values and ethics and indigenous methodologies.

### The post-colonial research reality

*'Researchers are like mosquitoes, they suck your blood then leave'*

Alaskan Native saying (in Cochran 2008:1)

This Alaskan Native saying sums up how many indigenous people the world over feel about research. Linda Tuhawi Smith (1999) talks about research being a 'dirty word' for most indigenous communities. Respected Australian academic, Lowitja O'Donoghue summed the research experience of Australian Aboriginal people thus,

Until very recently....scientific research has been a very top down approach. For Aboriginal people, this has meant we have been amongst the most studied and researched group in the world....few if any tangible benefits have flowed to our people, as the research papers and the academic accolades have stacked up. Researchers have, by and large, defined the problems and sought solutions that they have seen as the correct, 'scientific' way to go. (Lowitja O'Donoghue, 1998, in Henry 2011a:12)

Research has, in the past been something that has been done 'to' Aboriginal people rather than with them. It has set Aboriginal people up as the 'Other' to be studied rather than people who have agency over their own lives, it has done enormous damage in terms of stigmatising

Aboriginal people and reinforcing negative labels and beliefs, and perhaps worst of all, it has produced very few benefits to the indigenous communities themselves, with the majority of the benefits going to the non-indigenous researchers and the institutions they work for.

Euro-Western researchers seemed to approach research in one of two ways. Often they would approach indigenous communities as knowledge treasure chests to be looted, mining the local people of their knowledge and then claiming the prize of discovery, a practice which Chilisa and Preece (2005) say was 'a violent way of dismissing the indigenous people's knowledge as irrelevant and a way of disconnecting them from what they knew and how they knew it'. Rigney (1999) also comments on the damage done to indigenous people through research when their voices were silenced and their ways of knowing under-valued, ignored and shut out.

Alternatively, Euro-Western researchers have historically looked upon the lives, practices and traditions of indigenous people as problems to be solved (Cochran 2008) with an emphasis on 'illness rather than health' (Wilson, 2009:17). Wilson points out that this counter productive focus has come about because traditionally researchers come from outside the community to 'study' the indigenous 'problems' and then impose 'outside solutions' rather than appreciating and expanding upon the resources available within indigenous communities (Wilson 2009:16). This has resulted in the proliferation of negative stereotypes about indigenous communities (Wilson 2009) and the stigmatization that can occur when these problems and negative stereotypes are the focus of published research findings (Cochran, 2008).

This negative focus also points to a lack of commitment to relationships, which is fundamentally important to Indigenous people. Wilson notes that in the past in most cases research undertaken was not at the request of the community, but rather based on a decision made by the individual researcher or the institution he or she worked for. Research therefore was perceived by the communities as disconnected and lacking any relevance to them, and they felt excluded from any kind of agency over the research process. There was no expectation or commitment on the part of the researcher to build relationship and trust with the community and no engagement in the issues the community itself would identify, or indeed the resources available from within the community to create solutions for those issues. At a more benign end of the spectrum Wilson talks about this affecting peoples attitude towards research saying 'People are accustomed to

seeing researchers come into their communities, do whatever it is they do and leave, never to be heard from again' (2009:15). At a more sinister level Cochran (2008:2) gives examples where the trust of communities is completely violated when informed consent is not taken seriously and people believe they are participating in research for one purpose only to discover the data is being used for an entirely different set of findings. Such appalling research behaviour has led to research findings that cannot be considered valid and reliable, but that have still had traction amongst policy and decision making bodies. Is it any wonder Indigenous people regard research with suspicion and contempt.

Perhaps the most glaring condemnation of the research of the past is that 'so much has been done for so little improvement' (Cochran 2008:1). Gorman similarly states that 'Despite decades of research there has been little or no improvement' and identifies one of the reasons for this, 'Part of the problem that has been identified is the ineffectiveness of research based on non-indigenous cultural values' (Gorman 2009:4). Smith says that for the Maori people 'research was talked about both in terms of its absolute worthlessness to us, the indigenous world, and its absolute usefulness to those who wielded it as an instrument' (1999:3). Finally Wilson makes a comment about the never ending research 'inquiries' that indigenous communities are bombarded with noting that the 'thing that all of these inquiries hold in common is that without fail, the conditions and issues that are being studied get worse, rather than improving, after the research has been done' (2009, p 20).

Researchers can no longer ignore this 'colonial legacy' of research (Gorman 2009, Cochran 2008). The power dynamic that has played out through the medium of research has led to a situation where Indigenous people and communities inherently distrust research and researchers. The long term implications of such power imbalance, negative stereotyping, and lack of ethics comes at the policy and program end of the knowledge cycle. Kovach rightly points out that policy and programming grow out of research, and 'while the influence of research and its methodologies is not always visible in the policy cycle, research is where it starts' (Kovach 2009 p. 13). Smith reinforces this point suggesting that the 'greater danger' of research for indigenous people were the 'creeping policies' that intruded into the lives of people and communities, policies that were 'legitimated by research' but more often than not 'informed by ideology' (Smith, 1999:3).

## **The emerging Indigenous research paradigm**

One of the key reasons that we have such a clear and undeniable condemnation of the way research with indigenous people has been done in the past is because of the relatively recent emergence of a number of indigenous writers and researchers who are speaking back to the Academy about the exclusion of their voices and knowledge systems in research. Through them we are reminded of two key things. Firstly, that there is more than one way of knowing something and therefore more than one way of researching something, and the research design must reflect the worldview of those being researched. Secondly, that how you do the research is just as important as the outcomes of the research which means that if research is conducted with indigenous people and the design ignores indigenous ways of knowing and appropriate ethical development then it can't be considered rigorous, and the results will be questionable in terms of their efficacy (Cochran 2008:2). If we believe that choosing an appropriate research methodology is based on the skill of matching the problem with an 'appropriate' set of investigative strategies' and that it is 'concerned with ensuring that information is accessed in such a way as to guarantee validity and reliability' (Smith 1999:173), then in order to be valid, reliable and rigorous in research with indigenous people the research design must be based on indigenous knowledge systems. Of course the medium to long term benefit of this is that indigenous research frameworks have the potential to improve relevance in policy and practice within indigenous contexts (Kovach 2009:13).

While there is a unified view amongst indigenous scholars about the need for indigenization of research design, there is a considerable diversity in terms of how this should happen. Ideas about creating indigenous research methodologies seem to fall on a continuum of sorts that ranges from disrupting or interrogating existing methodologies, through to the integration of indigenous knowledge into existing research paradigms, then on the other side creating new research paradigms that are fully indigenous and that stand as an alternative to traditional Euro-Western research methodologies, and possibly the eventual construction of a body of indigenous research methodologies that can replace old methodologies and offer something unique and new to the world of research.

### **A more positive and holistic approach to research**

There are numerous voices worldwide articulating the positive effects of 'maintaining, transmitting and clarifying an indigenous way of doing, and being in the research process' (Wilson 2009:19). Not only does it give voice to a people that have been voiceless in research for so long, but it provides a way of celebrating and strengthening the uniqueness of indigenous culture and knowledge systems. By creating a new paradigm that uses indigenous knowledge to build research at the ontological, epistemological, axiological and methodological levels, a more holistic approach to research is formed, one that sees the bigger picture and making links between previously separate disciplines (Henry et al 2002: 13). It moves the research process away from western rational, binary thinking to instead find the connections between things. How does it do this?

A research paradigm that is founded upon indigenous knowledge systems the core purpose of the research is relational and the research itself must be considered 'ceremony' (Wilson 2009:11). The knowledge lies in the relationships, not in the separate parts (Pawu Kurlpurlurnu 2008:15). DeCrespigny (2004) also concurs with this notion of relationality, as does Chilisa (2011:108-122) reminding us that it is not just about relationships between researcher and community, but more importantly about understanding the relational ontology and axiology of indigenous peoples. In this paradigm the researchers relationship to knowledge itself is and must be different. According to Moreton-Robinson & Walter (2009:6) Indigenous ways of knowing explicitly recognise that one cannot know everything, that everything cannot be known and that there are knowledges beyond human understanding. Additionally they maintain that 'knowledge cannot be discovered or owned; it can only be revealed and shared. In research the Indigenous person is always the observer and Indigenous worldviews and perspectives are explicitly positioned as the lens through which the research seeks to reveal knowledge' (Moreton-Robinson & Walter 2009:12). As Chilisa (2011:99) points out this indigenous perspective of research being about 'unveiling knowledge' may pose some challenges for an Academy that has previously be focused on the 'discovery' of 'new' knowledge.

## **The ethics of an Indigenous Research Paradigm**

With a sense of the impact research has had on indigenous people in the past due to the colonial history and the knowledge that indigenous academics are speaking back to the Academy with strong voices for indigenous knowledge systems to form the rock bed of the research with indigenous people, attention must now be paid to the question of how this can happen in practice.

Many Indigenous academics are conscious of the risks (Kovach 2009:13) involved in the bringing the Indigenous knowledge traditions into the world of the Academy and have responded with principles and ethical rules that serve as a guide to researchers. These principles and rules are grounded firmly and guided by indigenous ontology itself, because how that is lived out informs life for Indigenous people.

Moreton-Robinson & Walter underline the important principles of respect, reciprocity and obligation (2009:6), while Smith (1999, p120) recommends that when working with Indigenous people one should,

- Show a respect for people
- Present yourself to people face to face
- Look, listen....speak
- Share and host people, be generous
- Be cautious
- not flaunt your knowledge

Similar sets of ethical principles can be readily found. For example Henry et al (2011a:9-13) give a detailed overview of the attempts made in the field of Health research in Australia between 1983 and 1999 to define some new principles and protocols for doing research with indigenous people. Cochran (2008:4) also gives an Australian example of guidelines for research. Gorman (2009:11) identifies the following as some of the ethics and values that need to underlie research with indigenous peoples,

- mutual respect
- confidentiality
- clarification of who benefits and how
- identification of outcomes, and



- agreements between two parties about the how the research will be conducted and disseminated

Accountability to the respective communities is also a key principle, as is a foundational belief in the relationship and connectedness of knowledge (Moreton-Robinson & Walter 2009:7).

### **Possible research methodologies**

While it is clear that the choice and development of a methodology is only one part of research design and that it was not the starting point for a researcher's consideration, it is also clear that there are certain methodologies, particularly qualitative methodologies, that stand out as being largely compatible with indigenous sensibilities and traditional practices. One of these is narrative or story telling.

### **Story as method**

The central role of storytelling as a means of knowledge transmission is at the heart of indigenous knowledge systems (Wilson 2001 & 2008, Kovach 2009, Chilisa 2011, Kahakalau 2004, Kawagley 1995 & 1999, Barnhardt C. 2001, Barnhardt R. 2001, Basso K 1996, Hughes et al 2004, Partington 1998). Stories and metaphors were the original teaching tool used by indigenous societies. Wilson (2009:17) point out that 'stories allow listeners to draw their own conclusions and to gain life lessons from a more personal perspective. By getting away from abstractions and rules, stories allow us to see others life experiences through our own eyes. This information may then be internalised in a way that is difficult for abstract discussions to achieve.'

Not only is story or narrative widely used with indigenous people, but it is increasingly being recognised as an important research methodological strategy within the social sciences and health fields of research (Gorman 2009, Pepper 2009, Lai 2010, Mattos 2009, Hamilton et al 2008). In more western research paradigms it is seen that the use of narratives, which are also called vignettes or creative non-fiction, as a methodology permits life-like accounts of individual experience and offer an opportunity to value the experience of others (Gorman 2009, Pepper 2009). There are many advantages to using narrative and story telling as a methodology. For example it can create a power shift in research where the participant is able to direct the course of the research and retain ownership over it (Gorman 2009:10). Allowing people time and space to tell their own story in their own way has also been shown to contribute to peoples' wellbeing

(Pepper 2009:1). Story also frees the participant up to choose the language of telling, and Chilisa (2011:153) points out that the language the story is told in is one of the key components of research with indigenous people. All of these elements make story or narrative, a rich and in depth method of research, but story offers opportunities not just for data collection but also as a method of information dissemination (Chilisa 2011:149). Given its appeal across both indigenous and western research paradigms, this may be an appropriate methodology for a non-Indigenous researcher to use when working with indigenous people and communities.

### **Conclusions and next steps**

The research design process is a complicated one due to the impact the colonial paradigm has had and continues to have on indigenous peoples. Research has been and continues to be a key vehicle for the continuation of oppression and repression. This research must not be part of that tradition. It must instead seek wherever possible to subvert the old paradigm with a view to supporting the creation of a new research paradigm that has at its centre the upholding of indigenous ways of knowing and benefitting indigenous people and communities as the key principles. While remaining honest about the implications and potential pitfalls of being a non-indigenous researcher working with indigenous people and communities, it is important to also remember the vast experience and knowledge that already exists, the relationships that have been built and the place from which this research idea has. It is also important to remember the growing body of knowledge and experience that exists in the indigenous research and social science fields, much of which has already considered these questions. That knowledge and wisdom is there to draw upon in the same way as indigenous knowledge is and can offer some useful ways forward in areas such as ethical considerations and methodological approaches that might be appropriate and useful.

While it is important to explore all of these questions as part of the design process, a key element is the involvement of the indigenous research participants and communities themselves in the design process. There is only so far that this can remain a solo journey, and at some point in the near future I need to seek out the relationships that started me on this path and flesh out the partnerships that will form the bed rock of this research process.

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