

APPLYING INDIGENIST RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES *in* HEALTH RESEARCH: EXPERIENCES *in the* BORDERLANDS

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■ Abstract

For Indigenous scholars in health sciences, finding “ways of doing” research that value Indigenist knowledge is an important consideration. Indigenist research methodology offers a useful alternative to mainstream research approaches that draw upon orthodox Western knowledge systems. However, as Indigenous research approaches have only recently entered the academic discourses of health science, few courses currently exist to support Indigenous students and their supervisors who work in this area. While negotiating Indigenist methodologies is challenging, more Indigenous scholars are recognising the importance of doing so. This paper will outline some of the issues experienced by two Indigenist research students coming to terms with the relevance of an Indigenist research approach to their study, as well of those of their supervisor, the third author of the paper.

■ Introduction

Choosing a methodology appropriate to the research question is a challenging journey for most students enrolled in higher degrees by research. This journey is even more demanding for Indigenous postgraduates aware of the need to undertake research in ways that are respectful of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous values and ways of knowing, while at the same time recognising the need to challenge the claims of Western orientated research and its methodologies. Unfortunately this means the student must first come to terms with the role that science – and we include research here – and Western traditions have played in the colonisation of Indigenous people (Smith, 2005). While Indigenous people may have embraced higher education as an opportunity to reclaim, protect and nurture Indigenous culture, Rigney (2001, 2006) warns us that this is done with some degree of reservation. The basis of his concern is the academy’s continued reliance on the Western knowledge paradigm. Recognition of the domination of Western ways of thinking is a conundrum for Indigenous researchers who see an urgent need to “decolonize and deconstruct those structures within the Western academy that privilege Western knowledge systems and their epistemologies” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 6).

Choosing the best research approach for use with Indigenous peoples is problematic within the health sciences where quantitative and positivist research practices and theories have been valued and espoused. The practices and theories embedded within these traditions uphold the assumptions of the Western knowledge paradigm. For example, it has been suggested that medical and public health research have contributed to the health disadvantage of Australian Indigenous people. Rather than focusing on improving health for all, the current systems for measuring research performance concentrate only on scientific quality (Houston & Legge, 1992; Smith, 2001). However, the “field of Indigenous health research has been transformed over the past two decades, especially in terms of how researchers are expected to act towards and co-operate with Indigenous communities and organisations” (Humphery, 2000, p. 3). In 1991

the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) released the ethical guidelines for Indigenous health research which include three important elements: consultation; community involvement; and ownership and publication of data. As a result, communities, which had previously been the subjects of outside research, were recognised as having a role in selecting the types of research that were relevant to their needs and started to take on a more active role in the implementation of the research process (Henry et al., 2002a; Mayo et al., 2009; NHMRC, 2002). Some Indigenous academics however believed the guidelines did little to overcome the ongoing colonial domination of Indigenous research. As a result, the Indigenous Health Research Reform Agenda was directed towards achieving deeper institutional change (Henry et al., 2002a). As part of that process, Indigenous academics have proposed the development and adoption of Indigenous research methodologies “to ensure Indigenous intellectual sovereignty within research projects involving Indigenous people and their interests and concerns” (Henry et al., 2002b, p. 3). As a result, we now have new and innovative Indigenous approaches to research that are better suited to the needs of Indigenous people.

Over the past decade in Australia, Indigenous research that has emerged from the tenets of critical and feminist theory (Rigney, 1997; Smith, 2005) resists positivist and postpositivist methodologies that validate colonising knowledge about Indigenous people. Rather, “Indigenists deploy, instead, interpretive strategies and skills fitted to the needs, language, and traditions of their respective indigenous community” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 11).

However, as Indigenous research approaches have only arrived in the health discourse within the last decade, the extent of uptake of these approaches and progress towards achieving methodological reform within mainstream higher education institutions is not clear (Henry et al., 2002b). This makes it difficult for Indigenous research students in health and other disciplines, as well as their supervisors, to develop the required knowledge and capacity to negotiate the Indigenous research labyrinth. It also means that we have not yet fully realised the experience for Indigenous students who adopt this approach for their research.

We offer this paper from three perspectives: an overview of the challenges and opportunities that have arisen from the experiences of two Aboriginal research students, and an outline of the challenges and opportunities for supervisors provided from the perspective of a non-Indigenous supervisor. Finally, some ideas will be highlighted that might help future students and supervisors considering taking this path.

■ Why Indigenist research and what is it?

To begin, it is important to establish the significance of adopting an Indigenist research approach for Indigenous researchers, including Indigenous research students, and for all research that involves Indigenous people. Rigney (2006) explains that methodological reform is necessary to strengthen ways of privileging Indigenous voices throughout the entire research process and to facilitate “the Indigenous scholar speaking back to research epistemologies that have contributed to the social construction of Indigenous Australians as oppressed” (p. 41). He defines Indigenist research as informed by three fundamental and interrelated principles: involvement in resistance as the emancipatory imperative; political integrity; and, giving privilege to Indigenous voices (Rigney, 2006).

We acknowledge that finding the right way to conduct research is challenging for most research students, but we argue this decision presents an even greater challenge to Indigenous research students. Although it may suit some Indigenous researchers to work within the dominant paradigm (Rigney, 1997), our experience has shown that the Indigenous student soon develops an awareness that most of the methods of research currently available to researchers, perpetuate assumptions about reality that are not in-keeping with the Indigenous student’s background or beliefs. This is the case because:

The research academy and its epistemologies have been constructed essentially for and by non-Indigenous Australians. Indigenous Australians have been excluded from all facets of research. The process of radicalisation declared that my peoples minds, intellect, knowledges, histories and experiences were [sic] irrelevant (Rigney, 1997, p. 114).

The claim for an epistemological ground is thus a powerful legitimising force intimately linked to Indigenous worldview. Knowledge systems and worldviews are shaped by our living conditions where we learn to accept the dominant view (Ladson-Billings, 2003). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have therefore been critical of research undertaken on, and in, their communities for some time (Humphery, 2001). They have long recognised the way research serves to perpetuate ongoing racism and colonialism, and fails to value Indigenous ways of knowing or recognise Indigenous worldviews. Smith (1999, p. 42) explains that Western research:

... brings to bear, on any study of Indigenous peoples, a cultural orientation, a set of values, a different conceptualization of such things as time, space, and subjectivity, different and competing

theories of knowledge, highly specialized forms of language, and structures of power.

Recognition of the domination of Western methods of research has led Indigenous scholars to be involved in the development and use of research epistemologies and designs that contribute to self-determination and liberation (Humphery, 2001; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2008; Rigney, 1997; Smith, 1999):

Indigenous Peoples must look to new anti-colonial epistemologies and methodologies to construct, re-discover and/or re-affirm their knowledges and cultures. Such epistemologies ... strengthen the struggle for emancipation and liberation from oppression (Rigney, 1997, p. 115).

However, to develop a worldview that differs from the dominant one is not easy; the dominant worldview claims not only another way to view the world, but purports their way as the only way to view the world (Ladson-Billings, 2003). Sadly, the dominant worldview in Australia "continues to re-shape knowledge construction of Indigenous peoples via colonial research ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies which is so fundamentally subtle and common sense" (Rigney, 1997, p. 114). It is not surprising then that Indigenist research originated from within the traditions of critical theory as critical theory is guided by a vision for a just world with the goal of liberating "individual groups and society from conditions of domination, powerlessness and oppression which reduce control over their own lives" (Rigney, 1997, p. 120). Critical researchers are painfully aware of the need for members of the community and research participants to take control of their futures and seek to undertake research in ways that foster emancipation, democracy and community empowerment while simultaneously seeking to redress power imbalances, in order to enable those who were previously marginalised to find their voice (Lincoln & Guba, 2003). Research undertaken in this way becomes an endeavour that is unashamedly *political* and closely aligned with the development of a critical consciousness. Rather than cling to the rail of neutrality, critical researchers openly admit their partisanship in the struggle for a better world (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003). Hence, Indigenist research is defined as:

... research by Indigenous Australians whose primary informants are Indigenous Australians and whose goals are to serve and inform the Indigenous liberation struggle to be free of oppression and to gain power (Rigney, 1997, p. 120).

At the heart of Indigenist research approaches is a critical awareness of the need to rediscover the ways knowledge is produced and how particular

knowledges are rendered legitimate and perceived as superior to others (Nakata, 2002).

An important factor linked to the subjugation of Indigenous knowledge, is the ongoing cultural attack on the identity of Indigenous people under the legacy of colonisation (Lavalley & Poole, 2009). This leads us to argue for the need to embrace Indigenous culture, worldviews and knowledge systems, and to conduct research which espouses a critical and liberating intent. Rigney (2001, p. 7) argues Indigenous people must ask themselves: "can we participate in Western science without reinventing the hegemonic colonial imagination about ourselves?" We also contend that Indigenous people have an obligation to conduct research in ways that respect the values and traditions of Indigenous people. Denzin and Lincoln (2008, p. 27) stated that "getting mad is no longer enough"; the time to act is now. It is possible to imagine "... an alternative and more natural context" that offers the potential to "...reduce the residue of colonialism; domination and oppression" (Lafrance & Bastien, 2007, p. 109).

As Indigenous scholars have established an academic argument for an Indigenist methodology, it has been stated that it will now be "harder to dismiss" (Rigney, 2009, pers. comm.) within the academy. However, we are warned that the road ahead may still be difficult (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2008) and resistance will have to be addressed. Regardless, future research endeavours by, and with, Indigenous people can now begin to reap the benefits of the approach and begin to focus on the "gifts" it can bring to academic outcomes and discourses; to fail to do so would be an injustice. However, as use of the Indigenist approach grows, it is also necessary to recognise that while new qualitative researchers who move away from the scientific or empirical approach go through a process of "unlearning" or letting go of bias and preconceived ideas, a different experience occurs for Indigenous researchers. For them, this experience can be described as a "decolonising" process (Smith, 1999), which requires the researcher address the trauma associated with colonisation while also recognising its role in the denigration of Indigenous identity (Kirmayer et al., 2007). We contend that this is indeed very much a reality and thus offer an overview of the experiences of two Aboriginal research students in this regard.

■ Issues that arise for Indigenous research students

As Australian Aboriginal women, Roianne and Vicki responded to the call to arms that Indigenist researchers espouse. Thus they both used Indigenist research methodologies which were adapted to suit the needs of their individual projects. It is not easy to learn a new methodology, especially one that espouses an innovative and necessarily critical approach. We recognise this requires a lot of background study

and preparation before data can be collected. Both students wanted to use a qualitative approach which necessitated first of all learning the philosophical underpinnings of the qualitative paradigm. But it may also be useful to remember, so aptly pointed out by Rigney (2001), that the early Indigenist scholars within the academy, such as Langton and Langford, had to first of all be mindful of classical Western epistemes in order that they were able to articulate the partial distortions and racial biases inherent within the philosophical reasoning of science. For Vicki and Roianne, this meant they not only needed to learn the extent of methodology required of any other research degree student, but also that they must learn the tenets of critical theory (from which Indigenist research emanates) and other qualitative approaches. Only after they had grasped this adequately, could they begin to understand and articulate the Indigenist research approach fully within their contexts. However, the academy has valued and advanced certain ways of knowing in preference to, and to the exclusion of, others while at times even actively devaluing some ways of knowing, such as Indigenous ways of knowing (Sonn et al., 2000). Making the decision to adopt an Indigenist approach is not easy especially when it counters the dominant view and ways of doing research. Roianne described this as: “the most difficult thing I have ever done” and said, “there were times when I just thought it would be easier to do a ‘normal’ Western methodology, but it wasn’t possible” (West et al., 2009). Vicki added, “Once you know something, you cannot unknow it. Once you recognise the ‘reality’ of the knowledge constructed about Indigenous peoples and the harm it causes, ‘doing’ research as you did before is no longer possible” (West et al., 2009). This reminds us of Nakata’s (1998, p. 4) assertion that in order to fully appreciate the situation for Indigenous people in an attempt to improve it, “... we must first immerse ourselves in and understand the very systems of thought, ideas and knowledge that have been instrumental in producing our position”. However, it is also important to realise that the tensions between the Western ways of knowing and doing research and the epistemologies of Australian Indigenous peoples, lead to what has been termed by Rigney as “the journey of academic contradiction”. This term acknowledges while the academy has a role in contributing to the oppression of Indigenous people, it also raises consciousness about that oppression:

Such a journey is traumatic and deculturalising for some of our Indigenous peoples. However, without such an intellectual journey our contemporary problems and their solutions remain neither knowable nor visible. The “journey of contradiction” in academe is problematic. However, we simply would not be in the current historical moment of Indigenous epistemic

revolution and scientific transformation without it (Rigney, 2001, p. 8).

For the supervisor, this means being prepared to work alongside the student as they grapple with the sophisticated knowledge of the discipline and its philosophical underpinnings. It also means assisting the student to come to terms with the “academic contradictions” that will inevitably arise. We also know that as “knowledge is always in process, developing, culturally specific and power-inscribed” (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 689), the needs of the student will change over time. As a result, the supervisor must remain aware that the students need change as they move through their work and as they uncover the underpinnings of various approaches. In addition, they must expect the students to have different experiences, backgrounds, understandings, worldviews and goals (Laycock et al., 2009), and recognise that these which must also be accounted for by the supervisor. As the student’s critical consciousness grows, the supervisor’s support will be even more important as the student struggles to overcome the inevitable awareness of the impact of colonialism on Indigenous people.

Choosing to implement an alternative or new methodology, such as an Indigenist research methodology, means there is little available to support the researcher. As a result, all development, adaptation and implementation becomes an individual process; a process which Sommerville (2007) calls emergence. This has been the case for qualitative research which has seen the emergence of a variety of alternative approaches in recent times (Lather, 1991; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Many new ways of doing research “... facilitate the emergence of alternative voices and new knowledges” (Somerville, 2007, p. 228) which set the scene for the inclusion of Indigenist approaches within the academy (Rigney, 2001). In the case of students implementing a relatively new research approach, this also means not only do they have the extra work associated with developing an innovative approach, but also take the risk of moving into the borderland spaces (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007) which requires they risk that examiners and others will appreciate their work.

For the student to succeed in this endeavour, the supervisor must be prepared to spend the necessary time to work alongside the student while they grapple the many complex issues. For example, Roianne has worked to develop a methodology that incorporates an Indigenist approach while offering the potential to offer new understandings around Indigenous nursing workforce issues. This was necessary as previous ways of researching the topic had all ended up confirming what had gone before. Roianne has therefore worked to develop a methodology that incorporates both an Indigenist and narrative approach. Vicki has used her creativity to draw, paint and write poetry as a means

of explanation which she then uses to bring about an articulation of the issues within the research project. This articulation is a way of translating her different ways of knowing and being in the world into a story line that helps to unravel a complex issue. However, developing these innovative approaches is extremely demanding and time consuming. It is not uncommon, from our experience, for the student to lose their motivation or, even at times, lose their way in the process. An attentive supervisor must be continually on the look out for this problem and when it occurs, seek collaborative ways forward. Developing new and innovative approaches to research also requires the supervisor become familiar with an entirely new body of work (Laycock et al., 2009) while learning to appreciate the importance of the approach to the individual; especially important when supervising Indigenous research students.

Undertaking research within the academy invariably requires the Indigenous student to confront many difficult issues such as colonialism, discrimination, racism, and the domination of the Western model of knowledge, all of which has the potential to cause emotional distress. This emotional journey is described as involving "... outrage, pain, anger, humiliation, guilt, anxiety and depression" (Nakata, 1998, p. 4). Vicki described how for her the decolonising process was "brutal and personally confronting. It can also be a process of deconstructing core personal and research beliefs which causes an acute awareness of culpability" (West et al., 2009). For some students, this distress is obviously considerable and the support they require extensive. As described by Nakata et al. (2008, p. 141), the "content, knowledge and perspectives issue, clearly cause frustration, alienation, and/or emotional entanglement for Indigenous students studying in disciplines". There appears to be no easy solution or ready fix to help overcome this distress. We believe that awareness of the potential problem means the supervisor is more likely to be prepared and recognise the need for support when it arises. The supervisor must also assist the student to engage with the discourse of the discipline while remaining cognisant of their need to maintain their own Indigenous standpoint.

Many of the newer qualitative research approaches presuppose a redistribution of power. Approaches such as biography, phenomenology and ethnography have attempted to shift the power relationship within research by minimising the distance and separation in the researcher-participant relationship (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009). Indigenist research methodology similarly requires a power shift. For the students, this meant they became engaged in an ongoing struggle to be true to their commitment to the participants whilst completing the requirements of the research and the degree. For example, the approach necessitates a power shift back to the

participants around issues such as the direction of the research and how the work is reported. This requires careful consideration, planning and flexibility. Using an Indigenous approach also meant the ethical requirements for working with Indigenous people were more challenging and required they confront issues such as who has the "right to know" and the "right to speak" about particular issues (Laycock et al., 2009). These are complex issues for all involved.

Utilising emerging methodologies also involves risk taking; risk that the academy and the examiners will accept the work. Working on the boundaries or in the borderland spaces, as this is so aptly termed by some (e.g., Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Kincheloe, 2001), means taking risks while attempting to make sense of outside fields (Kincheloe, 2001). This is always a risk within the academic discipline, especially when you are relatively alone in borderland spaces. Ways that can assist the students and the supervisor in this regard include attendance at conferences on the methodology and/or the creation of opportunities to meet with esteemed scholars in the field; joining networks and establishing groups where like minded students can discuss issues; co-supervising students or forming groups of students with similar interests; and organising co-presentations and paper writing (Kincheloe, 2001). What we have learned from our experience we want to share with others who will no doubt follow. We believe that Indigenous students must consider the following as they plan their research journey:

- if there is not an Indigenous supervisor available, make sure the proposed non-Indigenous supervisor is aware of Indigenous ways of knowing and has a reasonable understanding of Indigenous culture;
- be sure the non-Indigenous supervisor can adequately support you through the decolonising process or identify other people who can;
- make sure the Indigenous or non-Indigenous supervisor is someone with whom you can feel comfortable and in whom you can place your trust;
- ensure the approach you choose for the research is appropriate for the issue yet also one that values and respects Indigenous knowledge and espouses a liberatory intent;
- find other Indigenous students who are going through this process and work together.

Non-Indigenous supervisors must:

- ensure they have a sufficiently deep understanding of Indigenous culture and belief in their ability to work effectively with the student;
- be prepared to support the students through all of the difficult times; there will be many of these from our experience;

- have, or be prepared to develop, an intricate knowledge of qualitative and Indigenous research approaches;
- be prepared to take the risk of working in emerging research approaches.

In our case, we have worked together as a group to establish our own knowledge and explore our limits, create shared resources and understandings, and collectively develop new ways of researching that value Indigenous ways of knowing and being. We have also been privileged to be part of a research project at our tertiary institution funded under the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Building Indigenous Capacity scheme, which also offered support, resources, dialogue, and the opportunity to collaborate with Australian Indigenous scholars.

■ Conclusion

We are very aware that many have trodden this path before us and that many others will follow. Our aim in the paper was to offer insights from our journey of applying the learnings of our Indigenist research predecessors; those who carved the path often at great personal cost. We know we stand on the shoulders of those who have written before us and acknowledge the help and refuge we have found in their work. While their work may not be so evident in the health sciences context, it is important to us to leave the reader with an appreciation of the value of engaging with Indigenist approaches within this context. We believe Indigenist research is not only an imperative for Indigenous researchers but also a gift which offers new methodologies, creative approaches to research, more rigorous ways of conducting research, emergent and innovative approaches, opportunities to help resolve the academic contradiction, and importantly, ways to liberate Indigenous people from the oppressive forces of colonialism.

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Vicki Saunders is a descendant of the Gunggari peoples (Mitchell, Queensland). A member of the Collaborative Research into Empowerment and Wellbeing (CREW) group in Far North Queensland, she is also a member of the James Cook University led Building Indigenous Research Capacity (BIRC) team. Her main research interests are in the area of Indigenous mental health with a particular focus on empowerment, wellbeing and recovery. She is currently completing her PhD entitled "Gaining two way understanding of recovery from Aboriginal people living with a diagnosis of mental illness" through James Cook University.

Roianne West is a descendant of the Kalkadoon people, born and raised on her grandmother's ancestral lands in North-West Queensland. Roianne has extensive experience in Indigenous health and education and maintains a strong connection to community with a commitment to increasing the Indigenous nursing workforce in Australia.

Kim Usher has a background in mental health nursing, nursing education and workforce development. She has considerable experience in the area of Indigenous nursing students, their educational requirements, and retention in the health and nursing workforce. Her research interests also reflect her clinical background in mental health, qualitative methodologies, and the health workforce, although much of what she does today includes the interests of her numerous Higher Degree Research students.