



Take a Walk: A Critical Reflection on Data Gathering in Remote Island Communities

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Key Words

Torres Strait • out-migration • remote surveying • third party data collection

Abstract

This paper is an account of a critical reflection on the process of data gathering in remote island communities by phone as an insider-outsider. The purpose of the study was to contribute to my PhD research question: What factors influence successful contemporary migration of Torres Strait Islanders who are moving to the Australian mainland? To achieve this I had to contact remote Island communities in the Torres Strait and evolve a process that was relevant, reliable, and appropriate to Torres Strait Islander people and their communities. Semi-structured phone surveys were completed with key informants for each Island community. The process involved walking beside the participants on a virtual tour, house-by-house, and street-by-street. The process uncovered hidden nuances that surround accessing and retrieving information. The findings are useful, relevant and transferable for advancing research methods for collecting information in remote areas.

INTRODUCTION

There are problems with the Western tick and flick method of remote surveying (Maar et al., 2011). Due to legitimate financial, resource and logistical constraints, data collection methods are often conceptualized and designed outside communities and positioned within Western paradigms (McInerney, 2012). Fisher, Pappas, and Limb (1996) raise similar issues around conducting surveys, in their case in developing countries. They note that particular attention is needed where language, conceptual, and cultural disparities exist. Taken for granted Western constructions are not always presented in local dialects and therefore require careful considerations in the design of survey questionnaires (McInerney, 2012).

My own study as an insider-outsider uncovered a number of similar facets when conducting a descriptive survey of remote Torres Strait Islander communities. My survey was designed to ascertain the nature and extent of contemporary out-migration. I needed data to verify assertions within my thesis, which claimed that



large numbers of Torres Strait Islander people were moving from remote island communities to the Australian mainland. The information was to complement 2011 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) census data, which also recorded significant reduction in the population between 2006 and 2011. What I was interested in was the scale and nature of the out-movement in the past ten years and motivations behind this outward push. The data I produce from this smaller study was to form the background of my thesis and intended to be returned to each community to inform knowledge, and to be used at the community's discretion.

The study took an island-by-island survey approach. The actual survey method evolved in the course of surveying. The intent was to delve deeper into the extent and nature of the out-movement and provide a descriptive account of the phenomena, which was both qualitative and quantitative. This small study was conducted to produce a background of the out-movement of Torres Strait Islanders, asking questions such as "Who has moved, why, when, and where to?" The people who I foresaw as holding the answers to my questions were Councillors in the remote island communities that dot the Torres Strait, Australia. The general population of these islands range from 40 to 800 people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). The Councillors are not only locals themselves but occupy a position of authority to speak on behalf of the people.

Besides anecdotal information of individual out-movement, no data of this nature existed. Moving away from anecdotal data, I developed a middle ground approach that looked beyond individual accounts towards developing a sense of the scale and scope of the movement. The intent was both for my own use and to amplify the issue to be recognised and understood as a social problem that had significant implications to the region.

I have chosen to write in first person voice as I believe my voice counts, firstly as a Torres Strait Islander who is an Indigenous minority within the larger Aboriginal nation of Australia, and secondly as a woman whose voice had been overshadowed by a patriarchal system that is sustained and reinforced through colonisation. This is also a writing style which I am evolving as a developing academic, a style that resonates with my own natural way of speaking, inspired by the brilliance of black female writer such as Bell Hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Linda Tuihiwai Smith and Vandana Shiva and the transformative paradigm which seeks to give voice to marginalised people (Mertens, 2009).

ACCOUNT

In order to produce this paper I first constructed an account of the evolving research process. The data used for this article was taken from my own journals, memos, and recollections from fieldwork. Critically reflecting on the account, I asked myself what actually happened out there and how was my experience different.

Of utmost importance was gaining the consent and approval from the local authorities. This was critical to the context of my study and to my standing as a Torres Strait Islander woman seeking permission for re-entry. Respecting local authority I contacted the Torres Strait Island Regional Council Mayor who represented fifteen island communities in the Torres Strait area. The Mayor expressed his support and was happy for me to proceed. He also indicated that he would inform the other Councillors of my study at their next council meeting. Once I received the Mayor's letter of support I began contacting individual Councillors to introduce myself and the study. Many had been expecting my call. They verbalised their anticipation of hearing from me and that they were happy to participate. One of the Councillors, whom I had worked with in the past, said he was very proud of me and that it was good to have "one of us" who knew the issues come back and do research.

Besides each phone call to the Councillors', I emailed them with a copy of the research proposal, interview schedule, and data-recording sheet. I also contacted the Divisional Managers (DMs), who mostly ended up as my informants. The decision to work with the DMs was first recommended by one of the Councillors during our initial discussions. He mentioned that the DMs were mostly present in the community and were knowledgeable and up-to-date with local matters. The DMs were often long-term residents of the community and had worked within the Council over a number of years in various capacities before assuming their current positions. The criteria for participation required that the informant had resided in the community for more than ten years. Verbal consent and approval was obtained by phone from the Councillors and then from the informants prior to commencing interviews.

I had pre-established relationships with most of the Councillors and their staff through my previous employment which required regular field visits to the remote island communities. I also attended high school on Thursday Island with some of the people I contacted. These factors made the process of establishing rapport less arduous and I was able to reconnect through mutual sharing of information about our families. Most were interested in what I was doing and we were able to talk extensively about the genesis and rationale of the study during the informal conversations prior to our interviews. These preliminary discussions were not only an exchange of information, they became material for reflection which extended my own preconceived "insider" assumptions. For example, a prominent Councillor spoke of families directly affected by the local government changes, which resulted in considerable job losses. He mentioned that high school leavers were not returning home because there was nothing for them to return to, adding a new dimension to the study by exposing this group of the population that could easily have slipped by unrecognised. These smaller, less notable movements were harder to recall requiring

conscious elicitation and became important considerations for data collection. It was these conversations that subsequently heightened my awareness, informing and enhancing the interview process and data collection.

Once an informant agreed to be interviewed a tentative time was arranged. This was never concrete and determined by the informant's availability considering unexpected work and personal commitments. I would usually call the informant on the day of the interview to confirm their availability otherwise we would reschedule a time and play-by-ear. Most interviews took place during work hours and in the informant's workplace, except for one, which took place in a coffee shop as suggested by a Councillor who was in Cairns at the time. This interview lasted for almost two hours. During the first hour, we spoke extensively about our families and local politics. Breaking into "talk" outside the interview occurred frequently throughout many interviews. Informants would stop and talk about things that were both directly and indirectly related to the emerging data.

The first interview took place with an informant from one of the smaller island communities and I used this as a pilot. Reflecting on this interview later I realised that it was incomplete as I knew of people who had moved, mostly individuals that were not included in the interview. It was much easier to recall significant group movement, such as families moving for medical reasons however, individual movements were less noticeable. By the next island, I started to mind map the community with the informant taking a house-by-house approach. This strategy worked well for smaller islands with one main street, when I reached larger communities the process included a village-by-village, street-by-street component. Although being away for almost ten years, my knowledge of the layout of communities provided a bird's-eye view of the area we were covering. By now I was aware that some movements were less obvious so as I walked alongside the informant I would sometimes prompt them to stop outside houses, step inside and look around. This strategy was further refined, with some informants bringing along to the phone interview an allotment map of their community as a guide to our journey which in turn improved coverage and kept the interview focused.

Fractured interviews were not uncommon, particularly for larger populated islands. Interviews could take up to three sessions, each consisting of one to two hour blocks. It was necessary to keep interviews to short sessions to alleviate fatigue and to respect the informant's work responsibilities. I made it clear to informants that I appreciated their time and that I was to fit into their schedules. This was important to maintain relationship and eliminate any feelings of let down, which the informant may shoulder for not keeping to our arrangement. Recall bias was another factor that required skilful negotiating without pushing the informant. The ability to recall certain events in the community is largely dependent on the importance placed upon

it. Sometimes it was worth jogging the memory by asking questions outside the original parameters. For example, asking whether any school children had returned to a particular household, maybe stayed for a period before moving away? I found this method of questioning to be thought-provoking, allowing the informants to stop outside a house and think deeply before moving on.

I was able to survey thirteen of the fifteen remote island communities. The absence of available informants or passive refusal by not returning my calls resulted in the non-completion of the remaining two islands. After a number of attempts to contact these communities, I stopped calling. For me to continue would seem invasive and pushy, particularly when there was no obligation to participate. To have the Councillors and then the informants take time to acknowledge and listen to me was more than enough, taking part in the study was most gratifying and to be let back in was welcoming. Pushing my way further would be disrespectful and contradictory to *ilan pasin* or “our” ways of doing things. My close connection to the islands and the people who live there meant that ending interviews became an emotional blend of gratitude and relief. It was humbling, tinged with sentiments of sadness, knowing that I may not see or hear from the people again. As an ending to interviews, I asked informants if they wanted to share anything more on the out-movement. I took notes as we spoke and was able to reflect upon these afterwards.

INTERPRETATION

There were three main features that emerged from my experience of this evolving process. They are take off your hat; won't get burnt; and take a walk.

TAKE OFF YOUR HAT

It cannot be assumed that as an insider you have free and privileged access to your community or cultural group. Living away makes you an outsider, going home gives you some in-roads. It becomes contentious as a researcher, although the community may support what you are trying to achieve and likely benefits, they may have different priorities and goals (Yakushko, Badiee, Mallory, & Wang, 2011). I had to take off my hat, bow to the authority and the people of the place when entering. It was from this act that I was taken, led through the doors and placed back into my cultural position whether this was cousin, aunt, grandmother, or Buai (extended kin).

Flexibility was important so I practically set my watch to *ilan taim*. Time taken to participate in an interview may be time taken away from other tasks, which are more meaningful to the participant (Donovan & Spark, 1997). I was fortunate in that I had access to my informants during work hours. Even so, I had to respect their work and other responsibilities. Giving people time was a valuable lesson and a compromise on my account as the months dragged on in-between. The informants returned my

patience by letting me in and by their willingness to participate. The interviews did not always occur on schedule due to interruptions, unavailability and other work commitments that unexpectedly appeared. It became a case-by-case situation, where interviews were repeatedly rescheduled for various reasons. Informants were under no obligation other than they knew me and that they perceived my study having some benefit to their community.

Phone interviews can be impersonal and detrimental if not managed carefully. Indigenous people are good at reading body language and can usually sense emotion through dialogue (Eckermann et al., 2010). Cultural competence means more than observing basic cultural protocols. It is about honouring cultural norms and values as well as being aware of nuances of language and culture (Merriam et al., 2001). To speak the same language, in this case Torres Strait Creole, can enhance communication but one must remain vigilant in the course of meaning-making. The advantages of having pre-existing relationships did provide easier access but I was wary not to take advantage of this privilege. I was an insider and an outsider, an Islander and a researcher living on the mainland, removed from the everyday experience of community life.

WON'T GET BURNT

People need to know that they will be safe from harm or retribution from within their communities and from outsiders as a result of participating in research. Trust is essential and this is achieved through making small talk and sharing personal experiences and family connections. These were people whom I may have shared some time with through schooling, work, or through familial ties; it was essential that I maintain those personal relationships by being myself and continuing pre-existing social bonds. People need to be assured that you are the same person, speaking the same language to avoid any sense of inferiority. In one of my interviews I assisted an informant with child welfare information that would be useful to a relative. The informants felt that they could speak openly about community matters, and sometimes of their own personal issues, due to the fact that I was on the other side of the phone, which gave them a sense of anonymity.

The manner in which data was collected through third-party informants based on hearsay information has serious implications and must proceed with extreme caution. Protecting individual identity was essential and information pertaining to sensitive issues was generalised and listed under the "Other" categories without further elaboration. Board categories seeking general information were developed using a structured interviewing technique (Minichiello, Aroni, & Hays, 2008). Intimate details were not required, nor were names used or recorded as the purpose of this small study was to ask questions such as who moved, why they moved, when

and where to? Aggregate figures for the region were reported back to each community Councillor and informant. A summary of the findings of each individual community was reported solely to their respective communities.

TAKE A WALK

Taking a walk alongside the participants down each street, and stopping at each house to see who lives there was a method that emerged through trial and error. Given time restrictions, the first interview with one of the small communities became the pilot. In this interview I had relied on the informant's local knowledge and memory, which when I reflected may have under-represented the number of out-movements. In subsequent interviews I developed the process intuitively by walking the informants down each street, surveying each household virtually. On the largest populated island, this process took three separate interviews ranging from one to two hours in duration. I walked with the informant through each village, along each street crisscrossing as we walk along to cover houses on each side.

I had discovered that by walking alongside the informant down each street in the community and doing a house-to-house virtual tour enhanced coverage. I found this to be useful in prompting the informant to recall past events that may have easily slipped their memory. In order to do this one must be grounded and know the physical landscape of the community intimately. This process peered beyond the noticeable and looking past the obvious signs of empty houses and fewer people. Walking the informant through the community personalised this journey by changing the out- movement from actual figures to real people.

DISCUSSION

Take off your hat, make sure people won't get burnt, and to take a walk with your informants are three major features that became apparent upon reflection on my research process. Taking a walk has a number of positive benefits when surveying remote communities but you must take care not to abuse people by not taking off your hat or by causing them harm.

Gaining approval and consent from community leaders and elders and keeping them informed during all stages of the study is not only respectful, but crucial when working with Indigenous people. Gaining access and setting up the research took time. I started contacting Councillors in February 2012 but the Local Council Elections later in March stalled the process as new Councillors had come on board and I had to wait for their induction. McDonald, Benger, Brown, Currie, and Carapetis (2006) found that the process of gaining consent took several months and required engaging whole families. In this case, consent was frequently provided verbally, but at

times through non-verbal gestures. Consequential visits to the community required re-negotiating with households and individuals (McDonald et al., 2006). Time was therefore a consideration in my attempts at surveying remote communities and what I thought would take two to three months became nine months. Giving people time means that you are willing to recompense the time people take out for their own lives to accommodate you, especially when there are no perceptible benefits or tangible incentives involved.

I could not assume that having on-going relationships with the respondents placed me in a better position to work with the informant or receive special favour. An insider researcher must consciously and continuously manage their own place and find a balance between keeping connected while at the same time maintaining distance (Innes, 2009; Kanuha, 2000). Whether you are an old school mate, relative, or have some sort of kin association with the participant, their age and gender determine how you engage in the interaction. My insider status to any one group at any one time was determined by where I stood in relation to the person on the other end of the telephone. I had to bow to authority and take off my hat. I had to be more respectful and conscious of my position as a researcher as I too was raised under similar cultural teachings.

Choosing unobtrusive methods for data collection was cost effective, time efficient and appropriate in this case. Unobtrusive methods are considered safe both for the researcher and the other person, discrete, non-disturbing and maintaining anonymity as opposed to traditional methods of door-to-door interviews (Kellehear, 1993). Besides time and cost effectiveness, telephone interview using structured surveys and fixed-response questions can protect both informants and the community (Knight, 2002). For an “outsider” to be seen wandering from house-to-house door knocking can be intrusive and suspicious.

I found that interviews of this nature cannot be rigid and they don't always go as planned. There was time to stop and have a yarn about the emerging data or whatever came to informants' minds at the time. Meaning making was interwoven into these dialogues. Before we could proceed to the next stage of discussion there was a need for mutual understanding and consensus. I had to allow time for conversations in between interviews, which was central to maintaining access and a certain level of rapport. Researching Indigenous communities extends beyond the parameters of academia. When “in” the community you are seen as a reference point to the outside. The marginal position I occupy “outsider-within” (Collins, 1986) served as a reference point for advice and information. At times I was seen in my former position as government employee providing services to the community, and at other times as a social work graduate who had knowledge of the system.

Throughout the interviews, a reciprocal exchange was taking place as I negotiated my multiple identities and simultaneously gave back to the community, which had been the intent of this study from conception. Gathering information is a two-way process, just as information is relevant to the study it may also be of use to the community (Donovan & Spark, 1997). I not only gave back to the community by sending each of the Councillors and informants a report that presented the findings in a series of coloured charts, I also shared information from my own investigations of the topic with the Councillors and informant. Maar et al. (2011) found that respondents did not just want another survey that is going to sit on the backburners, but to also receive feedback in a report based on results and given back to the community in a presentation. They also maintain that knowledge translation is a key outcome and those benefits to the community must be tangible and that feedback must be accessible to all residents and written in accessible language (Maar et al., 2011). My report was simple and visually effective, as I did not want to bombard the reader with unnecessary technicalities. It was up to the reader to formulate their own opinion on the findings and use these as they wished.

It was important to consider an alternative type of surveying that was practical and convenient for me, the informants, and the community. Face-to-face surveying was impossible so I resorted to conducting phone interviews. Madans (2001) recommends using different data collection methods and strategies determined by the survey objectives and the characteristic of the area being surveyed. Previous studies have found mailed surveys to be ineffective with poor response rates. In addition, participants preferred to have their responses written down by the researcher team (Maar et al., 2011). Some authors suggest that researchers go door-to-door with Indigenous assistants and that interactive in-person conversation was the most effective way for data collection (Maar et al., 2011). Text that support this style suggest that, augmenting questionnaires with some open-ended questions allows deeper involvement instead of trying to mould feelings and thoughts into boxes using the standard tick-flick method (Maar et al., 2011). In my case, there was no other way to gather the information I needed without the funds to personally travel from one island to another. To overcome this challenge and achieve coverage I had to devise a process, which resulted in walking alongside informants on a virtual tour of their communities. This enhanced coverage, reduced the potential of getting burnt and personalised the experience of recounting the movement of real people.

CONCLUSION

Many authors talk about positionality of insider-outsider research. Indigenous ethics frameworks also support notions of taking your hat off when working with communities to ensure safety, respect, and appropriateness of research. Taking a walk

on a virtual tour, mind mapping, and actual mapping by an external researcher and locally based informants has many benefits and can overcome issues of remoteness, coverage, completion, and cost effectiveness. Unobtrusive research methods using third person hearsay information have serious implications around privacy and identity issues and therefore must be consciously managed. It is ever more important to maintain a high level of privacy and confidentiality when conducting research in this way. The informants were professionals both in their own work and in the proceeding of these interviews. Broad categories ensured concealment of individual identities given that the purpose of the research was to look at movements and provide an aggregate summary of the extent and nature of out-movement. Strategies to protect individual identities were considered and observed during each interview.

The findings from this study might be useful in other policy domains that require information from remote communities that would otherwise remain on the peripheries of dialogue and decision-making. Further critical reflection is needed when researching remote communities and the sharing of such has potential benefits to all stakeholders.

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