How can academia contribute to participatory methodologies for community engagement in the diverse cultural contexts of remote Australia?

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Ideas to be explored

Participatory, developmental and empowering approaches to evaluation are favoured by many evaluators who work in contexts where programs and people face challenges associated with inequity, disempowerment, exclusion, or injustice. For many, the task of evaluation research is not a dispassionate objective process designed simply to find out if or how well something works, or even what could make it better. Many evaluators see themselves as part of the process of uncovering solutions.

There is considerable literature about Indigenous methodologies and some good theorising in this space. But what (if any) theoretical foundations can a non-Indigenous evaluator/researcher base their practice on if they wish to do their work ethically, with integrity, while at the same time supporting participatory approaches in remote communities?

There are plenty of guidelines and principles non-Indigenous researchers and evaluators can draw on, but what foundation do these have in theory and philosophy?

This presentation is an attempt by one non-Indigenous researcher/evaluator to tease out what these might be.

Introduction

Non-Indigenous researchers and evaluators have for some time grappled with the issues associated with their role as cultural outsiders, entering into a space where epistemologies, ontologies, axiologies and cosmologies are markedly different for the researcher and the researched. Scougall's (Scougall, 2006) discussion of the tensions are one example from the Australian context. I too have written about this in the past (Guenther, 2008a) as I have reflected on my own inadequacies. However, while a good deal of theorising (and philosophising) has occurred among Indigenous researchers, few non-Indigenous researchers have done this. Some notable exceptions in this space are the works of Christie (2011), Nicholls (2010), and Baimbridge et al (2013) though their work has tended to focus more on methodology than on theory or philosophy.

There is of course a risk in tackling a theory of non-Indigenous engagement with Indigenous communities. It may be seen as yet another attempt by 'whitefellas' trying to (re)colonise a space that has only relatively recently found its own space among Indigenist theorists. Some may ask why there should be a need for a theory of non-Indigenous research in the Indigenous space. It is my contention in this presentation and paper that as long as there are non-Indigenous researchers working in—particularly remote—Indigenous spaces there is a need for better ways of working and from an academic perspective, some appropriate theorising around this space. Of course, this cannot be done in isolation without the willing support of Indigenous academics and community members, but I would contend that non-Indigenous researchers and evaluators need to take responsibility for their practice, their ethics and the underpinning assumptions which they bring to their work.

The audience for this paper and presentation is primarily an academic one, though not limited to those working in universities. Within that audience the focus is primarily on those who adopt philosophical positions outside of the positivist/post-positivist paradigms, and who use a range of qualitative or mixed methodologies. The discussion that follows is particularly relevant to those who are concerned with participatory approaches for evaluation research.

Locating research and evaluation in remote Aboriginal communities

The research context

The context of the research discussed in this paper is an important consideration for the application of theoretical and methodological frameworks in the intercultural space. Very Remote Australia, which is the context of this research is in many ways different from other geographical spaces defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2011). In many Very Remote places, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders make up the majority of the population, and across the entire geographical space, nearly one third of the population describe themselves in this way and at the 2011 Census over 45000 (nearly one in five of the enumerated population count) identified as speaking an Australian Indigenous language (Guenther & McRae-Williams, 2014).

Disadvantage, gaps and race

Despite being the majority in many very remote communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are often objectified and 'othered' (Sarra, 2011), with many interventions and policies designed to 'close gaps' (Abbott, 2014) and overcome 'disadvantage' (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2014). In the process the intent of programs, many of which are racialized, is to assimilate the 'others' into western ways of being, knowing, valuing and believing (Arbon, 2008). The racial intent of interventions are sometimes denied by their authors (ABC, 2014b) despite the voices of those who argue otherwise (Kunoth-Monks in ABC, 2014a).

There are problems with the pervasive rhetoric of disadvantage and closing gaps. *First* there is a real risk that being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander *is* the disadvantage, in effect 'cultural dysfunction' (Cowlishaw, 2012, p. 412). *Second*, the deficit discourse is most frequently based on non-Indigenous understandings of advantage, and developing a sense of the 'Aboriginal problem' (Gorringe, 2011; D. Rigney & Hemming, 2014). *Third*, the racialised nature of disadvantage may lead to a promulgation of responses that lead to 'exceptionalism' of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on the basis of race (Langton, 2012)—that is, an exceptionalist view that comes with race categorisations segregates and therefore discriminates against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. *Fourth*, the disadvantage discourse may idealise the interests of the privileged, reinforcing a hegemony that in turn reinforces existing power dynamics in society and results in 'self-fulfilling prophecies' of the disadvantaged (Orlowski, 2011, p. 43).

Methodological responses to intercultural research: Indigenist, Critical Race Theory, the cultural interface and other lenses

How do researchers and evaluators deal with these challenges? There are several methodological approaches that researchers work with in the intercultural research space. To varying degrees, the methods discussed below allow (or do not allow) for involvement of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers. In the literature that follows I am largely concerned with qualitative methods which are based on critical, constructivist and participatory inquiry paradigms (for a succinct discussion on these see Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011).

At one end of the spectrum there are those who would argue that indigenous peoples should be the only ones to engage in research on or about other indigenous peoples. This is in part a reaction to colonisation and imperialist views of the world and the subsequent struggles for self-determination among indigenous peoples (Smith, 2012). It is also a reaction to being researched 'on'. The term 'Indigenist' research is a way of recognising the importance of indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing—epistemologies, ontologies, axiologies and methodologies—as an alternative paradigm separate from western paradigms (Chilisa, 2012; Martin, 2003, 2008; Moreton-Robinson & Walter, 2009; L.-I. Rigney, 1999; Wilson, 2008). Out of this we see the emergence of decolonising and anti-colonial frames of reference within research and education (McLaughlin & Whatman, 2011; L.-I.

Rigney, 1999). This is in some ways a response and reaction to positivist and post-positivist ontologies:

> Indigenists resist the positivist and post-positivist methodologies of Western science because these formations are too frequently used to validate colonizing knowledge about indigenous peoples.(Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 11)

There are however indigenous critiques of Indigenist research. Nakata et al (2012) in particular, challenge the validity of 'teaching students to 'resist' Western inscriptions of the Indigenous and take up Indigenous ones' (p. 136). They suggest instead an approach:

> …that makes spaces for the exploration of ideas, that insists on critical reflection on the limits of all thinking on both sides, and that requires the development of better language for navigating such intricate and complex entanglements of meaning. (p. 136)

A recognition of the contested nature of knowledge led some academics to promote the idea of the 'cultural interface' (Nakata, 2007; Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009) where new knowledge could be created that was not necessarily 'Indigenous' nor western. The simplistic idea that taking on an Indigenous standpoint necessarily divorces the researcher from the colonised and hegemonic space of western research philosophies is not universally supported (Nakata et al., 2012). There is a recognition by some that the complexity and contested nature of knowledge along with the nature of the researcher's role as both an insider and outsider are a reality (Tur, Blanch, & Wilson, 2010).

What does this then mean for non-Indigenous researchers? One consequence of the Indigenist movement may be to dissuade non-Indigenous researchers from engaging in the contested space and so decolonise the field. Some non-Indigenous researchers may ask if their contribution can be legitimate or how to reconcile the complicity in whiteness while 'acknowledging Indigenous sovereignties' (Koerner, Tur, & Wilson, 2009, p. 204). Jones and Jenkins (2008) come to similar conclusions in their discussion of the 'colonizer-indigene hyphen' when they assert that 'the most feasible posture for a colonizer collaborator' is to have relationship with the hyphen, not the 'Other' (p. 482). Surely there can be a 'productive dialogue between indigenous and critical scholars' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 2). Chilisa (2012) suggests that this can be achieved through collaborative partnerships between researchers and communities and 'partnership of knowledge systems' (p. 297).

The non-Indigenous researcher can never adopt Indigenist methodologies nor claim to operate from Indigenous standpoints. However, they can adopt positions that are congruent with the goals and needs of indigenous peoples in a respectful way. This is partly achieved through cultural sensitivity with careful consideration and reflection of methods and position (Liamputtong, 2010). It could be argued that 'insiders'—those who belong to the group of those being researched—are better placed to conduct meaningful research than those who are 'outsiders'. However, the binaries of insider and outsider are not necessarily as straightforward as they may seem. It is possible, for example for an Indigenous researcher to be an outsider in his or her cultural group by virtue of the knowledge and power they hold or their 'class, gender and perceived outsider status' (Liamputtong, 2010, p. 121). Bishop (2011, p. 18) argues that researchers in Kaupapa Māori contexts need not attempt to empower or emancipate subjugated others, but rather 'to listen to and participate with those traditionally "othered" as constructors of meanings of their own experiences and agents of knowledge'. The point here is that cultural outsiders can play a role in meaningful research in Indigenous contexts.

Notwithstanding the above caveats, there is a case for intercultural methodologies that are collaborative, relational, participatory and reflexive. Nicholls (2009) argues that these methodologies require the researcher to cede control of the research agenda. Christie (2011) goes further in his argument for 'generative research' where the control of the research agenda is built collaboratively from the ground up. In a similar way, Bainbridge et al (2013) advocate for a merging of decolonising methodologies with constructivist approaches of grounded theory for the 'coconstruction of knowledge' (p. 286) for the purpose of 'delivering social change for the common good' (p. 277).

What stands out from the limited literature on these processes is that they are contested, take time and are often difficult to navigate, particularly when the power relationships are unequal in favour of the researcher (Markiewicz, 2012; Mullings, 1999; Samuels & Ryan, 2011). These concerns are generally expressed by non-indigenous researchers working in the intercultural space and they are generally discussed from a pragmatic or 'theory to practice' perspective.

'The critical race theory movement is a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism and power' (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 2). Critical Race Theory, as a framework, offers a somewhat different (and perhaps more comfortable) lens through which to view research in the remote intercultural space where non-Indigenous researchers enter as the minority, in communities which are predominantly populated by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders. We would agree with McGlaughlin and Whatman (2011), that the 'potential of CRT as a theoretical framework in Indigenous Studies remains unrecognized and untapped by largely a White academy' (p. 374). There are some points of convergence that connect directly with research in remote Australian community contexts. Firstly, 'race still matters' (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 8). Issues of discrimination, inequity, inequality and hegemonic political control over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people in Australia, stand out in remote communities, even though in many cases land is owned by local people, and local languages dominate the vernacular landscape. It could well be argued that racism is normalised in remote Australia to the point that it has effectively become invisible (Langton, 2012).

Critical Race Theory aligns with story-telling as a means of conveying truth among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The promotion of Indigenous voice as a counter-narrative is a strategy used to challenge the dominant discourse (McDonald, 2003). It provides a 'critique of the positionality of race in [the] dominant culture' (Dunbar, 2008, p. 93). Both critical theories and decolonizing approaches have assisted in providing an analysis for 'making visible the power dynamics within society' but according to Kovach (2009, Location 921) critical theories are not sufficient for indigenous researchers. While both indigenous peoples and people of colour share a similar experience of being subjected to and being objects of 'Eurocentric' methodologies, the impact of colonisation adds to the oppression experienced by peoples of colour. 'Indigenous communities demand a decolonizing outcome from research' (Kovach, 2009, Location 1533) whereby capacity and educational attainment are improved. Miller (2013) suggests that critical race theory, critical theory more generally, and standpoint theory can be combined to provide an 'intellectual invitation for researchers to further validate a more holistic awareness and utilization of their personal resources/assets in the light of their consideration of the phenomenon they want to research' (p. 72)

To the extent that CRT encourages activism, social justice, participatory processes and reflexivity, research carried out under its banner provides a useful set of principles (Hylton, 2012) that can be used well by non-Indigenous researchers to position themselves within a hegemonic power-laden cross-cultural space. Note though, that Hylton's (2012) list of key considerations (p. 36) does not include relationships. This does not necessarily mean that relationships between researchers and researched are not important; rather they are important for an understanding of race. However, the origins of CRT in binarised black-white contexts of the United States may inadequately address many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' and non-Indigenous concerns—as well as other indigenous peoples' concerns (see for example Hermes, 1999)—about colonialism, positionality and the need for co-construction of knowledge at the 'interface'.

There are of course other methodological approaches which would not privilege Indigenous voice in the ways described above. Methodologies that work on positivist assumptions (see for example Lincoln et al., 2011), which are widely used in the fields of science, could not contemplate the notions of alternate realities, let alone the possibilities for subjective, reflexive or interpretive approaches to data gathering and analysis. We set any arguments about those issues aside for others to debate. However, based on our understanding of the literature and our own experiences in the field,

we see the importance of research and evaluation that draws on and amplifies the ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies of those we engage with. It is to these experiences we now turn.

Other theoretical frames of reference

Setting aside the response to evaluation in indigenous contexts for a moment, it may also be worthwhile considering how participatory approaches to evaluation are constructed. Participatory approaches (King, 2004) cover a range of evaluation strategies where participants are actively involved in planning and implementation of evaluations. They are generally collaborative, emancipatory, transformative (Mertens, 2009) or practical (Chouinard & Cousins, 2014), developmental (Patton, 2011) or focused on empowerment (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2007, 2005; Suarez-Balcazar & Harper, 2003). They depend on a relationship between evaluator and participant where control for design, development and implementation are shared between the evaluation stakeholders. Philosophically, these approaches see knowledge as co-constructed. The relevance of these approaches for work in remote Aboriginal contexts should be immediately apparent because they can support and affirm the cultural standpoints of participants in a cross-cultural environment. Epistemologically, knowledge becomes a powerful tool that can be used to strengthen the dominated culture and potentially subvert the dominant culture. Mertens (2009) argues for a 'transformative paradigm' informed by various theoretical approaches such as post-colonialist theory, CRT, disability theory, queer theory and feminist theory and compatible analytical strategies (including the participation of community members) to effect change through research and evaluation in complex cultural contexts.

From practice to theory

Academics often talk about theory-based practice. I want to switch that the other way round and consider theory from a practice base. I should also say that when I first started as an evaluator in remote contexts I was far more concerned about practice than I was about theory. I was particularly concerned about improving my practice and developing methodologies that worked within the context. It was a bit hit and miss and I think I learned as much from failure as I did from success.

An illustration from the field

The illustration I want to use here is not intended to be one of best or good practice or even bad practice.

In 2005 I started working with a team from CDU on evaluations of Communities for Children programs, some of which were located in remote communities. The early attempts to conduct these evaluations were driven from a Sydney based research and evaluation organisation, that was commissioned to oversee the national evaluation of the Australian Government program. As local evaluators we were given instruments to administer. The first iteration of this instrument was a 30 page questionnaire with lots of likert scale questions. It didn't take long to figure out that this wasn't going to work. Community partners running activities within the program were faced with the same dilemma. Some had their own instruments, which were also found wanting. In 2008 one of those organisations approached us to consider adapting their international instruments to fit the remote contexts. We had quite a bit of fun playing around with graphical representations of concepts. We worked with artists, community members to see how these western ideas might translate into concepts. In partnership with the organisation we set out to simplify and translate tools for use in a range of communities. One concern we had was to be able to quantify outcomes because we felt that funders wanted numerical evidence of change. After three years of experimenting we went to a community and did some road testing. We engaged a local person to facilitate connections with program participants and to ensure we weren't just doing this in English (even though the instruments were written in English). The road test wasn't a total failure. We did quantify something. But as we reflected on the process we realised that we still hadn't captured the essence of the program and its outcomes for local participants. Four years later I am pleased that, while numbers are still

being collected, the local staff of the program are able to articulate the value and outcomes of the program in their own way. There still remains a tension between the expected outcomes from a funder perspective and those that are now being expressed from a community perspective.

What does good evaluation practice look like?

The illustration above is neither good nor bad practice. The problem with notions of good or bad practice is that they suggest that practices can be simply fractionally distilled into essential elements, which can then be magically combined to form some kind of chemical reaction like the combination of hydrogen and oxygen to produce water.

$$2H_2 + O_2 \rightarrow 2H_2O \text{ plus energy}$$
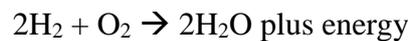
The illustration represents a learning journey, which is still ongoing. We could look back and either laugh or cry at our attempts to distil 'truth'. Given this, let me offer some images I have that give me some satisfaction as an academic. I have seen:

- community groups use evaluation reports to successfully lobby for a continuation of funds that would otherwise have been cut;
- both non-Indigenous and local Aboriginal understanding of a particular phenomenon expanded so that both get fresh glimpses of each others' knowledge;
- local researchers empowered so that they grab hold of new knowledge and apply it to their own (and their family's) advantage;
- relationships between service providers and communities strengthen as a result of the shared learning that happens through evaluative research;
- individuals benefit economically, socially from engagement as community researchers— sometimes to the point of transformed identity;
- relationships between Aboriginal researchers and community members flourish through engagement in the evaluation process;
- an almost therapeutic effect of the interview process as reflexive and reflective learning processes create fresh insights and awareness; and
- service providers improve practice as a direct consequence of the evaluation process.

What are the principles that underpin good practice in evaluation and research?

In 2009 I was among a team of several evaluators from CDU who completed a major evaluation of an Australian Government family violence program (Arnott, Guenther, & Williams, 2009). At the end, we were able to identify a number of principles that underpin effective *program* delivery in remote communities. With some tweaking I think those same principles can be applied to evaluation also. In most cases the statements made under each heading are adapted so that the word 'program' is replaced with 'evaluation' or 'evaluator'. My colleagues and I are not the only ones to have considered good practice principles in this space (Mikhailovich, Morrison, & Arabena, 2007; Price, McCoy, & Mafi, 2012; Putt, 2013; Scougall, 2006). However, by and large the discussion rarely goes beyond the principles. This is where I want to get to in this paper.

Design and practice elements

Ethical practice (AITSIS guidelines)

First and foremost in any discussion of principles, ethics need to be considered. There are any number of ethical issues arising from work with and in Aboriginal communities, and many of these are covered in the various national guidelines (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2012; National Health and Medical Research Council, 2003) though these standards do not necessarily adequately cover or allow for full informed consent for all participants,

(Williams, 2014), let alone those who are being researched in remote contexts where there have been calls for a new paradigm of ethical evaluations (Williams, Guenther, & Arnott, 2011). Suffice to say here, that filling in an ethics form and obtaining approval from a committee does not in itself ensure ethical practice in evaluation.

Engaging community and program leadership

The principles around leadership, which the evaluation of family violence programs articulated apply to evaluations at a number of levels. Firstly, as noted later below, engagement of community leadership is directly related to local ownership of the research or evaluation process. Second, evaluations of programs in remote contexts need to engage with program managers. Gaining their support for a contextually sensitive approach may require some negotiation. Thirdly, leadership of research and evaluation teams requires a different approach, which respects local cultures, timelines and local accountabilities.

> Effective leadership of programs delivered in cross-cultural contexts requires a different approach than might be expected in the mainstream, notwithstanding the fundamental functions of leadership.(Arnott et al., 2009, p. 67)

Evaluation design and methodology fit for context and purpose

Evaluations in remote contexts are intrinsically complex (Guenther, Arnott, & WIlliams, 2009). While it might be stating the obvious, the upfront effort required for such evaluations necessarily require more planning, more consultation, more contingencies and more resources than others.

> Complex [evaluations] demand careful strategic planning, coordination, human resource management and development in order to overcome the potential barriers that will arise. (Arnott et al., 2009, p. 69)

Data validity and integrity

Evidence of outcomes relates to programs directly, but the nature of evidence, who defines its utility, its worthwhile-ness and how integrity is perceived by all stakeholders are functions of the research and evaluation process. In the vignette discussed earlier, the scenario described a conscious effort on the part of the research and program team, to ensure that the data obtained was meaningful to program participants *and* funders. Similarly, data gathering processes need to seen to have validity and integrity as do the data gatherers themselves.

> To be deemed a success, any program must provide solid evidence of outcomes.(Arnott et al., 2009, p. 76)

Evaluator elements

Cultural knowledge

An effective evaluator in a remote Indigenous context is not necessarily a well-credentialed or even a well-experienced one. Rather, the 'competent' evaluator is one whose ontological position is explicitly understood (as self-awareness) in contrast to the ontological positioning of the one(s) he or she is working with. Hence:

> In order to engage at a meaningful level with Indigenous people, [evaluators] must respect the cultural values, norms and practices of local communities. (Arnott et al., 2009, p. 65)

Evaluator recruitment

The qualities of an evaluator in the remote context (where participatory approaches are appropriate) are perhaps more important than their credentials or experience. Non-Indigenous evaluators who

engage for the first time with this kind of work will be 'green' and naïve but as long as they are willing to 'unlearn' what they already know, there will be space for them.

> [R]ather than build on our knowledge, we first need to unlearn the assumptions and truths which we bring to our work. We need to pull down the 'scaffolds' that frame our knowledge systems (Guenther, 2011).

Having unlearned those assumptions and truths, evaluators are then in a better position to learn.

Reflective and reflexive practice

Coupled with the above comment about recruitment and appropriate evaluator qualities, the evaluator who engages in reflective and reflexive practices will have a much greater opportunity to engage in co-generative knowledge development.

A commitment to relationship building

Participatory evaluation implies a level of engagement that goes beyond being a casual acquaintance. While professional and ethical boundaries need to be maintained, the insider-outsider relationship that an evaluator can foster has some strong elements:

> [The] evaluator is required to be a 'critical friend'. This role is not objective and nor should it be. (Guenther, 2008b, p. 5)

Community elements

Local ownership and control

Participatory, empowerment, transformative approaches to evaluation will only work where there is local community ownership and at least some control of the process. Just as programs that are delivered into communities (especially where the terms of service are determined by the funder) will have less impact and less sustained impact, so too evaluations that do not connect with and engage local community leaders will have a limited impact.

> [Evaluations] delivered in remote and urban community contexts are more likely to be effective in achieving sustained outcomes when a community development approach—underpinned by local ownership and control—is employed (Arnott et al., 2009, p. 63).

Of course if impact is not a desirable outcome of an evaluation then this may not be so important, but if data validity and a research or evaluation process with ethical integrity is expected, then these things are important.

Traditional knowledge

I propose that research and evaluation that recognises and supports different epistemologies has the same impact that respecting different epistemologies has for programs. Hence if we as evaluators, are seeking to influence policy and practice (albeit in a collaborative, co-constructed manner) then we could expect the same result for our work as non-Indigenous evaluators. This goes beyond a tolerance of difference, but extends to giving primacy to the voices that represent these alternate knowledge systems. Of course this cannot be done without cultural knowledge, as noted above.

> [Evaluations conducted] 'in remote cross-cultural contexts, that use or at least give full respect to the traditional knowledge of Indigenous people will be more likely to [have] sustained [impact] over time, than those do not pay attention to this. (Arnott et al., 2009, p. 64)

Community and participant readiness

If utilisation of findings is important, particularly at the community level, the community in which evaluation is conducted needs to be ready for it. This is not about consultation. It is about a negotiated process where the voices and will of community members aligns with and concurs with the task of the evaluation.

> The willingness and capacity of the community (in terms of stakeholders: community leaders, clients, funders, physical infrastructure) to engage with [an evaluation] will have a significant impact on the outcomes (Arnott et al., 2009, p. 68).

Local workforce development

While the quote below relates to programs, if an evaluation is to employ a community researcher team (or individual), the model for such employment applies equally to evaluation 'work'. It must be seen to be flexible, adaptive and consistent with the goals of community members.

> While building remote workforce capabilities may be a desirable goal, to be effective the model employed in any given community must fit with the needs, values, identities and accepted practices of that community.(Arnott et al., 2009, p. 72)

Learning and knowledge construction

To be of benefit to the community in which evaluation or research is conducted, training and learning needs to be integrated into the program. This might include training of community researchers, but it might also involve learning, post research and evaluation. It could also involve joint dissemination of findings.

> Training and learning activities are an essential component of any program that is designed around community development principles (Arnott et al., 2009, p. 74)

Adaptive timelines

While there is no excuse (in my mind) for professional ineptitude when it comes to meeting deliverables of a research or evaluation project, there are inevitably instances where more time is required in order to achieve outputs that have validity and integrity. Hence:

> Funding arrangements for [evaluations conducted] in remote contexts should allow adequate time for programs [and research processes] to develop and offer a degree of flexibility when local constraints cause delays in meeting milestones (Arnott et al., 2009, p. 82).

What are the assumptions that sit behind those principles?

In attempting to describe the assumptions behind these principles I want to move *towards* a theory of non-indigenous engagement in evaluative research. I recognise that there are risks associated with this. I have no doubt that others will not share these assumptions.

Primacy of local ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies

Non-Indigenous evaluators and researchers inherit a set of ways of being, knowing and valuing from their social, historical, political, religious and economic context. These ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies are by nature hidden to the one to whom they belong. The normalised cultural practices that have been enculturated from childhood through a process of socialisation are seldom reflected on unless they are challenged. And where that culture dominates, the opportunity for challenge does not arise. However, in places where the dominant culture asserts itself over minorities (as is often the case in remote communities), the dominated culture finds clear definition in contrast to the dominant culture. I would argue that in social research, the local ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies not only need to be acknowledged, they need to be given primacy. In the illustration described earlier, this was why evaluation methodology failed. The local ontologies, epistemologies

and axiologies were recognised but were not given primacy. This was in part driven by the agenda of funders who wanted findings to reflect western ways of being, knowing and valuing.

Power and position dynamics

CRT offers researchers and evaluators a helpful frame of reference in terms of recognising the role of dominant culture (sometimes described in terms of whiteness) over the black or coloured culture. These dynamics are embedded in the history of colonisation and its attempts to assimilate, oppress and control the colonised. Indigenist methodologies are also helpful in shedding light on the position of the researcher and the researched. While I would argue that it is impossible for a non-indigenous researcher or evaluator to represent the standpoint of an indigenous person, I would also argue that it is impossible for an indigenous person from outside the evaluation context to do the same for other indigenous people. Power and position play an important role in the representation of evaluation findings. Race matters. However, I have observed that it is possible for remote communities to leverage off and benefit from external power sources. Ontologically, what it means to draw on power appropriately is not necessarily compromised by position, though this depends on positions being explicitly articulated rather than tacitly implied or ignored.

Shared humanity: equity, rights

While as noted in the literature, some would argue that non-indigenous people have no place in the business of indigenous research (in part because of the power dynamics described above), an alternative view exists that the space in which evaluation and research is conducted need not be (or should not be) exclusive. This view is built on an ontological assumption that the experiences of humanity are shared: life, death, relationships, emotions, intellect, good and evil are not unique to one group of people. Further, this is represented in an axiological assumption that human rights belong to all people. Respect for those rights can and should be given by and to all people. Given this, communities and individuals, in their pursuit of equity and rights should not be limited in their access or relatedness to others, regardless of race, religion or language.

Cogenerated knowledge spaces

I would argue that just as culture is fluid, so too is knowledge. That is epistemologies are not necessarily set in stone. As noted in the literature, the idea of the cultural interface allows for a space in which knowledge can be jointly constructed. Evaluators who want to adopt participatory approaches will probably go through a process of unlearning if they are to be effective.

Transformative and powerful knowledge

Consistent with the theory and practice of participatory evaluations as noted earlier, I would suggest that effective strategies in remote contexts should be premised on the assumption that 'good' research is associated with action, consistent with a transformative agenda as suggested by Mertens (2009). The transformative paradigm repositions power with research subjects rather than the external researchers. Four outsiders (as researchers), this necessarily involves a process of ceding power in terms of research and evaluation design, methodology, outputs and impact of the inquiry process. Ontologically, this means that the knowledge holder (for example in a remote community) shapes the definitions of truth and reality.

The role of academic institutions

The question that follows for me, then, is how institutions—and I am thinking here primarily but not exclusively of academic institutions—can contribute to a better understanding, more appropriate ways of working, and ultimately better participatory evaluation outcomes in remote contexts, particularly when those evaluations are carried out by non-Indigenous researchers and evaluators. I see two main roles for academia in this. The first, as I have attempted to do in this paper, is to move the discussion beyond practice and principles, towards articulation of theories. These theories should

not necessarily stand in contrast to Indigenist or Critical Theories, but complement thinking around the space of non-Indigenous academic involvement in remote Indigenous spaces.

The second important role for academia, and in particular academics who are well experienced, is to show leadership in good practice through teaching and mentoring. That teaching and mentoring can be through a mix of formal, non-formal and informal learning opportunities. It requires an explicit articulation of both the theory and practice of engagement and evaluation methodology. It also requires practical modelling of elements of good practice, including the processes of reflective and reflexive practice and relationship building.

The practical and pragmatic implications of the theorising and teaching will then be reflected in 'good' practice at a number of levels. First, it will govern the type of work we as academics buy into. There is not much point in tendering for work that compromises our theory and principles of good practice—unless we can redefine the terms and conditions associated with a tender. Second, it will govern the process of evaluation so that the design, implementation and reporting have integrity for those we are participating with. It will also promote a way of working that encourages strong working partnerships. Third it will have an impact on the outcomes and impact of evaluation, for the benefit of participants. There are some good examples, even here within CDU, where these pragmatic responses are evident, and there is a strong case for those to be more widely documented and promoted.

Conclusions

I recognise that this presentation and paper is an imperfect attempt to articulate a few key points which undoubtedly will be contested and challenged by some. However, in my reading of the literature I find little that shows how non-Indigenous academics have taken their practice and articulated in the form of an emerging theory of engagement with Indigenous communities for the purpose of improving participatory approaches to evaluation. This stands in stark contrast to the work of many Australian Indigenous academics who have argued the case for a theoretical positioning of Indigenous research in Indigenous contexts.

Those of us who have worked as evaluators in remote contexts for any length of time know intuitively what good practice looks like in participatory evaluation research. Some of us have even identified some principles that underpin those practices. What I am trying to do with this paper is open up a conversation which unpacks the theory and assumptions behind these principles. In moving towards a theory of engagement in participatory evaluation for non-Indigenous people in remote Indigenous contexts, I am proposing that there are at least five philosophically driven assumptions on which principles of good practice are based: 1) the primacy of local ontologies, epistempologies and axiologies; 2) a recognition of the power and position dynamics that affect who we are as evaluators and who we are evaluating with; 3) a recognition of shared humanity, of equity and of basic human rights; 4) the possibility of new knowledge being created in a cogenerative space; and 5) the application of knowledge as a powerful and transformative tool for change.

Academia has a primary role in shaping the way that participatory research and evaluation is conducted in remote Indigenous places. Its role in shaping theory driven practice is evident, and is at this moment in time begging for a response. Its role in teaching and mentoring up and coming researchers is also important. There are examples where this already happens, but more needs to be done. Academia also has a responsibility to ensure that ethical standards and principles of practice are upheld and that these are advocated to funders who may not see things the same way.

of the CRC REP or Ninti One Limited or its participants. Errors or omissions remain with the author.

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