

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY BASED INTERVENTION RESEARCH

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INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal communities with their complex social, economic and physical conditions have increasingly become the focus of governmental policies in Australia. Although health related conditions have captured a great deal of attention by both media and the bureaucracy, there have been fresh calls for more understanding of how these communities function and what roles they might play in tackling the problems of social and economic exclusion. By understanding and appreciating the roles and bases of the community's assets and positive features they display (Khavarpour, Knight and Foley, 2005), it is argued, one can increase community's capacity and ability to resolve some of the shortcomings facing their quality of life (McKnight, 1998). Interventions based on these premises, it is argued, will have a better chance of success, useful outcomes for the players and changing the scene from a "top down" approach to a problems resolution to a more of "grass root" approach. Understanding such a process is now embedded in the recently developed community based interventions research paradigm. The aim of this paper is to use the Safe Koori Kids [SKK] project in order to demonstrate the challenges faced in such a community based intervention research, issues facing the researchers in undertaking an interdisciplinary approach to research and investigate the strengths and benefits of Indigenous research paradigm.

BACKGROUND

Injury is one of the leading causes of death, illness and disability in Australia. Australian Indigenous people are over-represented in both intentional and unintentional injury statistics, with the former having three times rate of mortality due to injury (Helps and Harrison 2004). The complex nature of injury has a profound effect on not only the individual but also on families and communities (Harrison et al 2001, Helps and Harrison 2004, McClure et al 2000, Memmott, et al 2001, Moller et al 2004). Although Indigenous children and youth are particularly vulnerable to the impact of injury, there have been no studies to date that document the incidence and impact of injury to Indigenous children or which offers sustainable and culturally acceptable solutions to the problem.

THE STUDY

The *Safe Koori Kids* study, funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), is a 3 year study which addresses Aboriginal child and youth injury prevention in South West Sydney. Injury is a leading cause of Indigenous mortality in Australia but little is known about the impact of injury on Indigenous children and youth, particularly in urban areas. The aims of the project are to: explore the incidence and impact of intentional and unintentional

injury on children and youth in South West Sydney; identify factors that contribute to injury; develop and evaluate initiatives in Indigenous communities aimed at increasing resiliency in at-risk children, youth and families; and make recommendations for changes to policy and practice across a range of government portfolios and non-government organisations.

The three year research study is designed in to three stages. Stage One involves consultation and collection of baseline quantitative and qualitative data including focus groups and interviews with Aboriginal service providers as well as non Aboriginal organisations which work closely with the Aboriginal community and members of the local Aboriginal community. Interventional initiatives make up the Stage Two of the project. A range of positive safety promotion activities in school to build individual resilience and a complementary Aboriginal family and community base programme on safety awareness and problem solving strategies to prevent injury and building resilience in children, families and communities. And finally in Stage Three an evaluation of combined interventions and the identification of outcomes that can be integrated into policies will be developed and disseminated.

DESIGNING COMMUNITY BASED INTERVENTION RESEARCH

In general community based research takes place in the community, involves the member of the community in the design, development, implementation and the evaluation of the research project (Chappell, Funk et al. 2006). This is very different to ‘conventional’ research where the researcher is the sole controller of the research and utilises the community to collect the data and analyse the findings (Flick 1999). Conducting community based intervention research, although time consuming, costly in some instances and in some instances logistically difficult to conduct, has the potential of leaving a positive and long lasting impact on the community. Conducting community based intervention research is based on certain principles such as involvement of community members as partners in the early stages of research; provision of positive benefits to the community; enhancing the community’s capacity and assets; sustainability beyond the life of the research project and; empowerment and building the community’s capacity to initiate its own research projects which will address community’s needs and aspirations (University of Washington, 200).

The SKK project took into consideration the most important principle of community based research, that is, the need to build a relationship of trust with community members. The project began after a long period of consultation with members of the South West Sydney Aboriginal community, specific Aboriginal service providers as well as non Indigenous organisations which worked closely with the Aboriginal community. Members of the research team established a good rapport with the members of these communities. In the first year and before receiving the funding for the project, the SKK researchers consulted with the Aboriginal Medical Service [AMS], participated in local NAIDOC week celebrations (National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee) and held discussion with key Aboriginal organisations at both local and State levels.

INDIGENOUS RESEARCH PARADIGM

Designing a framework is the first step in conducting research (Creswell 1994). The choice in research design reflects one’s decision about the priority given to the range of dimensions in the

research process. Quantitative research typically adheres to a standardized research design, developed before the commencement of the research (Sarnatakos, 1998). Qualitative research, on the other hand, aims towards exploring social relations and describing reality as experienced by the participants (Bryman, 2001). The notion of objectivity, so embedded in quantitative research methodology, is less evident and advocated in the qualitative research paradigm (Stergis, 1991). By the same token the notion of generalisation of the data, strongly advocated by quantitative researchers, has fewer implications in the qualitative research models. The importance of a large representation of the target group in the study has less meaning than the development of relationship with the few.

However, ethical considerations are equally important for both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. Concern about the welfare and protection of the right of the participants in the research the National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC] indicates the importance and the relevancy of the research to the betterment of the individual and the community (NHMRC, 2003). This document explains in detail the concepts of “integrity, respect for persons, beneficence and justice” as the basis of a good research (NHMRC, 2003:11). However research within the Indigenous communities provides another dimension to this ethical consideration. It advocates six additional principles to “ensures that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values” are well respected and followed in any research involving Indigenous people (NHMRC, 2003). Following table depicts these principles in detail.

Values	Description
Reciprocity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A mutual obligation between individuals, family and community in the distribution of resources • Responsibility to achieve cohesion and survival of social order
Respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect for human dignity • Respect of human relationship which brings about trust and cooperation.
Equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Valuing individuals worth and dignity • Commitment to fairness and social justice
Responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsibility to family, community, country • Caring for others and maintain harmony and balance between physical and spiritual sphere.

Source: NHMRC, 2003.

In summary the respecting Indigenous communities’ right and acknowledging their culture and finally recognising their right to engage in any research are paramount to any research study in these communities.

IMPLICATION OF THE NHMRC GUIDELINES FOR SAFE KOORI KIDS PROJECT

Consultation with the members of the Aboriginal community, through meetings, discussions and workshops, have provided opportunities for community members to highlight their concern and provide input into the direction of the research [Respect]. Meeting with local chapter of the Aboriginal Education Consulting Group [AECG] presented the researchers with opportunity to provide the group with the aims and objectives of the project and receive constructive suggestions in improving the process of data collection. The Aboriginal Research Advisory Committee [ARAC], made up the members of the local community member and the service

providers provide input into the direction of the research and strategies to implement the initiatives.

Employment of an Aboriginal research assistant and provision of training for her advancement to higher level of research capacity were undertaken in the early stage of the research project. Utilising local resources, such as contracting and Aboriginal teachers to oversee the development of school curriculum on safety promotion and injury preventions has been another initiative implemented by the researchers [Equity].

Researchers have been mindful of the importance of openness in communicating the outcomes and issues of concern with community members and understanding their expectations of research in their community. Members of the research team have attempted to meet these expectations by providing ongoing reports to community based organisations such as Aboriginal Medical Service, the Aboriginal Advisory Committee of the City Council and to key individual Aboriginal community members. The research team also engaged in cultural events such as NAIDOC week, by holding a safety stall at the community fun day and providing funds for the local school to hire a dance troupe for the school's celebratory day [Reciprocity and Respect].

At the same time the research team recognises the existence of local power and authority structures and relationships. The Aboriginal Medical Service, as the main Aboriginal community controlled health service provider in the area and a community 'gate keeper', was called upon to provide necessary input into the design and development of the research. Communication between the research team and the community was conducted through the Senior Researcher and Research Assistant [both Aboriginal] which means a high level of acceptance and recognition by the member of both community and the Aboriginal Medical Service [Respect and Responsibility].

DISCUSSION

Conducting community based intervention research in Aboriginal communities poses numerous challenges. Locally available health data which ideally constitutes the baseline data for public health interventions are unreliable for this population group, particularly in the Eastern states of Australia. Access to participants, due to the distrust of research, is an issue facing the data collectors. The presence of sensitive issues such as domestic violence and child safety within the community, adds to the difficulties for researchers to access research participants. Aboriginal controlled processes put in place to protect Aboriginal communities can be frustrating and lead to delay in the planned research activities and indeed in the development of the interventions and strategies designed to combat the problems identified by the community. At the same time working and dealing with various Aboriginal organisations, is beneficial in the long run as it provides the necessary time to build up relationships and to better understand the local context in which the research is being undertaken. It also provides the time to identify and assist those most valuable participants, the Aboriginal 'cultural brokers' who, by understanding the value to the community of creating alliances with researchers to solve complex problems, tend to bridge the gap between researchers and 'the community'.

Community based intervention research is a long term process. It requires a strong commitment by researchers, community organisations, community members and most of all the community. Establishing genuine rapport with the community from the early stages of the research

development and intervention is vital to the success of the project. Finally, building partnership with the community and service providers will go a long way for the longevity of the project and its survival in the long run.

CONCLUSION/WHAT THE PAPER SAID

Conducting research among communities such as Aboriginal communities is lengthy process and requires commitment and perseverance. Be prepared for a long haul and be patient. In no form or shape assume ownership of the research process and intervening strategies. Finally celebrate the small outcomes and strive for a bigger ones in the next run.

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