Indigenous research across continents: a comparison of ethically and culturally sound approaches to research in Australia and Sweden

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In the context of opposition to, or absence of, ethical engagement in Indigenous research, researchers are morally obligated to make a stand that ensures their engagement strategy and implementation plan uses an approach based on positionality, participation, mutual respect, and partnership. Whilst this may involve new challenges for the researcher, such an initiative maximises the likelihood of an empowering and culturally safe process for vulnerable participants, including inexperienced researchers. As two early career researchers, we reflect on our experiences amidst some of the challenges within Indigenous research. These challenges include ethical, methodological and structural issues. The main aims of this chapter are to advocate for practical and philosophical reform of Indigenous research ethics particularly in the context of decolonisation; ultimately to maximise the benefits of research primarily for community research participants, service providers, and policy makers as opposed to primarily for the academy. The authors' experiential and theoretical knowledge enables a critical understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of a decolonising research approach and how this guides the development of an appropriate ethics protocol.

We acknowledge that research impacts on Indigenous peoples' lives, often in a negative or unintended manner, and its governance varies dramatically according to individual as well as institutional values that are steeped in Western thought including colonialism. This paper draws on scholarly theoretical knowledge of cultural protocols and the governance of ethical processes from international and local sources, as well as our own experiences in cross-cultural communication to articulate what we call a Decolonising Standpoint. We regard this as a necessary addition to the implementation of an Indigenous Standpoint in the context of research, which has provided a highly credible philosophy and practice for Indigenous researchers. We aim to create an additional and quite distinct position that non-Indigenous researchers can add to their repertoire of skills and knowledge in the context of Indigenous research.

Introduction

Kristina Sehlin MacNeil is a non-Indigenous PhD Candidate at the Centre for Sami Research at Umeå University in Northern Sweden and the David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research at University of South Australia in Adelaide. Kristina's PhD project investigates power relations between Indigenous groups and mining companies in Sweden and Australia. In Sweden the Indigenous people are the Sami and Sápmi, the Sami homeland, which stretches over the northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia (Sápmi, 2014). Dr Jillian Marsh is an Adnyamathanha woman from northern South Australia, and a Research Fellow in the University Department of Rural Health at the University of South Australia. Jillian is actively involved in community-driven research as well as cross-institutional research collaborations.

Our experiences of participating in Indigenous research and undergoing Indigenous ethics reviews are varied. Beside our roles as researchers, Dr Jillian Marsh also holds experiences of hosting researchers in her community. Through these experiences we identify a need to discuss ethical issues that span the globe. In Sweden there are no particular procedures in place to ensure that research involving Indigenous peoples undergoes ethical review, and in many cases the researcher decides whether to put in an ethics application or not. Swedish practices

lead to cultural learning, in the same ways that had occurred in the past. In Gapuwiyak, these conversations led to changes in the way the local child care service operated. New play activities were introduced explicitly to reinforce and support the cultural identities of children as strong Yolngu children and elders were invited to spend more time with children to teach language.

In 2008 community based researchers, Barbara Petrick, Noreen Bundy, Joanne White and Andrena Webb, in the small community of Atitjere, worked with Institute researchers and members of their community on an action research project entitled Transition to School Project[11]. The main aim of the project was to improve local community involvement and interest in the local school through strengthening the capacity of parents and school personnel to reflect on and identify information that could support young children's transition to school. The project also modelled a process for building stronger relationships and understanding between schools and their communities through action research. The research identified the valued, local cultural practices young Indigenous children acquire prior to entering school as reported by their parents and grandparents as well as important school practices that children needed to learn in order to be successful in their first years of school, as reported by their teachers and principal.

These action research projects, supported by and engaged in by local Indigenous community members working alongside Institute staff, created momentum for innovation, challenge and change for improved early childhood services and programs for children in participating communities. At the same time, these projects also drove change within the Institute through enabling the development of more culturally informed course materials, curricula, and staff members.

Action Research in Early Childhood Workforce Development

In 2013, the Institute was successful in winning the NT Training Initiative Award for the 'Building the Remote Early Childhood Workforce' (BRECW) project in collaboration with the NT Department of Education; an action research pilot project on early childhood workforce development[12]. The project increased the number of training completions and the quality of graduates in early childhood education and care in four remote communities - Maningrida, Ngukurr, Gunbalanya and Yuendumu (Willsher, 2013)[13].

The community-based early childhood educators (VET trainers) employed in the four BRECW communities required a flexible, responsive tool that could provide integrated early childhood education and care training across the multiple work places. In order to satisfy this need, the Learning at Work Book approach was proposed; an accredited, clustered VET Certificate I and II in Community Services and Certificate III in Children's Services program. This curriculum was customised for senior school students (VET in Schools) and adult learners across the six different program sites in which they were employed (see diagram)[14].

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11 Project partners NT Council of Government Schools Organisation (COGSO), Batchelor Institute and the Atitjere community, funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) under the Parent School Partnership Initiative (PSPI).

12 See http://www.batchelor.edu.au/portfolio/batchelor-institute-winner-of-northern-territory-training-provider-of-the-year-2013/

13 These communities had been nominated as the sites for the construction and development of Child and Family Centres under the National Partnership Agreement for Indigenous Early Childhood Development.

14 FaFT in the diagram refers to the Family as First Teachers playgroup program of the NT Department of Education

be affected by the outcomes (Kovach, 2010; Smith, 1999; Rigney, 1999; Louis, 2007; Porsanger, 2004). We agree with this position and insist that Indigenous researcher participation and an Indigenous Standpoint are important, even though this may involve challenging or even offending some researchers who seek to uphold colonial positions of power. Furthermore, Dr Marsh highlights the importance of providing a culturally safe place for Indigenous researchers to work in, and the need to acknowledge community sources as an integral part of research education. In her case, when working with Adnyamathanha Elders and community, what becomes clear at every stage of the research process is the need to develop a culturally appropriate and clearly articulated methodology that is understood by all parties via a practically implemented ethical framework. As a member of the participant community or as a stranger with little or no connections, the process of negotiation is critical to ensure cultural safety for all. We argue that a Decolonising Standpoint, in addition to, or in place of, an Indigenous Standpoint, enables all researchers to position themselves both as researchers and as participants in the research environment rather than researchers 'doing research' on Indigenous issues. Through acknowledging the philosophical underpinnings and personal experiences brought to the research environment by the researcher, researchers can maximise cultural safety whilst negotiating entry into the field.

Similar to Australia, Swedish academe requires human research projects to undergo ethics reviews, although, research undertaken on a postgraduate level is not required to undergo ethics processes. Also, contrary to the Australian academic environment, where Indigenous research must be preceded by specific ethics reviews, Swedish academe requires no particular ethical protocols for Sami or Indigenous research (Ledman, 2012, p. 55; Lawrence, 2009, p. 66). When PhD Candidate Kristina Sehlin MacNeil initiated her PhD project within Umeå University in Sweden, she was told that the project did not have to undergo an ethics review unless seeking to publish internationally, and that whether the research participants were Indigenous or not was irrelevant. In other words, in Sweden, there are no particular ethics protocols for research that involves Indigenous peoples, that goes beyond mainstream research involving human beings.

Swedish critical race and whiteness researcher Tobias Hübinette and colleagues (2012) point out that using the Swedish word *ras*, meaning race, is more or less taboo in Sweden and states that "instead, the term ethnicity, and to a certain extent also culture and religion, have replaced and also been made to include race" (Hübinette et al., 2012, p. 44, author's own translation). Hübinette et al. (2012) argue that rather than eliminating racist societal structures and expressions, the avoidance of the term race, in favour of a so called 'colour blind' society, has merely aggravated the discussion about issues of discrimination, racism and segregation experienced by non-white Swedes (ibid.). It seems likely that the avoidance of the word 'race' and fixation on 'colour blindness' is linked with the generic ethics procedures for research involving human beings. According to a Swedish national philosophy Sami people are simply Swedish people and run the same risk of being subjected to unethical research methods as any other Swedes. However, as evidenced by a report compiled by the Swedish Discrimination Ombudsman, Sami people experience a high degree of discrimination because of being Sami (Pikkarainen & Brodin, 2008). The question is whether ethical procedures regarding research involving Sami people that do not factor in issues of discrimination because of Saminess, can guide research that will promote social justice for Sami people. Or will this (lack of) ethics procedures merely add to unjust structures already in place? A Decolonising Standpoint would address structural discrimination promoted by a lack of appropriate ethics procedures and provide both non-Indigenous and Indigenous researchers with a philosophical grounding built on respect and reciprocity. To embrace a Decolonising Standpoint a researcher must

be ethically as well as methodologically committed to honouring the research participants' voices and perspectives, and to the concept of cultural safety.

Risk recognition and minimisation

Within current academic structures there are risks associated with taking a stand for Indigenous led or guided research and ethics as a primary philosophical position. These risks can include researchers being denied access to resources due to their commitment to follow Indigenous research ethics and protocol (Heikkilä & Fondahl, 2012), or the research not being regarded by some researchers as objective or even scientific. In a recent paper Denzin (2014) outlines the battles between research paradigms and whilst being optimistic about the development of qualitative research, he calls for a greater openness between paradigms as well as an:

> ...Ethical Agenda: The qualitative inquiry community needs an empowerment code of ethics that cross-cuts disciplines, honors indigenous voices, implements the values of love, care, compassion, community, spirituality, praxis and social justice (Denzin, 2014, p. 1125).

We agree with Denzin, however, we also argue that the emergence of a Decolonising Standpoint extends our understanding of Indigenous research ethics in a way that challenges where responsibilities currently lie; Indigenous research ethics must involve non-Indigenous as well as Indigenous commitment. Within the context of Indigenous inquiry we advocate a philosophical commitment to research that is based on participation by choice, and reciprocity by definition, as well as positions that are fully negotiated in Indigenous people's terms of respect, understanding, cultural appropriateness, and a willingness to consider others. This standpoint should not have to be fought for by Indigenous researchers in isolation but should be based on shared recognition and mutual respect between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers.

Compliance versus philosophical standing

We argue that in accepting responsibility to engage in Indigenous research, all researchers must broaden their focus from a narrow compliance perspective to include a philosophical Decolonising Standpoint. Researchers must make the effort to learn about, and be prepared to implement, an ethical framework that demonstrates understanding of the possible risks associated with Indigenous research and the range of methodological perspectives appropriate to Indigenous research. This includes a reflective and critical process that enables a researcher to learn from their practical experiences and enrich their philosophical understanding of the research process. Standpoint theory enables all researchers to be explicit in articulating their philosophical positionality for example as an insider or outsider, as an Indigenous or non-Indigenous person, or as a male or a female. A Decolonising Standpoint demonstrates a deep and genuine commitment to acknowledging the many negative impacts of research on Indigenous peoples and cultures, and contributes to the momentum of a shifting paradigm away from oppressive ways of thinking and working.

Active engagement with Indigenous research ethics and methodologies should include a review of critical commentary on these topics as championed by researchers such as Nakata (1998), Smith (1999), Atkinson (2001) and Foley (2003) and as laid out in various national and provincial guidelines. These and other scholars have not only raised the bar on integrity within the research process, they have also set the bar in place where no bar previously existed. Dr Marsh as an early career researcher shares her experiences of the scale of the ideological gap that exists between institutional compliance and ethically driven researcher philosophy (Marsh, 2011). This was prompted by her experiences and earlier inquiry into the level of attention being given by academic scholars to the research process. In

particular the phenomenon known as 'contested space' (Ball & Janyst, 2008; Laycock et al., 2011) offered a dialogue for investigating the power relations within research. Contested spaces become very apparent when navigating the various models of ethical engagement such as the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) model of multiple levels of approval, the Human Research Ethics Committees (HRECs) University model, and localised models such as the 'ways of working' community model that emerged in the 1990s in community research and development in Western Australia. Many people involved in research seek to find ways that complement the needs and priorities of communities, the requirements of academia, and the expectations of researchers both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. However these spaces remain highly contested because of entrenched colonial approaches by some senior researchers, internalised colonialism in some sectors of Indigenous communities, as well as a range of inconsistencies across ethics compliance and philosophy.

Our sense of future direction is firmly influenced by the knowledge that Indigenous research ethics is a worldwide phenomenon being led by Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, and the time for a critical and radical approach to ethics more generally is long overdue (Sikes, 2013). These scholars have acknowledged the researcher's privilege in both philosophical terms as well as in practical compliance measures. Experienced and fledgling researchers alike have a responsibility to ensure that research goes beyond a level of ethics compliance that is tokenistic. Ethically sound Indigenous research should not be the sole responsibility of Indigenous researchers and Indigenous research bodies. We argue for a philosophical shift that embraces a power rebalance in favour of Indigenous peoples and knowledges, is culturally safe for all, and is based primarily on the values and priorities of Indigenous research participants. This is what we believe a Decolonising Standpoint is based on.

Research ethics governance

In a research environment of shrinking resources there is increasing pressure to ensure that funding is allocated according to outcome-driven criteria rather than participant-driven criteria, which can sometimes place institutions at odds with the concept of ethical research (Smith, 1999; Denzin et al., 2008). Stringent ethical measures do not guarantee that research funds will not be allocated to poorly designed projects or researchers with limited knowledge and experience of how to negotiate entry into the field in a culturally respectful manner. For example, in Australia there are often clear and detailed governance frameworks for addressing these shortfalls, yet there is still an element of philosophical resistance within the academy toward Indigenous-led research (Fredericks, 2008; Sherwood, 2009). Within this cohort of resistance there is an element of individuals (both researchers and policy makers) circumventing their responsibility to decolonise their practices, as well as individuals being pressured into conforming to the old ways of doing business in the Indigenous context (Sherwood, 2009). One example of an attempt at strengthening institutional and individual resolve to decolonise the governance of research is the South Australian Indigenous Research Accord (SAHMRI, 2014). This document was developed in consultation with a broad range of interest groups and endorsed by numerous parties, including three universities in South Australia. Its purpose is to pledge commitment at the highest level for ethical governance in Aboriginal health research in South Australia. At an individual level, we feel that all researchers working in Indigenous research should insist that research projects include the capacity to provide adequate opportunities to network, advocate, and strengthen their collective Decolonising Standpoints through informal networking as well as through opportunities to critically engage with methodological and ethical issues via seminars, conferences and through publication.

Conclusion

The tendency for some researchers, particularly those not familiar or comfortable with Indigenous research, is to view methodological and ethical reform as something primarily (or solely) an Indigenous responsibility, or to regard compliance measures as a gatekeeping practice. We endorse a very different set of priorities, where ethical engagement is a philosophical commitment derived from a Decolonising Standpoint that must always be prioritised both at an ideological as well as practical level. We acknowledge that this position remains little understood and poorly accepted within mainstream academies.

We argue that decolonisation of the research process requires identification and interrogation of resistance toward Indigenous-led research and Indigenous priorities at a theoretical as well as practical level. We claim that development of a Decolonising Standpoint based on the principles of Indigenous Standpoint theory will ideologically shift Indigenous research design and implementation to a new standard. We feel this is necessary to ensure issues such as positionality are openly discussed by all researchers, and critiqued with vigour by both new and seasoned researchers. This demands a critique of ideas such as mutual respect and reciprocity, to open up debates on more radical ideas around research control. We suggest that further development of a Decolonising Standpoint theory provides a way of emancipating Indigenous research participation through highlighting culturally appropriate ideology and ultimately greater Indigenous control. We feel this will create a shift that is urgently required across the academy, to ensure the intricacies of Indigenous research are fully understood or appreciated at the onset of an Indigenous research project. Decolonising Standpoint theory will strengthen our knowledge of power relations, including how Indigenous Standpoints ontologically change the framing of research. Decolonising Standpoint theory will shift control from the Western academy to the community in ways not currently possible due to the continued contestation of space and resources. Through institutional as well as individual endorsement of decolonising theories and methodologies there is great potential to strengthen Indigenous research.

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