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GROUNDED THEORY *and* FOCUS GROUPS: RECONCILING METHODOLOGIES *in* INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION RESEARCH

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◼ Abstract

This paper captures an ideological moment in time in which I contemplated the methodological approach I was embarking upon. In my search for a more appropriate approach for conducting research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tertiary students at the University of Queensland, I chose focus groups set within the qualitative process of grounded theory. This paper explores the meaning, usefulness and persistence of grounded theory, how it juxtaposes with focus groups, and the implications for the reciprocal integrity of the research for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and me. Within this context and the tenets of grounded theory I ask questions such as, "For how long in the process can your research texts (linking data and theory) about field texts (participants' narratives) remain purely inductive?" And, "How does the movement between inductive theory development and deductive assumptions fit with issues of power and authority in an Australian Indigenous context?"

I see possibility in the complementary use of grounded theory and focus groups that creates dialogic relationships between the students as both narrators and audience. Through the interaction of retelling, reliving and recreating life experiences in conversations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tertiary students conceptualise their individual subjectivities in a process of self-construction. How perceptive I am in "seeing" developing concepts within the students' testimonies, and how I interpret those concepts in relation to existing theoretical content, may lead to new theory that influences the ongoing deconstruction of grand narratives often assigned to group identities. Co-research among the participants can provide the opportunity for monitoring the generative process.

◼ Introduction

In this paper I pose challenges for myself as a non-Indigenous researcher working with Indigenous tertiary students, keeping in mind the implications for the reciprocal integrity of the research for the students and me. In doing this, I explore the adaptation of grounded theory and focus groups to create a space for the conceptualisation of life experiences through the dialogic nature of open conversations. My interest in Indigenous educational success grew from my observation of a discrepancy between past rhetoric that continually spoke of the disabling grand narrative of unavoidable and predictable Indigenous failure and the reality of Indigenous student success that I had been witnessing throughout my undergraduate studies and student tutoring. I did not wish to dismiss the many difficulties that Indigenous students face in the mainstream educational system but I had found a certain contradiction there.

It was after being with, and talking to, successful Indigenous tertiary students at the University of Queensland that I decided to approach some to gauge their possible interest in this contradiction as a formal study. How I conducted myself was to become of extreme importance as I proceeded. I had often discussed with Indigenous academics and students the frustrations and implications of inappropriate research being conducted by non-Indigenous researchers with Indigenous individuals and communities. They constantly reminded me that it was not always necessarily a matter of non-Indigenous researchers being ignorant of, or insensitive to Indigenous methodologies, but rather an ingrained attitude that placed Western-based methodologies as the only valid and rigorous approach to research, ones that would present the researcher's work as being acceptable in established, hegemonic Western academia.

Rather than totally discarding orthodox research methods I wished to reassess their uses as they would be generally practised (Lather, 1991, p. 20) and therefore, looked for possibilities within the adaptiveness of grounded theory and focus groups. With the intent of creating and exploring ideas from within the students'

shared conversations, the creating of new theory offered more flexible approaches to this situation; ones that would acknowledge the decolonisation politics of an Indigenous research agenda with more appropriate methodological approaches (Smith, 1999, pp. 115-116).

My research challenge

My research challenge was then to acknowledge and convey the call by Indigenous peoples for more culturally appropriate research approaches that recognised Indigenous methodologies and demanded respectful relationships (Huggins, 1998; Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Sheehan, 2004; Smith, 1999). This might not only have the potential to change the way knowledge is produced but also acknowledges that Indigenous peoples may have distinctly different ways of thinking about and naming research in bringing their values, attitudes and practices to the forefront (Smith, 1999, p. 124).

There is always a certain vulnerability for the participants and the researcher, our relationships, and ultimately for the study. In the current climate of "post era" scholarship there is much engagement with power, cultural authority, representation and agency. Not only had I needed to ask why I was doing this study, but also who would it benefit, how productive would it be for the Indigenous students, and how would the use of focus groups and grounded theory serve the aims of the study?

On thinking about my assumption that the Indigenous students were already well self-empowered before agreeing to participate, I felt that they had volunteered to participate in anticipation that through my research text, there would be the means of passing on their stories of success to future educators and Indigenous students. My direction then was to look at how these students have been successful, what they regarded as success, and how it defied the grand narrative of student failure. Although the students held expectations of me, they had differing ideas concerning whether it could be achieved. Generally, they were happy with having the opportunity to speak and that was why they took up the option. Some were sceptical about the outcomes, both in positive and negative terms. This issue was discussed further with comments and suggestions from the focus group participants in Stewart and Mackinlay (2003, p. 17).

At present, my research is ongoing and the students are supportive of my participation and the purpose of the study (Stewart & Mackinlay, 2003, p. 21). One of the students, Ross (pseudonym used by student request), told me that he trusted me to do the right thing by him and the others. I imagined that they also had unspoken reservations and this is where continued consultation is vital in maintaining focus and accountability. Nakata (2004, pp. 2-3) emphasises

the importance of opening "difficult dialogues" on a conceptual level as the "essence" of the necessary restructuring of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationships. It is certain that the complexities involved in such dialogues will produce discomfort and risk for those willing to participate.

While I acknowledge that my position as researcher (and non-Indigenous) holds a certain amount of power, I do not view the Indigenous students as being "powerless" in this situation. They have the option to withdraw at any time, making my research inoperable. In caring about their opinions of me as an ethical researcher, they have the power to negate my efforts and erode my self-perception. According to Foucault (2002, p. 298), power relations between people in any situation will always be present and unbalanced, but the point is to work at lessening the level of domination one holds over another.

In searching for new theory emerging from the context-embedded field texts, I found that a process of combining the use of grounded theory and focus groups offered possibilities for creating respect in research relationships. Respect in research is essential for it is "a reciprocal, shared, constantly interchanging principle which is expressed through all aspects of social conduct" (Smith, 1999, p. 120). The basis for my self-reflexivity is in my ethos of "What sort of researcher do I want to be?"

The reworking and complementing of focus groups and grounded theory

In firstly trialling modified focus groups (Madriz, 2000), I hoped to offer an alternative physical and intellectual space in which Indigenous tertiary students might feel more comfortable and able to share their views. I considered their involvement and contributions vital in directing the future progress of the research. By gaining their perspectives of the research purpose, methodology, product, theory and conduct of the study, I was hoping to provide opportunity for voices to be heard and valued. A trial allowed me to concentrate on particular areas of the method that may have been unclear, to test certain questions, and generally to begin building a rapport with co-participants as well as to develop effective communication patterns (Janesick, 1998, p. 42).

In telephone conversations with students after the end of each session I asked for their opinions on how they felt about participating in the focus group and its suitability for further use. Some of their responses were (pseudonyms used by student request):

> **Lois:** the forum of the focus group is not a new concept to Aboriginal people ... generally speaking, a group of people getting together in community consultation, collaboration and decision-making, sometimes of mixed gender and different ages

is representative of cultural practice ... and still is now.

Mary: it was fantastic to talk to other Indigenous students about our issues and problems ... so encouraging on my path to finding out my Aboriginal history.

Ross: It's a bit funny ... it's a strange thing for me ... I take a step backwards because I'm a reclusive sort of person ... but I think this works OK ... because there are four people here so you can listen to each others stories ... have a bit more of an open conversation. Someone will tell you a story and you'll feel some way about that story and that will remind you of an experience you had then you'll talk about it ... something good is going to come of it.

Tom: personally, I don't mind this style of research.

Neil: I only knew one other person ... I felt a bit uncomfortable to a certain degree ... I didn't really want to talk.

Ross: yeah ... but I'm quite happy with the way things went today ... I think today was great.

Even though their candid responses suggested some reservations, their feelings mostly indicated that the idea of using focus groups as a means of gathering field texts had legitimacy and was worth investigating as a continuing method. They offered suggestions as to how the method could be further changed or supplemented (Stewart & Mackinlay, 2003).

In creating a relaxed physical space, students would have the option of choosing their time and level of participation according to their preferred social and cultural communication practices. Conversations evolved with the students deciding on how and when they contributed and the field texts emerged as narrative rather than prescripted answering. In a self-chosen group situation there was space for physical silences, cultural knowledge silences, and gender and age priorities; for example, who could speak, when they could speak, when it was time to defer to others. The situations also acknowledged the multiplicity of life experiences, subjectivities and individual personalities. Accordingly, the use of focus groups as a means of collecting field texts did not necessarily suit all participants and alternative options were discussed.

At the same time, the modified focus group operated as a dialogic space where students entered relationships with the other participating students as both narrators and members of an audience. As a result they would construct the self through a process of re-envisioning their life experiences as Indigenous tertiary students.

In borrowing from Wortham (2001, p. 7), I hoped that the sharing, comparing and sorting of stories with others may help the students to express and manage multiple, sometimes fragmented or contradictory selves. Operating as an open conversational space extended the dimensions and possibilities of discourses beyond the narrowing scope of formal focus groups. Sampson (1993, p. 97) described conversations between people as "communication in action" and that as they dominated our lives, it was time that they were taken seriously as a tool for counteracting the monologic construction of Western privilege.

By adapting the grounded approach to building theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), emphasis was placed on theory construction through the conceptualisation of what was contained in conversations and the verification of such interpretations through either re-examining the field texts or speaking with the participants to confirm or modify. In many instances the students themselves gave voice to phenomena and named them in conceptual terms. Examples of this were the use of terms such as "uptown", "coconut" and "role model", which they then developed by sharing experiences and drawing together the over-riding concept of how they "operated in two worlds" in gaining their life successes.

While the students found related concepts among their varied experiences, it remained clear that differences between individuals were present regardless of any commonalities that existed in their groups. They had their Indigenousness in common but may have had little else in common pertaining to their backgrounds, affiliations and goals. My presence added confusion and extra socio-cultural and historical dimensions to the dynamics of the group already complicated by daily life. Individuals in the groups brought with them to the discussions awareness of such diversity among all group members and served to dispel the notion of the binary Indigenous/non-Indigenous category (including an essentialist Indigenous category) in which either could be positioned as the Other.

In the past, and in many cases still present, this binary notion based on race and culture has prescribed what is attached to each category representing each as unique, separate and oppositional in entity. As a result, discourse within the paradigm sets itself up to negate individuals' voices, those often being the voices of people already historically silenced. Persistence of a binary position in failing to recognise the complexities of all people's lives only serves to perpetuate the condition and prevent a moving forward in understandings and relations among people. However, Nakata (2000, p. ix), with McConaghy's (2000, p. 2) agreement says that in challenging "old discursive regimes" it is not necessary to erode "the cultural, linguistic and political resources of Indigenous people." It involves a working through of the issues surrounding an essentialist view rather than a total dismissal of its existence. Participating in

focus groups in this instance hopefully gave Indigenous students the opportunity to employ "different intellectual theorisations of their position[s] in relation to all the discourses that intersect their lives" (Nakata, 2000, p. ix).

Nakata (1997), in his experiences as a Torres Strait Islander, dispels the simplicity of the "them" and "us" positions and proposes an "interface" between the two, a political space that circumscribes the ways in which Islanders make sense of and enact their lives. An opportunity to speak and be heard is supported by hooks (1992, p. 116) and Foucault (1980) who advocate the possibility of resistance in the form of developing agency within the power/knowledge struggle that takes place between all participants in such discourse. I found that Indigenous students did want to talk about their Otherness and wanted to celebrate it through a dialogic alternative (Sampson, 1993, p. 14). In providing an alternate space for voice freedom, all participants could have the opportunity to express themselves, which included not only defending their positions but also making effective use of those opportunities for significant change. Within a designated space, Indigenous students could perhaps negotiate those margins, gaps and locations where agency could be found. This was how I hoped the students would view their participation.

In adopting certain concepts of Charmaz's (2000) constructivist grounded theory, depth and richness of dialogue was necessary for revealing deep meanings in Indigenous students' life experiences. I found that the focus groups encouraged a flow of ideas and cultivated deeper conceptual thinking. However, the use of focus groups may limit, if not inhibit, the development of thick description as the flow of ideas may move too quickly for detailed development of stories and ideas. The students suggested having the option of one-on-one conversations with me at a later date, which did happen. That allowed them more time to individually build on stories and ideas raised in the focus groups and provided privacy for revealing things that perhaps were too personal or sensitive to disclose in their group situations.

Gaining meanings from the interactions was complicated through the shifting combinations of parties to the conversations. In the extended audience of the focus group the students may have taken on different personas or subjectivities as they positioned themselves according to others and their own experiences. Wortham (2001, p. 160) claims that where an individual has a group audience there is opportunity for a more dialogically rich ground upon which to develop a conceptual understanding in emerging multivoiced conversations. Multiple layered stories produce conceptual propositions of which the students at the time (and the researcher later) either consciously or subconsciously link, through world and experiential knowledge, into relational webs

(Bower & Morrow, 1990, p. 44). Evolving conceptual patterns can also be linked to interpretations of students' interactional positionings through dialogic descriptions of time-space relationships such as those of Bakhtin (1986).

I felt that within the climate of the focus groups the students were able to speak relatively freely and, by interpreting and giving meaning to their experiences, could be able to access a process of "conscientisation" that Freire (1985, p. 68) proposes, of not only being in the world but with the world, together with others. In this sense then the students were making conscious contributions; attempting to construct for me something meaningful and coherent to further my understanding as well as their own.

Reason (1998, p. 264) believes that people are to varying degrees self-determining in their intentions and purposes. In accordance with my ethical stance on researcher/participant relationships, it is vital for the validity of the research to acknowledge that what they say and how they interact in the focus groups will be largely determined by them. Therefore, it was anticipated that formulating theory together from retelling and recreating experiences placed them in a position of co-researching with me in a research relationship (Stewart & Mackinlay, 2003, p. 4). Together our multiple perspectives as co-researchers could help to validate the existence of differing ways of knowing, with recognition that all ways of knowing are significant in the role they play in resisting oppression and exploitation. My intention was to move away from an assumption in ethnography that the Indigenous students would be there to be constituted as others to be known by me from a distance (Nakata, 1995, p. 41). I felt that this process placed the practices of grounded theory and focus groups in accord. Theories must emerge from specific contexts in order to examine such contexts critically; in this case the context of the co-researchers within the environment of the focus groups and the context of their lived experiences. I saw the importance of promoting the concept of Indigenous students as "intellectuals", as creators of theory but also as consenting and effective participants.

Bruner (1987, pp. 19, 21) discusses the developing "empowerment and subjective enrichment" of the individual's performance in the group allowing that person to stand back from the unfolding story as one who is neither formed by nor owns experience. He also speaks of an undercurrent of consciousness in which there is a shift in the narratives from expository to perspectival language and the person becomes a protagonist in his or her own story. In one of the focus groups, I took part in this process with Tina, Kris, Jane and Mary (pseudonyms used by student request). Tina could "see" her shifting position as she interacted in the dialogue with seemingly "empowered" other Indigenous students:

Tina: you guys sound really powerful ... you know where you're going ... it's sort of like a tool to your success.

[life experience] changes your perception of what success is, what failure is ... just today I've seen something ... 'failure is an event, not a person' ... and that's it you know ... so ... it's how you do it and what you want to get out of it really.

I'm getting there ... I'm working at it now.

I just know it's all happening in this time and space right now where my whole life is changing both internally, spiritually.

Tina's story, as did those of the other students, became not merely an articulated reflection of their individual university experiences but products of engaging in the social networks of the group (Gergen, 1994, p. 22). Wortham (2001, p. xii) draws on "slippery Bakhtinian concepts" when he concludes that the relational context of a group has significant, if somewhat complicated, effects on the transformative power of re-envisioned life stories. The utterances take on a life of their own in the context of the group interactions. Participation could produce varying degrees of acceptance or resistance comprising multiple, shifting and unpredictable variables as the conversations and narratives unfolded.

Complexities and cycles in human relationships act to confuse methodological procedures and impact on the meaning-making process in field texts. In dealing with the seemingly endless challenges that continually arise, this quote has provided me with an insightful message that will remain with me throughout my research life. "Nonlinearity means that the act of playing the game has a way of changing the rules" (Gleick, 1987, p. 24) and in acknowledging that my very presence must change the dynamics of the focus group, it also highlights that those dynamics become unpredictable and can activate and operate within different dimensions of time, space and relationships. In such uncertain situations such as these focus groups, mutual respect for everyone becomes paramount. In accepting that my choice of methodology in working with Indigenous students will not still criticism and "solve problems", relinquishing some control over the research process will allow most to be gained from the complementary use of grounded theory and focus groups. Focus groups offer an opportunity for the construction of narratives and grounded theory proposes a meaning-making process for those narratives.

Reflection

In this paper, I have outlined the search for an alternative approach to formalistic methodologies

in conducting research with Indigenous Australian tertiary students, one that is more agreeable with Indigenous Australian research methodologies. I have discussed the complementary use of grounded theory and focus groups in an Indigenous context as a means of highlighting how Indigenous tertiary students have viewed and achieved success.

Establishing an epistemology and constantly working through research issues is important and necessary in facing the confusions, dilemmas and contradictions that may arise when Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are working together within possibly differing worldviews. Co-research among the participants in a reciprocal relationship can provide the opportunity for monitoring whether it is maintaining the level of originality and flexibility that I had hoped and planned for. The clash or incompatibility of formalistic approaches to doing research with Indigenous Australian tertiary students remains an ongoing dilemma. However, while acknowledging the contentious issues of researcher/participant relationships that are complicated by race, it is counterproductive to become paralysed by constant self-reflection. Instead the researcher must come to some personal and relational compromise and concede to finding some "comfort from the discomfort" (Mackinlay, 2003).

Postscript

Rather than use the restricting prescriptiveness of how focus groups are organised, conducted and evaluated with the expectation of definitive results (Patton, 2002, p. 385), I adopted the basic element of a group of people coming together for discussion and adapted it to suit our requirements. I changed the term "focus" to "conversation", preferring to instil a suggestion of casualness, which would hopefully encourage free-flowing dialogue that did not impede, control or limit the Indigenous students' contributions.

Acknowledgements

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