Engaging Indigenous content within teaching of qualitative research in psychology

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Abstract

"Australian universities recognise cultural competency as an essential attribute for graduates. Within this context, The Australian Psychology Accreditation Committee (APAC) has enforced requirements for students within psychology programmes to have access to Indigenous content. Though Indigenous participation rates are low, the inclusion of Indigenous content or what is often labeled 'Indigenous psychology' acts at least as a symbolic gesture and important step forward in reconciling the massively disadvantaged position of Indigenous Australians. However there is little to date in the way of guides to help develop appropriate teaching methods to include such content more substantially in programmes. This paper reflects on embedding Indigenous issues and content within curriculum of qualitative research methods. While all content areas can or could include Indigenous content, the teaching of qualitative research methods has enormous capacity to bring Indigenous content to life for students. First, a general argument for the inclusion of Indigenous content within the qualitative research methods curriculum of psychology is suggested. Second, several case study examples of teaching praxis including Indigenous content are provided. Finally, evidence on the utility of such examples for students in learning about Indigenous peoples and key processes and skills for working with Indigenous communities from student feedback are discussed."

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Abstract: Australian universities recognise cultural competency as an essential attribute for graduates. Within this context, The Australian Psychology Accreditation Committee (APAC) has enforced requirements for students within psychology programmes to have access to Indigenous content. Though Indigenous participation rates are low, the inclusion of Indigenous content or what is often labeled 'Indigenous psychology' acts at least as a symbolic gesture and important step forward in reconciling the massively disadvantaged position of Indigenous Australians. However there is little to date in the way of guides to help develop appropriate teaching methods to include such content more substantially in programmes. This paper reflects on embedding Indigenous issues and content within curriculum of qualitative research methods. While all content areas can or could include Indigenous content, the teaching of qualitative research methods has enormous capacity to bring Indigenous content to life for students. First, a general argument for the inclusion of Indigenous content within the qualitative research methods curriculum of psychology is suggested. Second, several case study examples of teaching praxis including Indigenous content are provided. Finally, evidence on the utility of such examples for students in learning about Indigenous peoples and key processes and skills for working with Indigenous communities from student feedback are discussed.

Psychology, Indigenous Content, and Cultural Competency

The aim of this paper is to open up a dialogue on the power of qualitative research with Indigenous communities as a platform for cultural competency of psychology students. Australian Indigenous communities have extremely rich cultures as some of the oldest surviving in the world, but contemporary survival, especially in remote localities, is subject to immense pressures due to a range of macro social, economic and cultural pressures (Milroy & Koposar, 2005) not to mention psychological ones. The majority of communities continue to occupy a secondary position within Australia and this is reflected in a whole host of socio-economic indicators including: health welfare dependency, incarceration, housing, unemployment and, educational attainment (Guilfoyle, 2006; Holman, 2005; Sinnott & Wittman, 2001). However Indigenous people are suffering from research fatigue (Coffin, 2002) and historically, research has been viewed with due suspicion because it imposes external agendas onto communities. Ironically, whilst research is still needed it is imperative to identify how communities feel about participating in research in order to develop better research into the future. Thus we need to better align our teaching of psychological research methods with the needs of communities if we want research graduates who can work with and engage communities. Clearly this strategy requires a work force, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, skilled in ways of creating culturally secure (Coffin, 2007), participatory

research dialogue and processes for working with communities (Guilfoyle, Coffin & Maginn, 2008). There needs to be a discussion therefore on how we might best build up the graduate cultural competencies needed for researching with communities.

Australian universities recognise cultural competency as an essential attribute for graduates. Edith Cowan University for example embeds "cross-cultural and international outlook" as one its five attributes (Edith Cowan University, 2009. Despite critiques of the monoculturalism of Australian psychology (Riggs, 2004), deeper assertions of the 'cultural malpractice' of psychology generally (Hall, 1997) and calls for a socially and culturally relevant psychology (Riggs, 2004), little has changed for Indigenous communities. Indigenous issues remain at the margins within psychology pedagogy and practice. Within this context, the Australian Psychology Accreditation Committee (APAC, 2008), which controls the accreditation of all psychology courses across Australia, has, rhetorically at least, enforced requirements for students within psychology programmes to have access to Indigenous content. Though Indigenous participation rates within university generally, and psychology specifically, are low, the inclusion of Indigenous content or what is often and problematically labelled 'Indigenous psychology' (see Ranzijn et al., 2008) acts at least as a symbolic gesture and important step forward in reconciling the massively disadvantaged position of Indigenous Australians.

There has been discussions about psychology and Indigenous Australians (Davidson, Sanson, & Gridley, 2000; Gridley, Davidson, Dudgeon, Pickett, & Sanson, 2000). However, there is little to date in the way of guides or appropriate teaching methods for the inclusion of Indigenous content in ways relevant to the profession of psychology (Ranzijn et al., 2008). One of the earliest examples described the process and initial outcomes of incorporating Indigenous and cross-cultural content within a stand alone psychology unit (Sonn, Garvey, Bishop, & Smith, 2000). Importantly, a team has recently embarked on an ongoing project called 'Disseminating strategies for incorporating Australian Indigenous content into psychology undergraduate programs throughout Australia'. To date, the team has produced a website (www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/pia), workshops and conferences, and several publications devoted to documenting the development of curriculum guidelines and a preliminary analysis of student responses (e.g., Ranzijn et al., 2006; Ranzijn et al., 2008). They want to provide some scaffolding and their argument is for the inclusion of Indigenous content systematically across any given psychology program, within foundational units and/or by placing content within all units.

This paper doesn't depart from the suggestions in Ranzijn et al. (2008), but argues while all content areas can or could include Indigenous content, including worked examples of (both successful and unsuccessful) qualitative research with communities within qualitative research units provides the following:

> An immediate foothold for Indigenous content by embedding it within an existing or at least emergent structure of units; which are already partly or wholly present within most contemporary psychology schools and departments.
> An embedding of content into a space where underlying foundations and assumptions can be culturally secure.
> Creates a cultural competence for social change. This is twofold. First equipping students with cultural competence through better understanding about the social issues facing Indigenous communities and simultaneously building culturally competent skills for applied research with Indigenous communities to address the very same issues.

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Reflective Case Examples for Engaging Indigenous Content into the Qualitative Research Methodology Curriculum

Without space to describe how *specific* qualitative methodologies/methods can act as catalysts for the three points above, the general point is that qualitative methodologies have a collective advantage as a teaching context for Indigenous content. These methodologies share a common eepistemological value through their interpretive foundations in constructivism / subjectivism (e.g., Crotty, 1998) which can create ways of doing research which are culturally and politically valid (Fielder, Roberts, & Abdullah, 2000; Prilleltensky, 2003; Smith, 1999). Suffice it to say their essential advantage is in their shift from objectivism. Many qualitative research designs, having shifted from an objectivist position, one which will always aim to impose a reality onto communities and have increasingly developed their methodologies to work for and with Indigenous communities. Let's examine one reflective case study used in the current teaching praxis (Kimberley Sexual Health Project, Bolger, Guilfoyle, Hunter & and Ejai, 1998). Although the premise in using this case study is one of illustrating a qualitative research process, and students certainly have this process vividly defined for them within the exercise, I argue it helps do more than that. It allows students to gain insight into Indigenous culture and just how qualitative research can support research with Indigenous communities.

This case study is used in current teaching practice to show how the research process of member checking supports a good qualitative data analysis. An interview with an Aboriginal Elder under a large tree near the planned site of a new health service (Guilfoyle et al., 2008) had recorded the following statement: "I know who you are and I know why you are here (a very long pause and)…you need to make sure there is shady tree like this one (gesturing to the canopy above)'. In checking this exchange with a cultural mentor it was clear that the Elder used the shady tree as a powerful metaphor, a reference to an open area in which a new medical service should be located, as it provided less potential 'shame' or stigma of attending the clinic for treatment. It was a space where people could wait without feeling embarrassed, and could easily exit if they felt they needed to. It meant the service should be functional, as is a shady tree in the hot sun of North Australia. It was a space which was neutral, transitory, a walk through space used by all in the community in their daily activity. The suggestion was that a new health service must, in the first and last, be a place where people are comfortable. Metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) of course is a powerful, though often underused, method for analysing qualitative data. In my experience**,** students of qualitative research in hearing this case study readily take the points about the validity in process of member checking for creating reflexive interpretations and the utility of qualitative data analysis in finding new ways to think about important concepts such as health service provision for marginalised communities.

Does it work? Student Feedback Following 2nd and 3rd year Qualitative Research Lectures in Psychology

When using case study examples like the one illustrated above, in my teaching praxis, the case study is prefaced by a description of the underlying topic of the research project. This preface demonstrates both conditions affecting communities and the how qualitative research methodology can help in engaging with communities in changing those conditions. Students were emailed the following question: We are always keen to collect feedback to improve teaching style, process and content. If you have a spare minute and feel comfortable emailing, could you email me your thoughts? Please comment on any aspect of the qualitative component or the unit generally.

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At a general level, the students responded positively to the Indigenous issues which were included in the presentation of the qualitative research material and, connected the two quite seamlessly. For example, one student commented, 'I enjoyed this unit, and found your examples on working with indigenous communities very useful' while another stated, 'I really really enjoyed the qualitative side of the unit. I gained a lot of useful knowledge about it and Aboriginal people and learnt a lot. I thought that your examples about doing research with Aboriginal communities that you used were so relevant and interesting'.

The students also reported specifically on gaining a greater understanding and appreciation of qualitative research. For example, one student reflected that 'I think qualitative research is essential for psychology to understand the deeper meaning of human interaction, thinking and decision making especially within cultural groups and all of the vulnerable members of or society'. Some students were left wanting more information on both qualitative research and the issues facing Indigenous peoples and communities. One student suggested, 'I really enjoyed your qualitative component of the unit and definitely feel there should be more focus on it after three years of mainly quantitative' and another stated 'I would be interested in learning more about Aboriginal culture and issues. I look forward to hearing more from you next year'. Some students commented positively on the use of real-world examples. For example, 'thank you for all of your personal anecdotes, they were very enjoyable!' and 'I did think that your examples were very useful to my understanding of research and the complexities of working and researching issues that affect people who may be labelled as part of a minority group. I am glad that your examples were about something you are passionate about.'

Importantly, the students were informed in a relational sense about the social position of Indigenous communities and the concerns of these communities. One student wrote that the content 'did increase my knowledge and appreciation of experiences and issues facing Aboriginal people and conducting research with vulnerable populations' and another stated 'the lectures on how to do research made me look a lot further than I may usually'. The potential for social change of the cultural environment through the reflexive nature of the case studies is evident when students stated that the content challenged some of their biases and preconceived ideas about Indigenous people. For example:

> I was surprised at the level of increased appreciation I gained for the plight of Aboriginal people from completing the course. I found the qualitative process really helped me to take to take the perspective of others, and was surprised to discover plenty of my own biases along the way even though I have always strived to be a fair and kind person! I really believe this process has provided me with a great deal more insight in this respect…

Finally, of great interest the potential for instrumental change through building capacity was evident when several students commented on how the examples of doing research with Indigenous communities helped them see how they might use their applied research skills in the future in order to counter the disadvantaged social position of Indigenous communities. For example, one student described, 'Prior to your lectures I was not fully aware of the opportunities available to conduct such research and work with Indigenous communities and I am seriously considering it as a field that I would be interested in' and another asserted, 'Doing research with Indigenous people is actually something I'm really interested in. I was wondering if you might be able to suggest pathways I could/should take if I wanted to work in this field in the future?' All the feedback received was positive and the extent and impact of any student discomfort in being challenged by such content, a finding which has been reported elsewhere (e.g., Gerrett-Magee, 2006; Rademacher, 2006; Sonn et al., 2000) will be assessed in my future evaluations and research.

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In sum, the data indicate that the students gained an appreciation of the processes and complexities of qualitative research and the issues affecting Indigenous communities, and some were keen to develop their skills and knowledge further.

Conclusions

Merriam (2002, p. xv) suggests that qualitative research is "a powerful tool for learning more about our lives and the socio-historical context in which we live". In this light, it is suggested that by embedding Indigenous content into qualitative research methodologies in psychology at least four outcomes for students learning about their lives can be achieved:

A description of the theories, methods and applications of qualitative research for students in concrete terms;
Informing students about the social position of Indigenous communities and the concerns of these communities;
Equipping students with understandings, skills, research tools and ideas that they might apply as professionals to counter the disadvantaged social position of Indigenous communities;
An appreciation of the need to be culturally competent generally.

Engaging Indigenous concerns within the teaching of qualitative methodologies does more than give voice to concerns of communities; I argue it can equip students with a deeper understanding of issues facing communities and skills and tools to sensitively, realistically, practically and ethically support Indigenous people through applied research. Engaging Indigenous content within the qualitative research curriculum in psychology is ultimately about creating a basis for action against cultural disadvantage. Of course symbolism is good and embedding Indigenous context can act symbolically as a positive gesture as suggested by Ranzijn et al., (2008). We do need much more than symbols though, and**,** by being skilled in qualitative research, psychology students are better positioned to be genuine research collaborators. At this stage, the discipline is tentatively moving towards (although to be sure APAC indeed mandated this) creating openings for Indigenous content, however, to ensure a strong flow and with doors fully revolving, we will need to look at how we can structurally support such programs. Of course my arguments above can only be based on conducting research within Indigenous communities; I am not an Indigenous person. As others have argued before now (e.g., Ranzijn et al., 2008), Indigenous psychology is secure only when the voice of Indigenous community members are directing the content, for example as guest speakers in lectures in the first place at least. Community members are *the* speakers positioned to talk about Indigenous communities concerns and how qualitative research might support the social elevation of communities while building the cultural competence of our graduates.

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