

## Theory Into Practice Strategies: Social Sciences and Humanities

### Research

In the environment in which today's universities operate, cultural diversity in research is an issue which is often neglected unless the research project directly involves the collection of data from, or about, another culture. However, in a diverse nation like Australia, it is important to consider a wide range of perspectives so that the research results reflect the diversity of cultural frameworks in the wider Australian community.

Furthermore, in a nation such as Australia, it is important to consider a range of Indigenous perspectives in research. Neglecting Indigenous perspectives results in unrepresentative portrayals of 'the wider Australian community'.

'We do not believe that Indigenous knowledges are competing with Western knowledges. Rather, the two knowledge systems complement one another. The interface of Western and Indigenous knowledges provides space for conceptualising a more culturally inclusive curriculum' (Koori Centre 2004 p5).

Only by taking into account a range of frameworks, which reflect Australia's cultural diversity, can research be more representative of the Australian community.

### Common issues/problems with university-based research

One of the problems often encountered in university-based research is that by virtue of their structure, universities are institutions that reflect dominant ideologies. This does not mean that the employees within such institutions are completely bound within such ideologies. Although it is true that people become socialised into workplace 'cultures', they also have the ability to think outside of their immediate social environment.

### Thinking about culture and being self-aware

A good start for thinking about culture, your own and alternate cultures, is noticing what you find surprising about differences in everyday behaviour between someone from an alternate cultural group to your own. When this happens, try to think about the cultural 'rules' that are being used by those involved in the interaction (Carroll 2000). It is important for people employed within the university system, no matter what background they come from, to think about their own culture, and where they stand in relation to cultural viewpoints which may be unfamiliar.



### Position the self within the research

It is important to reflect upon your own role in the research process and to ask such questions as

- have I made attempts to build rapport with the community that is being researched?
- what is my cultural viewpoint?
- have I acknowledged my own biases and the ways in which they may affect the research?
- have I taken into account the multiple voices within the community being researched?
- am I assuming that the community being researched has only one point of view?
- am I only researching the dominant cultural viewpoint of the researched community?



## The Research Process

### Step 1: Thinking through the research issue

#### 1. Consider who owns the research

It is often assumed that the research/data/knowledge belongs to the researcher, who is the person distilling the information. This is not always the case. For example, within some Indigenous Australian forms of knowledge, there is much information that is not privy to anyone but particular people who 'hold' that cultural knowledge. Ownership of the knowledge/research/data must be carefully acknowledged in such situations, and the wishes of the knowledge holders must be respected. This may place restrictions on the research process, but it is an important part of an ethical procedure for conducting research.

#### 2. Consider whether any groups are excluded

While it is not necessary to take every culture into consideration, it may be useful to reflect upon your own way of proceeding with the research process.

Questions to consider include

- are the points of view of a range of groups in the research taken into account?
- is it taken into account that certain social groups may hold forms of knowledge that cannot be passed on?
- is the research issue bound by the researcher's culture?

#### 3. Consider the particular viewpoints of women from various groups

The position of women in certain groups is one where gender and indigeneity/ethnicity are intimately tied, particularly when viewed from outside of the group. In other words, there are many gender issues which are not generic, but which are instead linked to a person's position within a particular Indigenous/ethnic community. Has this issue been considered?

#### 4. Consider whether the research empowers the researchers or the research subjects

Asking members of a research team for their input into every stage of the research process can be empowering. This is also true of an 'own perspective' brainstorming session at the start of the research process, where everybody is asked to take into account their own cultural viewpoint and that of their colleagues. In relation to the research subjects, they can be empowered through consultation with community recognised leadership, building rapport with the people to be researched, and by involving the community in every stage of the research process.

### Step 2: Background reading and setting up the theoretical and methodological framework

#### 1. Consider the cultural origins of sources and determine whether the background readings are representative and inclusive

If the only sources are those which stem from one viewpoint, then less mainstream forms of knowledge and methodologies are not taken into account. Ask the following questions

- are there sources which can be consulted to give a more balanced overview of the issues?
- how do we acknowledge that any one cultural viewpoint may be 'blind' towards another cultural viewpoint?

#### 2. Are Indigenous research methodologies and paradigms taken into account?

Indigenous methodologies and paradigms often incorporate culturally unique ways of doing things. For example, the methodology may indicate who holds particular forms of knowledge, who is allowed access to that knowledge, and the positioning of actors within the research process.

### Step 3: Data collection

#### 1. Interview a representative range of people from diverse origins

This is particularly important in Australia since the Australian community is a diverse one. Research which lacks a diversity of indigeneities/ethnicities, is not representative of the Australian community as a whole. Is your data collection wide enough to incorporate a representative spread of people of differing ethnic origins, including the Indigenous perspective?

#### 2. Involve the community that you are researching

When determining the level of involvement, consider the following

- what are the benefits for the community being researched?
- are researchers seen as authority figures imposing research from the outside?
- are various members of the community able to have a say in their own words (as much as is possible)?
- is there anyone in the community able to assist with the research (eg research assistants, interpreters, translators)?

#### 3. Negotiate with community recognised leadership

It is important to consult community and group leaders before proceeding, for a number of reasons. Often, it is difficult to gain access to people who will be important for the research if community approval is not gained first. Community recognised leadership can come in a variety of forms. For example, an interpreter may be a community recognised leader, providing access to information for the researcher, and framing questions and comments in particular ways for both the interviewer and the interviewee. Good relationships can facilitate smoother access for the researcher. Additionally, simply approaching respected people in the community is a sign of courtesy and good manners. This alone can facilitate access to key groups within a community.

#### 4. If using a questionnaire/survey for data collection, consider who has designed its questions and framed its scope

This is particularly important, as it is one of the earliest steps in the research process. If there is bias at this stage, it will be amplified throughout the whole research process. Consider the following

- has the questionnaire/survey been designed with sufficient attention to differing cultural expectations?

- have the questions been framed to take into account gender differences within various cultures?
- has culturally specific input been sought for the design of the questionnaire/survey?

## Step 4: Data analysis

### 1. View results objectively

Consider whether the data is analysed in as objective a manner as possible. Ask the following questions

- are the researcher's own viewpoints clouding judgement?
- are the views of the researched group/community considered?

### 2. Consider the effects of the data categories being used

The group/community being researched is often the best source of information on the categories to be used for data analysis. The researched group will have the best knowledge of the often subtle gradations of age, gender and social hierarchies, as well as an 'insider's' knowledge of the political machinations of the community.

Consider the following

- where do the data categories being used come from?
- are artificial categories imposed on the data?
- is the researched community adequately consulted?
- what are the effects of the categories being used?
- do they empower certain groups within the researched community, and disempower other groups?

## Step 5: The write-up

### 1. Consider who will write up the research

Consider asking someone in the researched community if they would like to be involved in the write-up. Such an approach lends credibility to the research as it involves an 'insider's' view. Other questions to consider might include

- are colleagues and members of the researched community involved in the proof reading and editing processes?
- has joint publication been considered?

### 2. Identify whether the writer's 'own voice' is part of a dominant culture

We live in a highly diverse community with a wide range of perspectives, based on a variety of ethnic, cultural, class, age, gender, occupational, family, personal and educational similarities and differences. To look at the research results only from the dominant viewpoint is to not take into account the increasing diversity of communities across the globe. Therefore, in order to do 'good' research, it is vitally important to question our own perspective, and to ask colleagues, or the people being researched, their opinions on our viewpoint.

## Step 6: Dissemination

### 1. Consider the focus of the dissemination of your research

Consider the following

- does the research address alternate viewpoints in addition to the mainstream viewpoint?
- will the research be available to the researched community?
- will it be available to people who can make a difference to the researched community?
- will it be available only through journals housed in university libraries, and therefore inaccessible to many researched communities?
- will the research be available in a Plain English version, or in a range of alternate languages?

### 2. Make a commitment to provide feedback to the community you are researching

To continue on the road of trust which was developed early in the research process, arrange to go back to the researched community, or the community recognised leaders, to provide feedback and dissemination of the research results. This should be an important part of any trust relationship between the researchers and the researched.

## References and further resources

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. (2000). Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies. Retrieved August 2004, from <http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/corp/docs/EthicsGuideA4.pdf>

Carroll, J. (2000). A Way of Thinking About Culture: An Exercise. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development. Retrieved October 2004, from [http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/2\\_learnch/culture\\_exercise.html](http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/2_learnch/culture_exercise.html)

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Sanderson, V., & Allard, A. (2001) 'Research as Dialogue and Cross Cultural Consultations: Confronting Relations of Power' in AARE Conference 2001. Retrieved August 2004, from <http://www.aare.edu.au/01pap/all01558.htm>

Sutherland, E., & Tandy, C. (2001). 'Challenges of cross-cultural research - methods and processes' in Inter-Cultural Studies: A Forum on Social Change and Cultural Diversity, 1(1), pp.39-50.

Weis, L. (1992). 'Reflections on the researcher in a multicultural environment' In C. Grant (Ed.), Research and Multicultural Education: From the Margins to the Mainstream. London: Falmer Press.

Worby, G., & Rigney, D. (2002). 'Approaching ethical issues: institutional management of Indigenous research' in Australian Universities Review, 45(1), pp.24-33.

University of Newcastle Guidelines for Inclusive Research Practice <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/policylibrary/000774.html>

University of Newcastle Inclusive Language Guidelines <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/policylibrary/000797.html>



## Research Checklist

Use this exercise to help get a picture of your own individual approach to research.

To what extent do I?	What evidence do I have that my approach is effective?
Acknowledge my own biases? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 Highly evident <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Somewhat evident <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Hardly evident <input type="checkbox"/> 0 Not evident	
Portray the positions or multiple voices of alternate groups/ individuals? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	
Empower my research colleagues? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	
Empower the subjects of my research? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	
Reflect upon whose voice (or standpoint) will be used in the research? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	
Ensure that my data is not over-represented by dominant cultural viewpoints? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	
Include readings/sources/references from minority voices (standpoints)? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	
Take steps to share my research with colleagues and the researched community? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	