

Qualitative research: A Wiradjuri perspective

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Abstract

This paper discusses qualitative research from an Indigenous (Wiradjuri) perspective; a perspective that comes from having a foot in both camps so to speak. Not an easy task! To be able to do this requires a skill that has to be acquired over time, a skill that can only be acquired if one is Indigenous and has been assimilated ... to a point ... into non-Indigenous ways of being.

It is my argument that research on Indigenous peoples should always be undertaken from an approach that gives “voice” to participants. It is imperative that Indigenous peoples “see” themselves in the final product, they can understand that the information given has been used in such a way that they can recognise their own individual reactions and responses to the questions that were asked of them during the interview process. The reactions and responses of Indigenous participants must “show” through in the final product.

This paper does not offer a model for qualitative research, nor does it endorse models developed and pushed onto the research stage by anthropologists, archaeologists, and researchers of dubious intentions. Rather the paper highlights how there is no one model that can be utilised when one wishes to conduct research into Indigenous peoples and/or issues.

Introduction

At the time of invasion, settlement, colonisation, whatever word one wishes to use to describe contact between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, there were approximately 500 different clan groups with around 250 separate language groups living in this country. There are numerous researchers from just as many disciplines that have stated this as fact; it must be true. Just as factual, according to researchers from various disciplines, is that Indigenous peoples were all the same, ate the same foods, dressed the same, utilised the environment in the same manner, undertook ceremony for the same reasons, and all came to be here because of our ability to paddle canoes over vast expanses of ocean, just to set up home here on this island.

Researchers that have long left the land of the living have left a trail of inconsistency, ambiguity, and anomaly behind them. When one takes the time to peruse their respective writings, one can conclude that most had been researching from a rather weak approach. Much of the early research on Indigenous peoples gave no voice to them. Who were those informants that provided so much information to the likes of anthropologists for example? Why did they give this information? Were they coerced, frightened, cajoled, pushed and prodded, threatened if they didn't?

How can we tell from the literature that the informants were giving information related to their “true” lands? Maybe they were being mischievous in the provision of information. If the informants were not given “voice” then the task becomes much, much harder. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that there are a number of misconceptions surrounding Indigenous peoples still today, and why the issues of stereotyping remain with us also.

When one decides to research Wiradjuri, one will find that the task ahead is not as simple as one would have imagined. In my days spent at the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) researching, I came across at least fifty different ways of spelling “Wiradjuri” and I find that highly amusing! Wikipedia (2005) stated that Wiradjuri or any other Indigenous person for that matter did not have a name for themselves. I’m still entertained by that one ... frustrated ... but entertained!

I have always been, and am still interested in the diversity of people. I always take this into account at any conference I attend, whether in my capacity as Wiradjuri, a speaker or presenter, or just as an onlooker. I do the same at parties and BBQs. I do this because of the dynamics of people, how you move from one person to another, how that interaction leads to interaction with others, the smiles, grimaces, pats on the back, hugs of welcome and tears of goodbye.

These are the ingredients that make you who you are, but also separate you from one another; you are not all the same, you do not all react the same in any given situation and this is the one overriding principle of research, I believe, that is qualitative oriented: people’s reactions are different!

The existence of Wiradjuri as a people has been examined for the most part from two sides of the fence so to speak; that of a non-Indigenous perspective, and from the perspective of Wiradjuri. Conducted by non-Indigenous people, those from various disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and archaeology, most early research was undertaken on Indigenous peoples without knowledge or consent, and whilst providing a range of opinions, they were still coming from the same side of the fence; the non-Indigenous side. This research in the majority of cases, gave no voice to peoples, gave no consideration of feelings, ideas, concerns, and thoughts of those being researched.

How does one know that the information is not biased, that it has been interpreted correctly, and/or is not a figment of someone’s imagination? What does one take to be gospel in relation to Wiradjuri if there are contradictions, ambiguities and anomalies in the literature? And there are. With many local informants having now passed into their respective spirit worlds, corroboration of some parts of history can only be inferred, suggested, tongue-in-cheek interpretations of actual peoples, places and events associated with them, simply because their voices have not been included in the final presentation of data collected.

This paper looks at many issues and in doing so acknowledges that there are a multitude of other issues that simply cannot be written of here. The reasons for this are varied. I am not privy to many secret and sacred aspects of knowledge. There is business that belongs only to those who are owners for that knowledge and of course there are areas of business that belong only to women.

There are examples in this paper that allude to the need for qualitative research, but if one were to look deeper into those examples one may find that the overall intention is to highlight how researchers must, as suggested by Briskman (2003, p13), take a step back and allow Indigenous peoples to become the “senior partners” in research and knowledge sharing. The enquiry into the Stolen Generations (*Bringing Them Home*) has demonstrated that research driven from an Indigenous perspective and one that gives voice to them as “senior partners”, changed the consciousness of an entire nation.

It should also be noted that the spelling of specific words related to Indigenous peoples and or places, is dependant on the resource being used at the time. Indigenous peoples had no alphabet to speak of and therefore much of the spelling found in the literature comes from non-Indigenous interpretations of what they have heard, how they wrote it down, and how they later interpreted their own handwriting when data analyses began. The beginnings of anomalies, contradictions and ambiguities? Perhaps ...

Discussion

From the very beginning of time ... our time ... that is the time of creation, Indigenous peoples have received visitors to their respective countries. Visitors come in all shapes and sizes, from diverse cultural backgrounds, with different intentions in mind. They have different spiritual beliefs, carry out ceremonies that differ from their neighbours, and have different laws that they are obligated to abide by.

These visitors are often scrutinised by the host peoples and various issues are debated long into the night when the visitors have retired. Invasion, or as some call it, settlement of this island that is known the world over as Australia, brought visitors to our lands that took scrutiny to another level.

Indigenous peoples in this country are the most researched peoples on the planet. The research was, in the past, conducted on every clan group that existed. Now of course, research activities are concentrated mainly on those Indigenous peoples that are perceived as being “traditional”. This research is interpreted in many instances incorrectly and all of a sudden, all Indigenous peoples are the same!

I have never given my permission for any person, regardless of discipline, to conduct research on me. It is a given however that research undertaken by historians and the like, will include me in some way, shape or form. However it seems a shame that those who conduct research and include me as part of the data do not come and actually talk with me ... they miss out on so much by not doing so.

I want to see the voices of my peoples and other Indigenous peoples in the final product. I want to be able to remember how I laughed at a certain question, cried when asked about “sorry business”, and shook my head when the issue of secret and sacred business arose during the questioning period. This gives substance to Yalmambirra, puts meat on the bones of contention, and respects my right to openness but also respects my right to privacy. I believe this is applicable to all Indigenous peoples.

I often wonder at the awareness of people in relation to Indigenous peoples in this country. I ask myself if non-Indigenous people are aware of how frustrated we are that many researchers think we should have all the answers simply because we are “black”. The world of research on Indigenous peoples can be likened to a minefield of uncertainty and is fraught with danger. Take the issue of traditional ecological knowledge for example.

Many, many non-Indigenous people that I have spoken to, regard Wiradjuri and other Indigenous peoples as the panacea for all the ills that have befallen the environments but where did they get this idea from? Researchers of all disciplines still undertake research on Indigenous peoples but they still make the same mistakes as those who have preceded them ... they do not ask us. Should someone ask me to locate a certain medicinal plant for example, they would be shocked to know that I couldn't tell the difference between a

medicinal plant and a Holden Ute! I am not a “black dictionary” and therefore I do not have all the answers.

As will be highlighted later in this paper, research based on assumption is detrimental to those who are being studied, but the problem does not stop at the doorstep of Wiradjuri ... it knocks at the door of all Indigenous peoples. There are many who do not give credence to our thoughts on our origins for example. The issue of where we came from is looked at with a certain amount of indifference simply because the ecological and archaeological record suggests that we all came from little squiggly things that swam in the water! That means you, the readers, are the product of a little squiggly thing that swam in the oceans of this world ... how does that sit with you, knowing that your ancestors wriggled their way out of the water, grew to be an ape, and then became woman and man! Could there be other explanations for this? Is it possible that they “got it wrong”?

In the year 2003, I attended the National Landcare Conference held in Darwin. The first speaker proceeded to inform all and sundry that all people came from those little squiggly things indicated earlier. This included Indigenous peoples. No thought had gone into the opinions of Indigenous peoples who had attended the conference, and therefore his talk was seen as another form of cultural genocide by many of the Indigenous peoples who were there, with many walking out on the speaker. It matters not who is right or wrong here, what matters is that both sides of the issue are brought to the attention of the audience and it is for them to decide what they wish to believe.

Nowhere in the aftermath of the conference was there any mention of the fact that many had walked out, with one lady, her eyes filling with tears, suggesting that “nothing had changed”. Nowhere was there mention that the majority of Indigenous peoples had attended a number of meetings designed to deal with the issue and that there were many hearts filled with sorrow and frustration. A dominant culture had spoken and the voices of those dominated drowned out.

Western understanding or view of “science” and “knowledge” differs to that of Indigenous peoples, and Western research, aimed at the collection of information pertaining to Indigenous peoples and/or issues, utilises methods vastly different to those that Indigenous peoples would use. The end result is that Indigenous peoples cannot “see” themselves in the final analysis (Yalmambirra 2002).

If one was to be approached and asked the question ... “When did you begin your academic research career?” I would have to reply that it really began when I undertook to get a higher degree, and in this case, an Honours degree. If this answer were to be used in some sort of quantitative survey it would become a statistic. But where is Yalmambirra? What of my reactions to the question? What happened to the shrug of shoulders, the glazed look of eye that invariably accompanies those who revisit in their mind, the frustration and despondency that is inherent in higher degree research? Where am I in the pages of some journal that presents me to the wide wonderful world as a statistic? Where is my “voice”? For the uninformed, I’ll tell you where. In that quantitative abyss; where identity becomes a number, where personality matters not, and where individual mannerisms and emotions are lost, never to see the light of day; gone perhaps forever.

Past research has projected Indigenous peoples as a homogenous group. East (1889 cited in Lawrence 1969 p2) comments that Indigenous peoples “are a completely uniform people”. Elkin (1938 p279) stated “that the Aboriginals are one people”, whilst Kohen

(1993) confirmed the statement of Elkin by suggesting that we all did the same things, lived the same way, ate the same foods, carried out the same ceremonial activities. Not true!

For the most part, this would infer that I have the same skills and knowledge that other Indigenous peoples have. I have never had the painful pleasure of being initiated, never been to ceremony where knowledge is imparted to those who have been chosen to receive it. I am not, nor have I ever been, the same as other Indigenous peoples.

Let's take a look at some of the type of application forms that floated around in the past. Application forms that my mother and father for example had to have completed for one reason or another. Somewhere in the form was the question: "Are you full blood Aboriginal or half-caste"? Tick the box. Having done so, they would have been classed as a "black" Aboriginal, or as "half white" and "half black". If they ticked the box "full blood" then they would have been classed as an Aboriginal, not as a Wiradjuri lady or man. If they were to tick the other box, they would be entered into a data base that does not take into consideration the confusion that sat heavily on their shoulders when they tried to decide what part of them was "white" and what part "black".

Life goes on though. Some things have changed. At one stage there were two boxes in most applications: Aboriginal *and* Torres Strait Islander ("half-caste" has gone). Tick the appropriate box. The form still does not allow for the difference between Indigenous groups. The information from the application forms is collected and entered in some obscure data base that does not give any consideration to the reasons one identifies, how long one has pondered and procrastinated over whether or not to identify, how many tears were shed at the realisation that for the last x amount of years one was a whitefella, and now because of a comment by a relative, is a blackfella, for example.

They are still there, those obligatory boxes, but they are marked Aboriginal *or* Torres Strait Islander. Tick the box. Ticking "Aboriginal" still does not identify me as Wiradjuri, but at least they separate Aboriginal from Torres Strait Islander!

The point I'm trying to make here is that many researchers do not take into account the diversity of Indigenous peoples, that we really are different, have different languages, different mannerisms, identify in various ways, and have different ways of being.

In my Honours thesis, I wrote that it was far easier for an Indigenous person to conduct research with Indigenous peoples than it is for others; that a "certain credibility" exists (Yalmambirra, 2002). I still believe this is the case. Having said that, there were still areas or issues that even I needed to take on board. Many, many people had commented to me that "you should be able to breeze your research in, after all, you're a blackfella," or have said, "it's easy for you, all you have to do is ask someone to be a participant and they'll do it because they're the same as you ...". No, my friends, it isn't that easy!

In pursuit of my Doctorate, I say "pursuit" simply because I've been chasing the damn slippery thing for a while now, I will interview a number of Wiradjuri persons. There are many questions that I will ask, but just as important are the number of questions that I cannot ask. Just as important is the fact that I will give them "voice"; they will be able to "see" themselves in the final product and should I ever need to speak with these persons again, it will be far easier for me to do so; that "certain credibility" will have been established.

In undertaking research for that elusive Doctorate, I have to follow certain, strict guidelines. My research proposal has to be sanctioned by non-Indigenous people. It is they who will decide if the proposal is ethical and appropriate. But these are my peoples, Wiradjuri peoples, and as an Elder of Wiradjuri I should not need to be given the green light by non-Indigenous and certainly non-Wiradjuri people to conduct research on my own mother or father, sister or brother! This is absurd but it is the “white” people’s way and if I am to eventually catch that slippery thing referred to earlier, then I have to abide by criteria developed by them. This equates to having that foot in both “camps” so to speak!

But even as a “blackfella” there are many areas that I am not permitted to go. As a male I cannot delve into women’s business for example. I would not contemplate doing so, but there are researchers that do. They ask the forbidden questions, and collect data on secret and sacred ceremony but do not reveal the anguish, or the pain that accompanied that information. Information given in this instance is usually presented in written form for all to read. By presenting data that omits the “person”, other Indigenous peoples can easily misinterpret the final product. This can, and often does cause heartache and conflict amongst Indigenous peoples.

I was aware of these issues when I commenced my erratic career as a researcher of sorts. I knew that I couldn’t go into areas of a secret and sacred nature, that women’s business was just that, and should never be looked at with male eyes, or listened to with male ears. Women’s business belongs to women!

An example is warranted here. During the last Soccer World Cup, there on our television screens was the world famous soccer player, Pele, talking up a storm about men’s erection problems, and that fountain of resurrection known simply as Viagra! Not to be outdone, other advertisements showed young women endorsing a product that could only be classed as women’s business! Consider then, the following scenario.

A knock at the door of a viewer. “Hullo. My name is Yalmambirra and I’m doing a survey on tampons ... could you tell me if you have seen the ad on TV lately please”? “Why I sure have” said the viewer, a male. Yalmambirra goes off and continues his research, analyses the data, and presents his findings. The viewer meanwhile is shocked that “such a thing can be shown to men because it’s women’s business”. The reactions of the viewer are not recorded and the “voice” of the viewer is lost. That same ad, or an updated version, goes to air because the statistics all point to the fact that men see the ad and can advise women on the issue of the best one to use!

Another example, this time in an Indigenous context: A knock at the door of a Wiradjuri lady. “Hi Aunty. I’m a Wiradjuri fella. My name’s Yalmambirra. I want to know what really happens out in the scrub when you’re going to have a baby”. It hits the fan real hard then my friends! But nowhere in the record would be the fact that I was chased for the next 5 kilometres by several angry and battle-hardened Wiradjuri grandmothers, wielding what could only be described as something glistening and definitely very, very sharp! Women’s business belongs to women!

If these examples infer that I am advocating for researchers, organisations and/or agencies to lift their game when developing questionnaires and the like, then that is correct, because

if the aspirations, thoughts, ideas, concerns and hopes of those being researched are not included in research, then the final analysis, in my opinion, may well be corrupted.

Robbins (1993) suggests that personal names are our intimate selves, that names are a means by which one individual differs from another, and that names can also show how people see themselves in relation to other people. The comment then by Wikipedia (2005) that we had no names, whilst entertaining in its own way, is a sad indictment of how some researchers labelled or did not label Wiradjuri or other Indigenous peoples. Can you imagine the following scenario?

Walking through the bush one day, a Wiradjuri man comes across a man from a neighbouring clan group. The following conversation takes place: “Hey brother, what are you doing in my country?” “Ahh, just passing through brother.” “Well, where do you come from?” “Just down the flat country way brother.” “What’s your name?” “I don’t know, brother, never had one.” Silence ... and then; “Nah, I don’t have one either, someone forgot to give us one eh.” “I’ve got an idea, let’s wait until someone comes along and gives us a name.” “What happens if you don’t like it?” “Don’t know brother.” “Well, got to go brother.” “Yeah, see you later brother.”

Robbins (1993) asks many questions in relation to the discipline of anthropological research. Does one have the ability to put aside their own cultural perceptions in order to “see” those being studied? Is it possible to “see” the world through the eyes of others? Can one immerse themselves so deeply in their research that they become the researched?

The answers to these and many more questions are not the domain of anthropology though. In my research oriented activities I have asked myself the same questions. My answer to these questions is no, I cannot. I do not believe anyone else can either, for to do so would mean becoming the researched in all entirety, having no connection to anything that can define who you were, where you came from and where you are going. At the end of the day, the researcher still has to produce his or her findings to those who pay the bills.

Research on Indigenous peoples has mostly been undertaken by non-Indigenous people; that is a given. But therein lies the problem. Is it really possible that an anthropologist for example can research Wiradjuri and do so by forgetting who he or she is? Congalton & Daniel (1976 pp56-60) state that “it is usual for members of each society to take for granted that their own culture is superior to others, and because of this, as they further suggest, that in an effort to evaluate someone’s behaviour, there is the danger that you will be evaluating it from your own cultural standards, from your cultural viewpoint”.

This of course is a very dangerous pastime when it comes to researching Indigenous peoples. Ethnocentrism has caused numerous impacts to Wiradjuri and other Indigenous cultures simply because the “white way of looking at things” is completely different from theirs. The very act of initiating young boys and girls is now considered “child abuse” for example. You don’t read of the hopes, the aspirations, the dreams of those young peoples, in becoming fully initiated peoples, and thereby accumulating all the knowledge of their respective Elders in efforts to keep their respective cultures alive.

The guidelines for Australia as a society are laid down by the “white” dominant culture and pay no heed to those of the subservient cultures. Existing law in Australia comes from that of the dominant culture and most research is driven from Eurocentric approaches that give no “voice” to those being researched simply because to do so would be to question

one's own belief system, and there are few who would willingly be led down that path, suggest Congalton & Daniel (1976).

Imagine if you can, that you are living and researching among some of the oldest living cultures in the world. Their lifestyles are completely different from yours but you are expected to “conform” so that you “fit” in. Some of you may have already done this and some have probably noticed that many numbers of subtle changes had to have been made (Hughes, 1993). The one over-riding issue however is the one highlighted by Hughes (1993) in which she states that regardless of how well trained a researcher is, they cannot enter the “mind” world of those being studied if language skills are not what they should be. This would certainly appear to have been the case in times past. If according to Wikipedia (2005) we had no names for us as peoples, then how did we communicate who we were? According to many researchers Wiradjuri had approximately 30 to 50 different clan groups ... did they all speak the same language and if so, what did they call it? According to the statement of Wikipedia (2005) they could not have called their languages anything!

It is apparent, to me anyhow, that researchers utilising a qualitative approach would produce different results, even if they were given the same set of questions. People see things differently, respond or react differently, and in so doing can influence the way in which data is presented (Tesch 1990). Qualitative research then is underpinned by the philosophy that the experiences, thoughts, opinions and perceptions of people matter, and because this is so, they have a very valid place in relation to research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

It is important to Wiradjuri at least, that our motivations and our actions are understood by those who would research us. We are different, and therefore our circumstances are just as different, and we react accordingly (Patton, 1990). Perhaps an increase in qualitative research will give more voice to Indigenous peoples. In giving “voice” back to Indigenous peoples perhaps as Coe (cited in Tatz, 1975) suggests, you can give these peoples a past and in doing so, give them a future.

Conclusion

In the course of my erratic career as a researcher of sorts, I have had the fortune to interview many Indigenous peoples in relation to many, many issues. All have made the comment, in one way, shape or form that they would like to be able to “see” themselves in the finished product. This is clearly an issue that is located high on their agendas.

In Wiradjuri, to finish is to begin. Perhaps I have planted some seeds, perhaps you will nurture those seeds with the final result being research that includes the voices of your participants, and perhaps your research will provide an opportunity for the researched to “see” themselves. Perhaps.

There are many facets to research and there are many approaches to the way in which research is conducted. Qualitative research, in this author's opinion, stands head and shoulders above “that other” form known to “those others” as Quantitative.

If you and future researchers do not heed the call to undertake qualitative research on a much larger scale than is now utilised, then we may all be consigned to the abyss where identity was something we once had, and only faintly now remember; where characteristics

that once defined us, are now just shadows reaching endlessly and hopelessly for us, from somewhere in the dark.

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