Culture, Ethics and Participatory Methodology in Cross-Cultural Research

Michele Ivanitz

Aboriginal Politics and Public Sector Management

Research Paper No. 7 July 1998

Centre for Australian Public Sector Management Griffith University
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Abstract

To date, Australian government policies and programs have been largely ineffective in overcoming disadvantages faced by Aboriginal people. One of the underlying reasons for this is that public services and programs are managed primarily through mainstream public sector mechanisms. To achieve more positive outcomes, approaches to public sector management are required that are tailored to the specific needs, aspirations and circumstances of Aboriginal people in Australia. The development of such approaches requires the application of research methods that are sound from both Aboriginal and academic perspectives. This paper identifies methodological issues and approaches that are relevant to this task and discusses culture, ethics, means-ends justifications, transparency, and the efficacy of participatory methodology. A brief case study is presented on participatory research and Aboriginal accountability, discussing the participation of community leaders as a collective and as individuals. The conclusion of the paper places a cautionary note on the use of participatory methods and addresses future considerations in methodological development.

Much of the material presented flows from the author's formal training as an anthropologist and from fieldwork experience. The general perspective takes into account the practical ambivalence of doing fieldwork with human beings who have their own ideas of how fieldwork should progress and about how research results should be used.
Introduction

For marginal groups to improve their positions in society, the struggle is not restricted to economic and political spheres, but encompasses as well the realm of ideas. This ideational dimension has produced a novel responsibility for social scientists: that is, if their research is to contribute to the social and economic advancement of marginal people, they must attempt to develop new paradigms of inquiry and explanation. But they cannot do so within the circumscribed parameters of professional positivist science. Instead, the insights and aptitudes of local people must be enlisted and brought to bear on the research process itself (Maclure 1990:2).

To date, Australian government policies and programs have been largely ineffective in overcoming disadvantages faced by Aboriginal people. One of the underlying reasons for this is that public services and programs are managed primarily through mainstream public sector mechanisms. To achieve more positive outcomes, approaches to public sector management are required that are tailored to the specific needs, aspirations and circumstances of Aboriginal people in Australia (O'Faircheallaigh 1996). The Centre for Australian Public Sector Management (CAPSM) is undertaking a three year research project to facilitate the development of such approaches, requiring the application of research methods that are sound from both Aboriginal and academic perspectives.

The purpose of this paper is to identify methodological issues and approaches that are relevant to this task. Much of the material presented flows from the author's formal training as an anthropologist and from fieldwork experience. The general perspective takes into account the practical ambivalence of doing fieldwork with human beings who have their own ideas of how fieldwork should progress and about how research results should be used.

The first section of the paper discusses the importance of culture in this research. Ethics, means-ends justifications and transparency are then addressed as research issues. The next section addresses action research, participatory research and participatory methods currently being tested and refined through fieldwork. A brief case study is then presented on participatory research and Aboriginal accountability, discussing the participation of community leaders as a collective and as individuals. The conclusion of the paper places a cautionary note on the use of participatory methods and addresses future considerations in methodological development.

Culture as a Foundation

Culture is something like the "philosopher's elephant; it has a fluctuating popular image which depends upon which portion of the creature has been touched" (Clifton 1968:4-5). It is important to clarify my use of the term culture as a distinguishing feature in this research.

A view commonly held by academics is that culture is somewhat of a folk idea, used to denote some grasp of the core meaning of a learned pattern of thinking, believing, and acting, and some understanding of the existence and variability of human behavioural patterns. This basic recognition of cultural differences is not, however, accompanied by systematic appreciation of the complete reality and force of such differences, much less by an understanding of their causes and consequences (Clifton 1968). Simply recognising cultural differences as opposed to the systematic analysis of them, their causes and their consequences results in superficial discussion.

The use of culture as an expressive symbol rather than as a valid construct within which differences may be analysed is attributed, in part, to the vast range of interpretations of the concept. For example, Kluckholm describes culture as the total way of life of a people; the social legacy the individual acquires from his [sic] group; a way of thinking, feeling, and believing; an abstraction from behaviour; a theory on the part of the anthropologist about the way in which a group of people in fact behave; a store-house of pooled learning; a set of standardized orientations to recurrent problems; learned behavior; a mechanism for the normative regulation of behavior; a set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to other men; and a precipitate of history (Kluckhohn in Geertz 1983:4-5).

Geertz (1983) warns of the conceptual morass into which this type of theorising can lead and puts forward the view that culture does not correspond to any particular empirical object, but is simply a way of thinking about social reality (see Ortner 1984). It is not a power or something to which social events, behaviours,
institutions, or processes can be causally attributed. It is, rather, a context within which they can be intelligibly described.

Believing, with Max Weber, that man [sic] is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning (Geertz 1983:5).

The approach taken to understanding culture in this research reflects Geertz' view. The goal is not to claim a privileged view of others, but to form a bridge between the rationalities of the researcher and those of others (see McCall and Simmons 1969). The bridging issue then becomes one of translation. This is not an issue of linguistics, but of bridging epistemic gaps requiring systematic methodological strategies. The development of these strategies is part of the overall cross-cultural research process, and is addressed in detail in later sections of this paper.

**Ethics and Methodology**

Subjectivity is at the heart of cross-cultural research. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the area of ethics and method. The CAPSM research project involves asking questions of a type that cannot be answered through the application of mathematical formulae or models. Indeed, cross-cultural research generally may exemplify chaos theory more than the orderliness of Newtonian physics, as the subject matter is not broken into clear categories. In order to make sense out of apparent chaos appropriate research methodology is required. One of the issues that arises in the development of such methodologies are the impacts of the researcher's personal ethics on the research process itself.

Given that personal ethics are based on an individual's cultural norms, values and representations of both, it is almost impossible to separate questions of social science from personal values (see Cochrane 1971; Morrison 1977). Given this lack of separation, the researcher's ethical standards affect the research choices made and are best viewed not as an afterthought to planning and project implementation but as a guide to effective practice. Everyday decisions taken by the researcher should be considered as well as exceptional circumstances and it is useful to reflect constantly on one's own actions and on one's motivations for taking particular actions.

In the end, however, ethics are personal considerations and are therefore not particularly useful when taken as intimidating sets of injunctions and used as a weapon to argue that those who do not share the same beliefs are unethical. Anthropologists Cassell and Jacobs note that:

> Anthropologists who speak of ethics in this sense wish to improve or, at the least, reprove the behavior of others. A "Code of Ethics" in their view is a mechanism to help regulate the behavior of those with whom they disagree. Unfortunately, as historians and ethnographers have documented, the attempt to control others in the name of morality is more likely to lead to confrontation than moral improvement (Cassell and Jacobs 1997).

The issue of transparency provides a good example of an ethical dilemma. The appropriate use of ethics is based on a mixture of training and common sense, and on achieving a balance between full and open disclosure (called transparency) and the personal obligation we have to protect informants. Researchers must decide the extent to which they will ensure that research objectives and potential impacts are made clear to informants. These decisions represent questions of balance as both the benefits and costs of being open must be weighed. The questions to be answered are how far should you go in deception? And how much should you be concerned with avoiding harm?

On the surface, this appears to be a clear process of delineation between what is overt and what is covert. Overt research decisions are based on full and open disclosure, whereas covert decisions refer to partial disclosure. These issues are not clear, however, once a researcher gets into the field. As Punch (1986) notes, the overt-covert distinction represents a continuum, rather than a black and white divide as qualitative methods become more variegated, going well beyond the traditional 'look, listen and learn' dicta of fieldwork and shaped more distinctly by explicit philosophical and moral positions.

The realities of fieldwork are such that access and acceptance are pivotal to the whole relationship between the researcher and informant, and the development of that relationship is "subtly intertwined with both the
outcome of the project and the nature of the data" (Punch 1986:12). Bargains are made and deals negotiated between the researcher and community while constantly engaging in a form of moral calculus. Further, as there is simply no consensus on the key ethical questions of overt/covert distinctions, the rigid imposition of standards and sanctions is impossible. Broadly speaking, the reality of fieldwork demonstrates that

One need not be always brutally honest, direct and explicit about one's research purpose. One should not normally engage in disguise. One should not steal documents. One should not directly lie to people and, while one may disguise identity to a certain extent, one should not break promises made to people. Academies, in weighing up the balancing-edge between overt and covert and between openness and less-than-open, should take into account the consequences for the subjects, the profession, and, not least, for themselves.

I base this position on the moral view that subjects should not be harmed and on the pragmatic perspective that some dissimulation is intrinsic to social life and, therefore, also to fieldwork (Punch 1986:41).

In taking these considerations into account, it is nonetheless important to conduct research in the most open and transparent manner possible whereby intentions, research methodologies, and possible outcomes – both positive and negative – are stated clearly. This approach flows, in part, from the concerns expressed by Aboriginal organisations that anthropologists are often wittingly or unwittingly serving as spies for government (see Berreman 1962; Chambers 1985; Clifton 1970; Holmberg 1958, 1959, 1970; Keesing 1992; Van Willigen 1993; Warren 1988; Wax 1971). Government officials have expressed a similar concern that anthropologists serve as spies for Aboriginal organisations.

It is most important to the success of the CAPSM research to ensure officials of both Aboriginal organisations and government do not view the researchers as collecting data in a covert manner. Otherwise, sources of information will rapidly dry up and eventually close off.

Research Approaches and Methods

Each researcher must make a determination regarding the methods s/he will use in the field. The choice can vary greatly. In anthropology, for example, some are trained to employ methods reflecting an 'insider's' view whereby researchers maintain that they are capable of thinking and acting within the perspectives of both their own culture and the culture they are studying (see Evans-Pritchard 1951, 1962; Powdermaker 1966; Vidich 1955). However, the danger in such an approach is that the so-called insider is so immersed in the culture being studied that s/he is oblivious to what is unique. In addition, many community residents do not relish the thought of having a full time researcher live with them, which is required if the insider's view is to be obtained in an even limited way¹. Another problem with this perspective is it is simply too open ended to yield data that goes much beyond the purely descriptive.

A contrast to this approach is reliance on the administration and analysis of survey questionnaires². However, the construction of the survey instrument itself may be methodologically flawed in cross-cultural research as it assumes that enough is known in advance to identify the relevant parts of a system and to prepare questions (see Beebe 1995). Unanticipated, site-specific systemic relationships cannot be identified ahead of time and the questionnaire is limited to validating models articulated in advance. Beebe (1995) and Wolcott (1994) note that in order for survey instruments to be effective the researcher must live in the same world of meaning as the people surveyed. Accurate interpretation satisfies tests of both validity and reliability only when researchers “speak” the same cultural language as their informants, both in linguistic and symbolic terms. When this is not the case, answers given may be based on categories of reality different from those assumed by the question (Beebe 1995).

¹ Long term fieldworker and anthropologist Rosalie Wax notes that "...the researcher who insists on equating understanding with intense and intimate participation – who believes that he can do field research only if he lives with his hosts, shares in all their activities...may find himself thrown out on his car, or, a less harsh lot, simply unable to carry on his work" (Wax 1971:7).

² My use of this term includes only structured fixed-alternative questionnaires which place a heavy reliance on the written responses to prearranged questions and where the wording, order of questions and instructions for recording responses are standardised (see Lazarsfeld 1944; Seltiz et al 1964).
Given these considerations, repeated short-term visits to field locations and the use of primarily qualitative methods are to be used in the CAPSM project rather than long-term residence in the field or the construction and delivery of survey questionnaires.

**Action Research Approach**

A research methodology is particularly useful when it challenges academics to look at people, processes, politics, and institutions in real world settings. Generally speaking, an action research approach provides an appropriate methodology as it facilitates the pursuit of particular local and/or regional goals of Aboriginal people through the academic research process and compels extensive Aboriginal involvement in the design and implementation of appropriate research methodologies. The researcher and the community determine together the problems to be worked on and the possibilities for change (see Gearing 1970a, 1970b; Schensul 1974; Schlesier 1974; and Van Willigan 1993). The researcher is both student and teacher: learning occurs while assistance is being provided, in equal measure.

This approach flowed from fieldwork conducted between the University of Chicago and the Fox Indians of central Iowa over a five-year period commencing in 1948, as anthropologists responded to a need to take action through research when the interests of those who governed did not seem to coincide with the interests of those who were being governed (see Chambers 1985; Schensul 1974; and Schlesier 1974). The traditional Fox social and political structure could not cope with the changing white-dominated environment, and suspicion between the Fox and other residents of the area had grown. There was little or no communication between the two and non-Fox people promoted the view that the Fox community would cease to exist in two generations and would be assimilated into mainstream Iowa society. Anthropologists were called in to study the Fox response to this situation. The intent of the academics had been to address and answer a number of technical questions that had been predetermined by the University of Chicago researchers without consultation with the Fox.

The project quickly became, however, "a special kind of relationship between a changing community of Fox Indians and a changing group of anthropologists" (Van Willigen 1993:63). Researchers were faced with issues of providing assistance to the Fox under the direction of the Fox, while learning about problems as they arose. Interjected throughout were the question of values, action required to assist the Fox, and the timing of such action. The researchers were forced to address the issue of who would decide the Fox future – the Fox or the University of Chicago? (Tax 1958).

Accordingly, the researchers had to be prepared to encounter and sort through complex values and perceptions. This was not a simple task as each researcher was faced with problems that were affected by perceptions and values of the researcher, of community members, and of surrounding communities. The researchers had to attempt to make assessments that were based on the value orientation of the community, while acknowledging the impacts of their own values on their assessments and interpretations. "What works" was situationally specific and depended on the willingness and capacity of both the community and the researcher to make changes.

By the close of the project, applied social research had advanced greatly through the recognition that research methodologies may change drastically as the research progresses, and the results can be revolutionary. Rather than merely satisfying academic curiosity, the reflexive nature of the research project resulted in social action being taken by the Fox themselves with the assistance of the researchers (see Peattie 1958, 1970; Redfield 1958; Tax 1958; and Van Willigen 1993). As a result, the research became "...a continuous process of discovery and action and valuing..." (Peattie 1970:123).

This approach is useful in the CAPSM research as Aboriginal people in Australia are indeed faced with a need to take action, as their interests may not coincide with those of mainstream public sector institutions. Further, through the research, assistance is provided to Aboriginal people under their direction and the researchers learn about research problems as they arise. Questions of values and perceptions of the community, surrounding communities, and researchers are interjected throughout, as are questions of the action to be taken to assist and the timing of this action. Researcher and community work together to determine the problems to be worked on and to examine realistic possibilities for change. For example, in examining health care service delivery in an urban context, the author is working directly with Quandamooka people located on North Stradbroke Island and the Brisbane suburb of Inala to determine specific health care service delivery problems that are of relevance to Quandamooka. These problems include environmental health issues, a need to improve access to health care on the mainland, the impact of poverty on health care delivery and access, and possibilities for change.

**Participatory Research Methods**
The essence of cross-cultural research methods is to show how social action in one world makes sense from the point of view of another. This process could be described as beginning outside the interaction, confronting behaviors that are bewildering and inexplicable, and searching for emergent patterns in a world of meanings that are difficult to grasp (Wax 1971). The goal is to construct a model of the local system consistent with the way local people understand it and then use that model to facilitate positive social change. Doing so usually means trying to use local categories for dividing and describing local perceptions of reality.

In taking an action based approach, it is up to the researcher and informants to determine what approach will work best in a given context and to select an appropriate combination of methods. It is also important to acknowledge that researchers are never going to 'get all of it right' in cross-cultural contexts, as description and analysis can never be free of the interpretive fireworks that drive it. Methods are not recipe books and their use requires a mix of good judgement, common sense, and creativity. This involves the offsetting of biases held by the researcher and by informants through the constant re-examination of assumptions made and beliefs held, and learning directly, rapidly and progressively about how local participants view their system (see Beebe 1997; Chambers 1991). In the CAPSM research, the author is relying on the use of participatory approaches and methods to achieve this understanding.

The CAPSM research involves the development of appropriate methods that maximise the benefits of multi-layered humanistic research, satisfy rigour and are culturally appropriate in the Aboriginal context. Participatory research has been examined with a view to meeting these requirements. It is both philosophy and method and considers how the researchers and the researched deal with each other and how this relationship affects the research process and its outcome. It is based on the recognition that alienated minority groups are at a distinct disadvantage in both articulating their interests and realising their interests (see Kinnaird and Hyma 1997; Sikana 1995). Ideally, the researcher treats those with whom s/he works as co-researchers rather than as objects of research. Hence, the process of doing the research is as important as the outcome.

Action research approaches provide the foundation for participatory research, which draws from a number of sources ranging from agroforestry and farm extension research in Africa to political action research carried out by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the United States. Participatory research supports the premise that people have a right to participate in the production of knowledge that affects their lives (Smith, Willms and Johnson, eds. 1997; Stoeker and Bonacich 1992). For example, in the early 1970s development specialists in Africa became frustrated with the research methods available as they were too rigid for useful application and dealt only with phenomena which were amenable to precise specification and measurement (Mangham 1993; Sederberg 1984). In searching for appropriate methods, the researchers found that local assistants were a lot more effective in eliciting needed information from people by using their own methods, rooted in the local culture, that took the meanings local people assign to their behaviour into consideration (Park 1992). Gradually, participatory research replaced the models previously used. In the United States, community organiser Saul Alinsky and others worked toward the development of processes whereby communities could define and act on their own issues. Through increasing self-reliance, achieved by participating in research activities and social activism, people gained an increased capacity to reform unjust social structures (see Chambers 1992; Goudy and Tait International Development Research Centre 1988; Kinnaird and Hyma 1997; Meeks 1989; Stoekier and Beckwith 1992; Voth 1979). In the Third World, Freire's pedagogical model helped community members to engage in a learning process leading to political action through understanding and awareness by participants of social problems, their structural causes and possibilities for overcoming them (Freire 1970; see also Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991; Frideres 1992).

The participatory approach is in contrast to conventional social science wherein the role of the researcher is one of elite authority, maintaining a distinct distance from the participants. In the conventional model, the researcher is conceived as having complete control of the study, and information is extracted and analysed in the absence of critical feedback from the researched (Maclure 1990). Rather than being treated as partners in the research process, people are studied as objects and often the purpose of the research is not made clear. This is particularly true in the case of alienated minorities owing to their relative lack of power, exposing them to being disproportionately "studied to death" by social researchers (Park 1992:31).

Participatory approaches also contradict the orthodox scientific view of rigour that attempts to ensure validity by ruling out the influence of the researcher, (i.e. subjectivity) through experimental or other positivist

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3 The terms participatory research, participatory action research, and participatory methods tend to be used interchangeably throughout the literature.
methods, (i.e. objectivity) and clearly separating subject and object. Hence, it has been proposed by practitioners of participatory research that a "new definition of science based on a new is required (Reason 1993:1262; see also Maclure 1990; Swantz 1982). This may be achieved through what Reason (1993) "critical subjectivity" involving a self-reflexive attention to the "ground on which one is standing". Reflective of participatory research, the primary subjective experiences of the researcher are not suppressed: the researcher accepts that knowing comes from a particular individual perspective and the bias this introduces, and that it is articulated in research practice4.

The three objectives of shared ownership, learning, and action distinguish participatory research from other modes of social science and "(w)hile participatory techniques vary, the over-riding purpose is to broaden the scope of participants' knowledge and skills, and thus enable them to collectively initiate action or adapt innovations to their specific situations" (Maclure 1990:7; see also Awa 1989; Brown 1993; Canclian 1991; Conchelos 1983; Couto 1987; Davis-Case 1990; Kinnaird and Hyma 1997; Maclure 1990; Nyden and Wiewel 1992; Park 1992; Plaut et al 1992; Ramphlele 1990; Stoeker and Bonacich 1992). Participatory research is viewed as a process of mutual knowledge production,

Once informed consent has been obtained from the community leadership, the researcher needs to ensure that community organisations and as many individuals as possible understand and support the research. This is crucial for while the leadership may endorse the research, unless community residents are brought into may be termed an informal endorsement process through extensive consultation by the researcher, there is no chance of achieving any sort of meaningful participation.

Issues of transparency are important in a participatory framework as access to the community and its acceptance of the researcher depend on the project objectives, the nature of the data to be collected and possible outcomes. Ethical standards reflect the choices made by the researcher in how the benefits and potential outcomes of the research, both positive and negative, are expressed to community residents and participants. Unless full and open disclosure is undertaken, the researcher may be open to criticism that s/he is not truly seeking meaningful participation and is engaging in covert research. Since even the perception of covert activities has the potential to de-rail a research project, the researcher may be required to make repeated visits to the community, hold numerous group meetings, and sit with individuals on a one-to-one basis to outline the project and answer questions.

Once this process is well under way, the researcher commences work with participants on identifying specific problems that can be addressed through the research. The benefits and risks of potential research tools are also discussed extensively, as all participants in the research require a good understanding of the data collection process and the methods to be used. During this time, the researcher invites participants to consider taking active roles in the data collection process based on interest and potential skills development. Once individuals have confirmed their interest and have worked with the researcher to determine which data collection activities they are best suited, training in data gathering and field methods is undertaken and information gathering begins.

Timelines on data collection range from short term periods of one week to a year or more, depending on the nature of the research. Once the information gathering is underway, the researcher begins organising data in a preliminary format, which is then fed back to the participants for analysis and interpretation. This phase of participatory research is iterative in nature. The researcher must be able to transmit information and, at the same time, move participants toward reflection, questioning and analysis and then incorporate the responses of participants into the analysis. Further, the researcher must be prepared to "accede to the directions of participants where these are feasible and appropriate – and if they are not, to explain what she [sic] considers are the attendant difficulties and shortcomings, and then negotiate alternatives” (Cao Try 1984; see also Chambers 1983; Maclure 1990; Plaut et al 1992). After this process is complete, the researcher and participants may decide to jointly formulate and implement actions that have arisen from their increased collective understanding.

The success of participatory research is obviously dependent upon local participation. It is not possible, however, to get all members of a community to actively take part in the research process. Often it is the case that individuals are capable of participating but choose not to for any number of reasons. Thus the onus on the researcher is to provide a number of avenues for people to take advantage of the opportunities, based on the individual interests of the participants and level of skill.

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4 Critical subjectivity extends to the roles of the participants in that while insiders provide the researcher with more accurate or complete information, it is still information that is "forged from their perspective on their world, by their past and present experience. It is as biased and skewed as it is unique and distinctive" (Reason 1993:1262-1263; see also Bourdieu 1986; Geertz 1983; and Wolcott 1994, 1995).
It is also important that the researcher ensure that where skills may be lacking, training is provided to enable people to become fully engaged in the process. The researcher also needs to reiterate the existence of participatory opportunities on an on-going basis. It is also important to recognise that there may be a discrepancy between what individual participants say they do or think in one context, and what they actually think. Each individual involved in the research process – including the academic researcher – has interests in both process and outcome. Different people also participate for different reasons, thereby creating a complex set of motivations that are highly variable and need to be considered (Kinnaird and Hyma 1997). Hence it is critically important for the researcher to ensure that the practice of participation does not degenerate into the rhetoric of participation whereby hidden interests of individuals are masked and critical questions are not asked. Sikana (1995) points out that if this awareness is lacking participation may facilitate a ‘conspiracy’ for furthering segmentary interests of the more economically and politically powerful social actors.

**The Research Tools**

Community defined problems, the best methods by which to study those problems, and the selection of methodological tools are identified jointly by the researchers and community. No particular tools are considered superior to others when undertaking participatory research, although Ramphele (1990) notes that each situation requires individual assessment and tools must be flexible, innovative and adaptable to particular conditions. Flexibility and innovation does not mean, however, that rigour declines and Thrupp et al (1994) point out that the use of inductive reasoning, triangulation⁵, diagrams to aid data collection and analysis, and fieldnotes⁶ incorporate rigour into methods.

Depending upon the specific context, research tools may include open ended and semi-structured interviewing of individuals; oral history; focus group meetings with community organisations and groups; meetings with segmentary interest groups based on, for example, age, sex, political affiliation, and education; small group meetings made up of interested individuals; large community meetings; field trips to sites of significance; mapping activities; direct observation; participant observation; and the review of literature and documentary resources. Fieldnotes are also useful as research tool used to supplement other methods as

> These descriptions...are...invaluable analytical aids in making sense of one specific area of community life through the identification and coding – (the assigning of appropriate categories of analysis) of repeated events and behaviours and searching for emergent patterns (see also Clifton 1968; Clifford 1991; Hammersley and Atkinson 1983; Jackson 1991; Lederman 1991; Ottenberg 1991; Sanjek 1991).

**Aboriginal Accountability and Participatory Research Methods**

As Martin and Finalyson (1996) point out, Aboriginal organisations often represent points of contact between the mainstream and Aboriginal cultural and political systems. As a result of their location somewhere on a continuum between government department and Aboriginal community, these organisations find themselves in the discordant position of attempting to 'negotiate between differing political positions and cultural imperatives while still maintaining legitimacy in both' (Martin and Finalyson 1996:2). In order to function effectively at the local level, leaders are continually assessing Aboriginal forms of accountability based on local priorities and values. In contrast, however, to function effectively within public sector auditing requirements, leaders are required to achieve accountability against purely financial criteria and performance indicators that may be irrelevant in the Aboriginal context. Aboriginal people are therefore caught between cultural perceptions of accountability based on kin relations and traditionally embedded groups, and

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⁵ Triangulation means posing the same question in different words to different people (Thrupp et al 1994).

⁶ One of the goals of anthropological research is to construct a detailed account of particular events occurring among living members of another culture. Fieldnotes are the traditional means used for recording observational data and contain written descriptions of meetings, exchanges, interviews and other events that are loaded with details of meaning, patterns, style and content. The researcher's personal reactions to the events under way, observed physical reactions of informants, interactions between informants during the course of the event, and the context of the event are included. Speech is noted in a manner that approximates a verbatim report and non-verbal behaviour is recorded in relatively concrete terms. They also provide a permanent record the researcher can reread, review and use to reorganise work and reclassify data into analytical categories.
mainstream perceptions focusing on financial accountability. These two forms of accountability must be balanced in some way if both Aboriginal and mainstream accountability are to be achieved. It is therefore necessary to examine alternative forms of accountability based on Aboriginal culture, which allow Aboriginal organisations to be accountable to government for monies received, but also to be accountable to their own constituencies.

As part of the CAPSM project, research is under way to identify such alternative forms of accountability. The efficacy of participatory research and methods is examined in this context and the specific issue of participation of the community leadership in the research process is addressed.

**The Collective, the Individual and Participation**

The author solicited and received the consent of two Aboriginal communities to undertake this research and the aims of the project are supported fully by the community leadership and administration. Extensive discussions have occurred with residents in both communities to ensure the research is understood fully and activities are transparent. Specific research tools include open-ended and semi-structured interviews, focus group meetings and interest group meetings, oral history, and the review of literature and documentary resources. The research tools have been chosen jointly by participants and the researcher and in those cases where a particular option – such as the delivery of a structured questionnaire – has not been appropriate, the tool has been modified or discarded.

Local individuals who are interested in undertaking data collection are being trained on an on-going basis and have begun the process of critically examining their role in the project with a view to both data collection activities and maximisation of further research opportunities. The convening of small group meetings focusing on accountability mechanisms, service delivery outcomes, and the connection between the two is under way. Access to all community organisations has been made available to the researcher and there is a significant amount of interaction between the researcher and participants, most of it positive. Data collected is undergoing verification through interviews with knowledgeable individuals in the Aboriginal community and in service delivery organisations, and through further examination of documentary evidence where required.

The next phase of the research involves the compilation of preliminary findings and obtaining feedback from organisations, groups, participants and other individuals. The final phases will involve the compilation of findings, the completion of any outstanding data collection, and the writing up of final results.

The research process is demonstrating a dynamic and iterative nature, as researcher and participants are shifting between and among all phases of the research depending upon what is required at any given moment. Levels of participation are shifting as well and vary depending on such factors as degree of interest, time constraints, kin obligations, political alignments, perceived efficacy of the project, and perceived impacts on both individuals and on organisations. The research is demonstrating clearly that the availability or opportunity to participate does not necessarily mean that participation will occur. It is particularly difficult to mobilise active participation on the part of community leaders as a collective.

This may be occurring for a number of reasons, the first of which relates to conflicting accountability requirements. Aboriginal leaders are required to respond to mainstream audit requirements on an on-going basis. As noted above, leaders are also obligated, both as individuals and as members of the collective, to respond to their constituency. As such, leaders find themselves attempting to reconcile two systems of accountability, one of which is based on culture, kinship and family obligations and the other of which is based on government financial auditing requirements. This dual focus of accountability means the collective must address difficult questions raised by the research, such as how does the leadership explain that while the objectives of a particular program, such as housing, may have been met, the community is in breach of its obligations?

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7 A research grant has been provided to the author by the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies to assist with this specific section of the overall CAPSM research project.

8 It can be the case that community-based research is as tumultuous as the change it seeks to encourage. In some cases the collaboration between the researcher and community members has been very successful. Cornwall (1993) and Nyden and Wiewei (1992) note, however, that in other cases what begins as a good relationship has deteriorated into bitter conflict. This may be owing to personality conflicts, but may also result from the often conflicting traditions of research and activism. For example, the community activist Saul Alinsky tersely commented that the word 'academic' is a synonym for 'irrelevant' (Alinsky 1989:ix).

9 It is beyond the scope of this paper to address these issues in detail. Further, there are a number of other factors that may influence participation in addition to those noted. The nature of participation and its limitations is an issue for further research.
because it failed to file a report with the government on time? How are expenditure decreases that lead to staffing cuts and subsequent family hardships justified?

If leaders participate in the research as a group, they cannot avoid addressing these and other difficult questions. What makes collective participation even more difficult is that bringing these issues out into open may cause further problems as the collective itself may not have a consistent view on or definition of accountability. Prevailing notions may be reflective more of an organisation's current financial status than of a specific definition of accountability. Indeed, the group may not have thought about the nature of accountability at all and address the issue by taking a reactive stance in response to mainstream audit requirements. Secondly, the complex network of kinship and social groupings, events, behaviours, institutions, and other processes at work in a community may have an impact on whether the individual leader chooses to participate in a group setting. For example, family obligations rooted in Aboriginal customary law may dictate that an individual does not address a particular issue as it is not appropriate to do so. Further, the political and/or financial interests of the family group may be at odds with the collective discussion.

Despite the reluctance to participate as members of the collective, individual leaders are taking part in the CAPSM research through agreeing to participate in one-on-one interviews, by contributing information and perspectives, and reviewing data with the researcher as it is collected.

**On Participation and Cultural Complexity: A Cautionary Note**

The potential to gain the commitment of local people, government, and other interests to implement activities that require instigating and implementing change may be increased through the use of participatory research. It serves no useful purpose, however, to make a fetish out of participation and there are cautions that should be heeded. These cautions pertain to real and perceived power imbalances in existence between the researcher and participants and the issue of where actual control of the research process rests (Annorbah-Sarpei et al 1993; Donnelly-Roark 1996; Ivanitz 1996, 1997; Lane 1996; Mosse 1994; Rahnema 1990; Voss 1989).

Rahnema raises the potential dangers associated with academic elitism, which she describes as "the last temptation of saint development", and she notes

> In participatory terminology, we insist on the necessity to perceive all the actors concerned as subjects and coactors, but things do not actually happen that way. Although we recognize sonic of our differences with "them" in terms of education, social position, and economic privileges, "we" take pride in transcending these, basing our interaction with "them" on many things "we" think we share in common... neither the commonalities nor the differences are what we think they are. They rather represent intellectual constructs, often aimed at legitimizing our intervention (Rahnema 1990:211).

Donnelly-Roark (1996) discusses the example of a recent United Nations Development Programme (LTNDP) effort to lay the groundwork for a re-invention of bureaucracy that would effectively accommodate participatory practices. Whereas the UNDP did recognise that both power and culture were at play, bureaucrats did not understand the "implications of their own dominant position and the need to equalize their power relationships with project participants if...partnership were to emerge". While the participants recognised that the inattention to complex culture-power differentials resulted in slippage back to a form of consultation that is symbolic rather than real, the bureaucrats continued to "believe, for the moment at least, that real participatory partnerships were being developed" (Donnelly-Roark 1996:111)

Community power structures may favour a higher level of participatory activity for some individuals within a community while relegating others to a passive role, even though all are ostensibly involved in the research project (Maclure 1990). Further, Donnelly-Roarke (1996), Dia (1996) and Voss (1989) note that local issues of knowledge and power may not be considered seriously by researchers, as rules and patterns applicable to various aspects of knowledge are highly variable, closely reflect the social structure, and are constantly reinterpreted by the community members themselves

In addition, there is the possibility that participatory practice will be used in the context of a research agenda that is determined and driven by more powerful interest groups, outside agencies, or universities. In this case, participation is at best seen as a means to lend legitimacy to external intervention. Sikana (1995)
points out that in rural development, participation gives the illusion that since local people are involved, then what is being pursued is truly in the interests of the local community

Where Does The Control Rest?

Participation is not a stand-alone, instrumental process, but is conceptually and operationally interactive with power and culture. Participation is only effective when power and culture are balanced through a research process that enables equitable power sharing between the researcher and the participants. At one extreme, participatory research amounts to little more than token involvement, while at the opposite extreme it refers to genuine power sharing. Between these two ends is a range of processes resulting in decisions and actions that reflect the perspectives of local people Donnelly-Roark, following extensive review of four World Bank case studies, points out that the critical determinant is where the control rests. Often, control of the research process does not rest with the community

...have tended to mainstream the trendy rhetoric of participation, while letting the more difficult reality of participation practice lag far behind. This confusion of a desired result with a facile strategy inevitably leads to the diminishment of participatory development's real potential...it conversely strengthens the perceptions of the donor...that substantive participation practice is actually taking place. But this substitution of rhetoric for reality is now playing out the dangerous shell game that allows us to continue business as usual while widening the gap between rich and poor (Donnelly-Roark 1996: 1).

Conclusion

This paper has addressed culture as a foundation in the development of appropriate research strategies and in the bridging of epistemic gaps between the researcher and the participants. It has identified methodological issues of ethics, means-ends justifications and transparency that impact choices made by the researcher and on research outcomes. The paper has also examined the action research approach and the application of participatory action research methods in the CAPSM project on accountability. The discussion has demonstrated clearly that the opportunity to participate does not mean that participation will occur. The paper has also addressed the issues of real and perceived power imbalances in existence between the researcher and participants and where the actual control rests.

There are a number of issues arising from this project that warrant further research. The nature of participation and its limitations requires critical examination within the context of power imbalances, and the use of participatory practice as a means of legitimizing external intervention must be addressed in the context of participation as an 'illusion' as opposed to participation as a 'reality'. Is it truly possible to achieve a balance of power between the researcher and participants? Is it possible to ensure that participatory practice results in genuine power sharing? Where does the control of the research process actually rest? What are the ramifications of knowledge appropriation by both participants and external agencies? What are the mechanisms for addressing power imbalances in the production of knowledge within the Aboriginal community?

Further, questions of epistemology must be examined. What are the constraints in the production of knowledge? Is it necessary to limit the subjectivity of both the researcher and the participants? What are the limitations to validity and reliability of data when subjective methods are used? Is it necessary to create a new paradigm of scientific rigour based on critical subjectivity and is it possible to do so? How is the production of knowledge impacted by issues of transparency? How and to what degree should consideration be given to "how participants know what they know", in addition to "what" they know, in the research process? How do researchers account for the discrepancies in what participants say they do in one context, and what they actually think (as reflected, for instance, in what they do)? And, given these considerations, is it truly possible for a researcher coming from a particular cultural context to bridge contesting epistemologies?

It is hoped that the CAPSM research will make a contribution to the literature on epistemology and participatory methodological development, by seeking to address these questions, and that it will also lead to further development of appropriate research approaches that are sound from both Aboriginal and academic perspectives.
References Cited


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