Handout 6: Cultural Issues in Research

When undertaking research, as with any activity in the community services industry, it is critical to be aware of and to practice empathic and sensitive cross cultural communication.

Competence in effective cross-cultural communication is critical if the trust and rapport needed for collaborative research is to be established. An awareness of the different ways that people from different cultural groups share information is critical if the researcher is to develop appropriate methods to gather information.

Left Brain or Right Brain?

It is useful to consider if the community you wish to work with are primarily left or right brain thinkers. An understanding of this can help the researcher to choose the best research method for a particular community.

Western culture is primarily dominated by left-brain thinking. Left-brain thinking is verbal, analytic, symbolic, rational, digital, logical and linear. It is left brain thinking which dominates the research methods used in mainstream Western social science. It follows that these methods suit the left-brain driven communities but may not work so well in communities who are primarily right brain thinkers.

Right brain thinking is less verbal, holistic, more willing to suspend judgment, spatial and intuitive. Indigenous groups in Australia often display these characteristics (Sayer: 1988). It is important when conducting research with any group to be aware of the differences in thinking and communication styles and to plan to use research methods which account for these variations.

“Taufa'ase'e” – Participant Hoaxing

Research, as all of us who have received calls right at dinner time from market researchers who want to bog us down with ludicrous questions, can be an irritating activity for the research participants. The content that fascinates the researcher may be boring, ridiculous, or rude to the participant. The temptation for the participant, when bored or outraged by a researcher, is simply to tell the researcher anything, regardless of the truth, in order to get rid of them. In social research this problem is sometimes described as participant hoaxing. The problem of hoaxing is increased when researching groups where we do not understand the language and cultural traditions of the community. Margaret Mead, the famous American anthropologist, encountered this in her study of sexuality in Samoa.

In 1928 Margaret Mead published her book *Coming of Age in Samoa*. In this book Mead showed that Samoans went through an adolescence that was liberated and free of the types of stresses experienced by American adolescents. She argued that this was because in Samoa the community did not restrict sexual activity.
Derek Freeman almost immediately called the research findings into question he was another academic who, unlike Mead, was fluent in Samoan and used a wider range of information sources to interpret the adolescent behaviours of Samoans. He disputed Mead’s findings.

Mead it would appear had been blinded by her own research objective that was to test if it was culture rather than biology, which determined human behaviour. When she realised the difficulty of proving her research objective she began to spend a lot of time talking to a couple of Samoan companions about their sexual activities. They were embarrassed by her persistent and intrusive questioning and resorted to a customary practice among Samoans call "taufa'ase'e", or prankish hoaxing. They of course didn’t realise their stories would be published and become “academic truth” for 60 years until after Mead’s death. All they did was to deal with Mead’s inappropriate questioning by creating stories that were funny and the antithesis of Samoan culture.

**Some Things Just Can’t Be Talked About**

It is also important to be aware that among some cultural and linguistically diverse groups not all things can be discussed. There are taboo subjects.

An example of this can be found in the Hindmarsh Bridge affair. This controversy highlighted the issues of secret spiritual business in Aboriginal communities. In this instance the local Ngarrindjeri people argued that the building of the bridge from the mainland to Hindmarsh Island violated “secret women’s business”. They argued that Hindmarsh Island was a sacred site but could not discuss the details of this beyond the group who were the keepers of this tribal knowledge.

As a result the sacredness of the site was disputed. Gareth Evans, the Labour Foreign Minister described the secret women’s business as “bull-shit on stilts”. This case demonstrates the difficulty that some Westerners can have in believing the evidence of other cultural groups. The issue is really that the belief system is not shared and therefore the evidence is perceived to be incredible and untrue.

**Some Guidelines for Working Collaboratively With Different Cultural Groups**

- Use a collaborative or participatory research model
- Work hard to build a meaningful and trusting relationship with the community you wish to collaborate with
- Take time to learn about the communities culture
- Find out about the cultural and political protocols. The possibility of developing a relationship can be destroyed by not following protocols
- Find out whom the right people are to talk with and talk with them right from the beginning of the project. Be guided by them
- Be aware of cultural sensitivities and practice cultural empathy
- Be aware of the communities’ values and consider these with an open mind. A researcher must be open to learn and to change their mind
• Ensure that you are familiar with the issues that the groups is struggling with both at the local, national and international level
• Set up a way of working and learning together - the *action research model* can help here:
• Establish and maintain regular meetings so the relationship can grow and trust can be developed; It may be necessary to use a variety of mediums to help here such as phone, e-mail, letter, visits etc
• Identify a common area of interest to help to focus the research
• Demonstrate some long-term commitment to working with the community. Try to find ways to contribute to the community. For example helping to write funding submissions for community projects or providing other specialist services to contribute to the communities development
• Think beyond traditional research methods, be prepared to include different methods of communication into your research strategies such as:
  • poetry
  • dance
  • stories
  • visual art
  • informal discussions
  • observations.

• Be aware of historical, economic, and social issues and how these may shape the research findings.

**Sources:**


Brunton, Ron *Courier Mail*, 21 July 2001.

**Mannaaki Whenua Land Care Research** 2002 A collaborative research model for working with discussion paper [www.landcareresearch.co.nz](http://www.landcareresearch.co.nz).