

Yarning/Aboriginal storytelling: Towards an understanding of an Indigenous perspective and its implications for research practice

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ABSTRACT: *There is increasing recognition of Indigenous perspectives from various parts of the world in relation to storytelling, research and its effects on practice. The recent emergence of storytelling or yarning as a research method in Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island studies and other Indigenous peoples of the world is gaining momentum. Narratives, stories, storytelling and yarning are emerging methods in research and has wide ranging potential to shape conventional research discourse making research more meaningful and accessible for researchers. In this paper we argue for the importance of Indigenous research methods and Indigenous method(ology), within collaborative respectful partnerships with non-Indigenous researchers. It is imperative to take these challenging steps together towards better outcomes for Indigenous people and their communities. In the Australian context we as researchers cannot afford to allow the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and mainstream Australia health outcomes to grow even wider. One such pathway is the inclusion of Aboriginal storytelling or yarning from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait perspective within Indigenous and non-Indigenous research paradigms. Utilising Aboriginal storytelling or yarning will provide deeper understanding; complementing a two-way research paradigm for collaborative research. Furthermore, it has significant social implications for research and clinical practice amongst Indigenous populations; thus complementing the biomedical medical paradigm.*

KEYWORDS: Indigenous, Aboriginal storytelling, yarning, Indigenous perspective, methodology, research and clinical practice, partnerships

There is increasing recognition of Indigenous perspectives from various parts of the world in relation to storytelling, research and its effects on practice. The recent emergence of storytelling or yarning as a research method in Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island studies and other Indigenous peoples of the world is gaining momentum in the education and social sciences (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Kovach, 2009; Rigney, 2001; Smith, 2005; Yunkaporta, 2009). Nursing is also experiencing an expansion of nursing research practice which carries significant potential towards redressing the gaps in traditional Western paradigms of nursing research in its endeavour to provide culturally competent nursing care across the discipline and the profession to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island and other Indigenous client groups (Fredericks, 2006; Hayes, Campbell, Buckby, Geia, & Egan, 2010; Kruske, Kildea, & Barclay, 2006; Saunders, West, & Usher, 2010; Tanner, Agius, & Darbyshire, 2005).

As researchers, we not only develop new knowledge but also build our knowledge on the existing works of others by expanding and enriching established research and research methodologies,

giving us a deeper understanding of the human lived experience and the world around us. The colonisation of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people and the male biomedical dominant voice resulted in the silencing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island voices and their stories in favour of the dominant world view. For the most part of my lived experience, and that of many other Indigenous people affected by colonisation, the word and workings of research are heavily weighted with negative Eurocentric implications. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people have read of, and still read about, the many research studies that have been conducted on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people with little or no reciprocity (Dodson, 1994; Johnson, 1991). These past exclusionary research practices have silenced many people and rendered their stories invisible.

Furthermore, these Eurocentric biomedical research practices have left a legacy of mistrust within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities. Research in some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities is a 'dirty word' and is understood as something done to them and not with them, without reciprocity. Whereas, Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Island approaches to research has the potential towards making significant change in the move towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island self-determination in research development and delivery of services. Hence, the past decade has witnessed a turning of the research tide in Eurocentric research paradigms, and a vital transformative emergence from the Indigenous oral methods of storytelling and knowledge creation, into Indigenous scholarly story writing and knowledge building that is crucial to privileging Indigenous voices in academia (Rigney, 2001; Smith, 2005).

It has to be said that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples have had to accept and submit to the past 200 years of Eurocentric research paradigms. Now this Eurocentric comfort zone is undergoing a shaking and a ruffling of its academic feathers. In Australia at least, the days of white academics preening their feathers and building nests whilst basking in accolades from the gains of research conducted on Indigenous peoples are over. Western paradigms now have to shift to fit in with Indigenous world views and paradigms. Whereas in the past Indigenous peoples had to fit with Western research approaches, now we have Indigenous methodologies developed by Indigenous people for use with Indigenous people (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2005).

In some respects within research, Indigenous people are now becoming the teachers and Western researchers are becoming the learners – thereby balancing the scales with our new found tensions and transformations. This is a healthy seed bed where our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island voices are making themselves known in the Western sphere, where exchanges of ontological and epistemological discourses makes a creative space for something new (Martin, 2003; Watkin, 2009). Nowadays peak Australian research bodies are appreciating the imperative for research as a collaborative partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people in their communities and acknowledging the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island researchers undertaking such research. Emerging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island researchers and allied non-Indigenous researchers are recognising the oppression and silencing that can occur through exclusionary research practices. As a result new Indigenous research spaces are being created in the relatively unknown arena of academia to

disrupt the silencing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island voices, and non-Indigenous researchers are stepping out and walking with us on the journey that privileges Indigenous research voices.

The innovative development and implementation of unique Indigenous research perspectives and standpoints have seen the emergence of research approaches such as Aboriginal storytelling or yarning as it is commonly referred to in Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander society. Storytelling is an ancient practice used by Indigenous persons/cultures for thousands of years that is integral to Indigenous learning within the different spheres of life. It is therefore not surprising that Indigenous researchers across the globe have adopted storytelling as a research method (Bishop & Tuhiwai Smith, 1996; Kovach, 2009; Lekoko, 2007). Insights from Indigenous persons/cultures can contribute to our understanding of storytelling or yarning as a method and methodological research practice in relation to Indigenous peoples and their communities.

CONTEXTUALISING THE RESEARCH JOURNEY – SITUATING MYSELF

I (LG) am a fourth generation Bwngcolman woman born on the Aboriginal community of Palm Island, QLD, Australia. My heritage is Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. I am also a descendant of European Anglo-Saxon and Celtic heritage from the ancestry of my mother and great grandparents which I acknowledge. However the culture and the people I was raised in, live with and belong to and identify with is the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. My lived experience is that of many other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people under the legacy of colonisation. I grew up on Palm Island under the legislative control of the Queensland State Government until my early teenage years. My education was paramount for my parents; I am the product of their vision and hope during a bleak time when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people were subjugated to a penal system of living under the complete control of the Queensland government. This form of social control of a people group was the most punitive in Australia's colonial history (Kidd, 1997; Queensland Government, 1897; Watson, 1993, 2010). Now, decades later I celebrate their parenthood as a

Registered Nurse and Midwife, Master of Public Health and Tropical Medicine graduate and now awarded with a Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Nursing. I learned from the stories and the actions of my parents as they learnt from theirs, the unsung grassroots researchers whose lives were shaped by forces beyond their control and yet they were able to perceive, prevail and reconstruct their lives for their children and the generations to come.

As an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island researcher making my voice known to the unknown is not a new thing. I recall my childhood memories of the many walks through the rainforest on Palm Island with my father and siblings. My father would walk ahead of us and then at various points we would stop, and wait, listening; our ears would be up like antennas, we knew what was about to happen. My father would then call out into the unseen realm around us, 'whoooooo Old People we just walking through, me, Tom Geia'. In this ritual of respect my father would call his name out to identify his voice and persona; in our way we would honour those who have gone before us and believe those in the unseen realm would give way and let us go through without hindrance as we walked through their ground. My father has been gone these past 39 years, but still that practice is still very much alive and storied in our family. I use this story as a simile to illustrate the emerging research practice whereby Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island researchers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people are using their voices as they walk forward into an unknown sphere of academia; we say 'here we are and we are walking into your space, make way and don't hinder, because we have a story to tell, our story is also your story.'

AIMS

The aim of this paper is to extend current understandings of Aboriginal storytelling/yarning and consider the importance of the inclusion of the method(ology) in all research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Indigenous peoples.

STORYTELLING/YARNING – A MOVEMENT OF LIVING LANGUAGE

We argue that for Indigenous people stories and storytelling in an integral element in people's lives. Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people

use storying and yarning in everyday interactions with others; it is the way we make sense of our lived experience. It ranges from the informal brief conversations or that 'knowing' look that elicits an emotional response, to the more formal ways of storytelling that have prescribed outcomes attached to it.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island storytelling, what we call yarning, is not a static process; it begins and it progresses, through loud and raucous engagement, to a sudden move into contemplation and silence. Aboriginal yarning is a fluid ongoing process, a moving dialogue interspersed with interjections, interpretations, and additions. The stories remain in our conscious state like a thread hanging, waiting to be picked up again, to be continued, reconstructed, reinforced and once again embedded in our ontology. Yarning almost always contains the threads of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island history as it moves into the present tense, its parameters within present time is filtered through the memories of the past as the two move simultaneously and at points collide and reveals fragments of the future. This type of Aboriginal storytelling or yarning enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people to reconstruct their lives in new ways while at the same time keeping their cultural integrity intact. Further, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island yarns are rarely an individual construct; they carry within them the shared lived experience of their families, and communities. As an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island researcher, my life story is intimately connected to the story of my ancestors, my parents, my family and the people in my community and nation and also with those I encounter outside my community.

STORYTELLING/YARNING – ITS RELEVANCE AND ARTICULATION INTO RESEARCH

Story telling is a feature of all Indigenous societies where the oral tradition dominates (Kovach, 2009; Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). In non-indigenous research, storytelling is often referred to as narratives (Clandinin, 2006). Clandinin (2006) explains that people have been telling and living their stories in a way that creates meaning in their life and the life of their community. Yarning, as opposed to narrative inquiry, is an informal and relaxed discussion; a journey both the researcher and the participant share as they build a relationship and visit topics of interest to the research (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010).

European history, its collision with Indigenous society and its legacy; both – positive and negative – is a living memory and story behind every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island person in Australia. Indeed, it is behind Indigenous people of other nations who have lived through, and continue to live with the legacy of colonisation. Each Indigenous person or people group carries with them a profound life story of individual and shared experiences of trauma of the past and present. With this, they also carry the ontological premise of hope; some grasping firmly onto it or some feeling it slip away into hopelessness for a future free from the internal and external oppressive forces impacting their lives on a daily basis.

As researchers we impact the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people we encounter in our professional and personal life. Aboriginal storytelling can assist researchers to develop a deeper understanding of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island perspective on health and health delivery if the researcher is prepared to adopt the approach. The following points offer the researcher some practical steps of engagement with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island person prior to adopting a storytelling or yarning approach.

- Prepare well ahead of time. Getting to know the participants ahead of time will result in deeper yarning and richer insights into the research question(s) (Kovach, 2009);
- Befriend or engage in dialogue with an Indigenous colleague, or client, develop a respectful attitude in your interaction and you will in almost all cases receive a reciprocal respectful attitude from your Indigenous colleague or client;
- Tell your story, share some of your personal and professional story, it need not be a long story. In fact most Indigenous people in Australia prefer to share small yarns of introduction, and enquiry of their personal wellbeing and the country (that is their tribal, language and family affiliation) they belong to on first encounter with a stranger;
- Listen to their story; the process of interaction and sharing stories will begin to breakdown communication and social barriers between researchers and the Indigenous person. Be attentive, notice body language, tone of voice, the use of silence, and avoid the overzealous attempts of connecting with an Indigenous colleague or client or you run the risk of stifling any success in two way communication.

The previous practical points for engaging in yarning with an Indigenous person or patient/s are all about relationship building. Research practice involving Indigenous people requires it to be conducted through a genuine relational construct. Once the researcher and/or clinician has embarked on or established a genuine path of relational interaction with an Indigenous person/s then the research practice emerges as its own story of researcher and Indigenous partner. Yarning then becomes the medium of interaction in the research partnership; where learning becomes a storied two-way process on a research journey for both the researcher and participant.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

It is important to note here that a fundamental element in conducting research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples is the privileging of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island voices in the research process towards an emancipatory research outcome for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island community (Geia, Hayes, & Usher, 2011; Hunt & Geia, 2002; Miller, Spring, Goold, Turale, & Usher, 2005). As referred to in the beginning of this paper, research is no longer the sole domain of Western research practice. Indigenous research focuses on the privileging of Indigenous voices and stories/yarns as a means of changing health outcomes for Indigenous people and their communities.

Yarning helps facilitate in-depth discussions that result in thick description. While this may be common to other qualitative research methods, yarning offers Indigenous people a more relaxed approach where they can talk freely about their experiences (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010).

Equally important for the non-Indigenous research colleague/partner, using yarning provides culturally secure space for Indigenous participants to tell their stories. The non-Indigenous researcher, after listening to the yarns, will no longer consider Indigenous people as a number or statistic; they will no longer remain a nameless face or just another patient in the ward.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have espoused the importance of Indigenous research and Indigenous method(ology), inclusive of the process of knowledge creation within collaborative respectful partnerships with

non-Indigenous researchers. It is imperative that we take these challenging steps together on the critical pathway towards better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people and their communities. Aboriginal storytelling and yarning is a very practical way to 'close the gap' on an individual level between researcher and participant. Moreover, on a global research and practice level, employing storytelling and yarning will enhance the biomedical paradigms for research and clinical practice amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait populations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Finally, I wish to acknowledge Professor Debra Jackson who assisted with the review and development of this manuscript. I also thank Professor Jackson for her scholarly insights into Indigenous social and research paradigms and continuing to make spaces for Indigenous knowledge development in academia.

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Received 15 August 2012 Accepted 10 February 2013

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