Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview

This chapter begins with a conceptual and philosophical discussion underlining the importance of approaching research regarding Aboriginal children in accordance with Aboriginal-informed methods (See Appendix 1 for definitions). The overall aim of the project was to gather or develop culturally specific, holistic and effective assessment approaches to accurately and sensitively describe the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children who have experienced trauma due to severe abuse and/or neglect.

This chapter briefly describes the three partnering organisations, namely the Department of Social Work and Social Policy at La Trobe University, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) and Take Two (Berry Street). Each organisation shared the goal of working to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children who have been subject to abuse and neglect, but each have different roles and responsibilities in this regard. The chapter concludes with an outline of the research project itself and of the structure of the report.

Some preliminary considerations

The term ‘Aboriginal’ applies to people from a diverse range of communities and countries within Australia, including Torres Strait Islanders that reflect considerable variation in history, language, experiences of colonisation, parenting practices and cultural mores. The majority of the literature, interviews and focus groups focused on Aboriginal people rather than those from the Torres Strait Islands, although this was not always clear. In general in this report, the term ‘Aboriginal’ is used inclusively to apply to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, except when specific mention of Torres Strait Islanders is made.

There is every reason for Aboriginal readers of this report to immediately consider with suspicion what ‘understanding social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children’ might mean. The history of ‘measuring’ and assessment when it comes to the relationship between academia and Indigenous communities, both within Australia and internationally, has been fraught with colonial impositions and outright racism (Drew, Adams & Walter, 2012).

Viewing Aboriginal peoples as objects of observation and discussion rather than participants with perception and dialogue has occurred throughout Australia’s post-invasion history from colonial observation to anthropology and, particularly in the post-ATSIC (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission) era, political discourse. This is one of the many forms of the prevalence and power of what authors such as Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2000) and Lillian Holt (2002) refer to as ‘whiteness’ in Australia. Such ‘othering’ is one of the many toxic by-products of terra nullius.

When Australia was colonised, non-Aboriginal researchers and scientists brought a method of knowing that was influenced by Western intellectual frameworks which

in many ways reflected a desire to control the world through knowledge. In relation to Aboriginal communities, these Western methods contributed to processes which effectively sought to control the original owners and custodians of the land and waters through categorisation and the power of the written word. Non-Aboriginal anthropologists and researchers mislabelled traditional Aboriginal practices; measured people’s heads to determine intelligence; measured people’s blood to define the degree of a person’s ‘Aboriginality’; and treated Aboriginal people virtually as fauna to be studied. Non-Aboriginal explorers and diarists wrote down their encounters with Aboriginal people and despite the fact that they often left events out which reflected negatively on settlers, such as massacres and attempts to poison Aboriginal people, their reports have been seen as more credible. Even today, some formal Western understandings of history give pre-eminence to the written word of settlers over the memory of Aboriginal Elders with their oral stories of resistance and survival (Dodson, 2003). All this betrays a cultural bias in research which remains alive today.

Colonial ways of knowing are not historical artefacts that simply linger in contemporary discourse. They are actively reproduced within contemporary dynamics of colonial power. (Anderson, 2003, p. 24)

It is not only a question of non-Aboriginal research methods being part of a system of oppression; it is also about creating more effective research methods when it comes to cross-cultural analysis. Western non-Aboriginal methods of research, particularly in the area of the humanities and social sciences, have developed more flexible models as methodologies have evolved from the merely scientific to more holistic forms of research (Ermine, Sinclair, & Jeffery, 2004). This is particularly for action research, feminist research and community development models. Today there is greater awareness of the limits of science and research and the need to be aware of how power dynamics and culture influence the construction of methodologies and theories.

Notwithstanding emerging approaches to Western research methods that grapple with greater levels of complexity and are more holistic and culturally informed, they do not replicate Aboriginal methods of learning and developing knowledge. Rather, these recent approaches provide an opportunity for building bridges across these domains of understanding, looking for coherence not sameness; and learning from the differences.

It is also important to appreciate the debate within the Western context regarding research and outcome-related practice. At the same time as strict, positivist, scientific approaches are being increasingly critiqued, especially in the social sciences, there has been a push towards more evidence-based practice within the social and health fields, such as medicine, psychology and social work. This apparent contradiction needs to be explored and debated as part of an ongoing discourse, particularly where it involves Aboriginal communities.

The interface between research and practice is articulated in various ways. For example, one goal of research is often...
seen to create new knowledge for discovery. This may or may not be designed with practical applications in mind. Research is also aimed at developing or encapsulating knowledge to inform decision-making, policy and practice. This type of research is ultimately judged by its ability to impact directly, accurately and positively in one or more fields of practice. There is also growing realisation that research should be informed by what is happening in the field, not just from within laboratories and that this requires different methodologies.

Evidence-based practice is a relatively recent way of describing a particular relationship between research and practice. Fonagy, Target, Cottrell, Phillips, and Kurtz (2002) note that evidence-based practices are reliant on the ability to measure outcomes. However, they caution that many important outcomes are not quantifiable. Even defining outcomes is complex and can be controversial or lead to misdirection. When adding a cultural divide based on a historical and current experience of oppression and racism, the defining by who about what constitutes a positive outcome is even more fraught. It emphasises the crucial element — outcomes must be defined by the Aboriginal community as to what they believe needs to change over time; and in the context of this study, for their most vulnerable children and young people.

Until recently, the child welfare field and to some extent the mental health or therapeutic field have adopted and adapted various practices without necessarily checking to see if there was evidence as to whether they achieve the intended outcomes. If it made sense, fitted our value base and our understanding of the client group it was worth a try. That was all the evidence needed. We could argue that our work was too hard to reduce to variables that could be measured. We believed that understanding human nature is too complex to accurately study using positivist scientific methodologies. We could criticise studies that excluded most if not all of our clients due to too many confounding variables. Arguments against a reliance on evidence-based practice are even stronger for Aboriginal children, where very few studies have been informed by the Aboriginal perspective or included Aboriginal children. Nevertheless, although these and other critiques of evidence-based practice are often valid and need to inform our thinking, do they mean we should not look for evidence of achieving outcomes for Aboriginal children and their families? Do they mean we should not be informed of evidence of what may cause harm? If we should look towards including an evidence-based perspective, then the next questions are ‘who is the ‘we’?’ and what could the ‘evidence’ look like?

A definition of evidence-based practice that demonstrates its relationship with outcomes and cultural competence is that developed by the state of Oregon (USA). According to their website (http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/mentalhealth/ebp/ebp-definition.pdf) evidence-based practice is where...

...programs or practices...effectively integrate the best research evidence with clinical expertise, cultural competence, and the values of the persons receiving the services. These programs or practices will have consistent scientific evidence showing improved outcomes for clients, participants or communities. (Department of Human Services, Oregon, 2007, p. 1)

This report is co-authored by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers. The Aboriginal partner — the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) — is seeking ways to develop a hybrid of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ways of research and analysis in order to improve its service delivery to Aboriginal children and families. Through this partnership VACCA is seeking the best of both worlds. For the other partners, Take Two (Berry Street) and Department of Social Work and Social Policy, La Trobe University, the partnership represents an opportunity to both learn from Aboriginal methods of engagement and research and make a contribution to mutual capacity building with an Aboriginal child and family services agency. This project was funded by AIATSIS, which as an Aboriginal organisation provided both accountability and authority from an Aboriginal perspective.

Our view is that Aboriginal ways of finding information works because they are based on cultural understanding, cultural respect, community engagement and community empowerment. Non-Aboriginal research methods have certain strengths such as statistical analysis, psychometrics and various disciplines of interpretation and conceptualisation. We know, however, that these types of systems of knowledge frequently redevelop and, more often than not, are susceptible to cultural bias. Aboriginal ways of knowing are holistic and part of an Aboriginal sense of identity and meaning. In most traditional Aboriginal cultures, the ‘old stories’, law, lore or ‘dreaming’ not only defined spirituality and identity; they established knowledge systems concerning economics, trade, land use, legal rights and responsibilities, political arrangements, education and family relationships. These were deep encompassing systems of knowledge and knowing, and embedded in Aboriginal people’s very being. In traditional Aboriginal society knowledge was conveyed in varying ways, particularly through story telling. Knowledge sharing depended on when the listener was ready to hear, or more importantly, ready to listen. Examples of the complexities of these systems and processes of knowledge are that it depended on who was the listener and who was the teller, whether they were male or female and their relationship to each other. Knowledge was not to be openly shared but shared only with those that had the correct relationship and the authorised role to have and apply that knowledge. The Australian film Ten Canoes (de Heer, 2006) depicts this form of knowledge transference well as it emphasises the relationship of teller to listener, the need for patience on the part of the listener and the sense of community.

In the area of child and family welfare, Aboriginal understandings assumes each person has a living relationship with the family, the community, the clan, the land and the spiritual beings of the law/dreaming. It is inherently interrelational and interdependent. Unlike Western culture, the person is perceived not as an independent self but a self-in relationship.