

The research dance: university and community research collaborations at Yarrabah, North Queensland, Australia

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Abstract

This article reflects upon collaborative research relationships between indigenous communities and universities in social health and empowerment programmes. This article is focused on Family Well Being programme and Indigenous Men's Support Groups conducted over the last decade at Yarrabah in northern Queensland. These programmes have incorporated a process whereby the community has set research agendas, local researchers have been employed, and university researchers have facilitated the development of appropriate programmes, the capacity of the community to manage these, and programme evaluation. This article draws upon reflective data derived from intensive group workshops and semistructured, in-depth interviews with both community and university-based researchers conducted in late 2006 and early 2007. These workshops and interviews describe, often in the words of participants, the experiences, challenges and strategies for research collaborations. This article recommends positive strategies for successful partnerships and outlines some challenges faced by both community and university researchers in programmes. The findings of the interviews and workshops are thematically discussed in relation to international literature on collaborative research.

Keywords: community participation, empowerment, evaluation and community-based research, health and social sciences, participation and empowerment, qualitative research

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Introduction

Research relationships in Australia between universities and indigenous communities have been subject to significant re-appraisal in the last decade with a shift towards collaborative research and capacity strengthening appropriate to needs and priorities of communities. This article reflects upon such a research collaboration in social health and empowerment focused on Family Well Being (FWB) programme and Indigenous Men's Support Groups at Yarrabah in northern Queensland. This has involved a process whereby community has set research agendas, local researchers have been employed, and university researchers have facilitated development of

appropriate programmes and community capacity to administer and run programmes. This article reflects upon the form and quality of the research relationship rather than programme outcomes.

In 2006, the significance of this collaboration was demonstrated during an international conference at Yarrabah. The local men's dance group, Yaba Bimbie, performed a 'research dance' that included James Cook University (JCU) and University of Queensland (UQ) researchers and staff members of Gurriny Yealamucka (GY) health service. The dance referenced a traditional healing pool called 'Yealamucka' and represented the healing process within social health programmes and the relationship between the community and universities. A dancer enacted drug, alcohol and mental health problems, crying out for help. University and GY staff within a circle of dancers reached out to assist him into

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their midst. Other dancers followed, passing through 'Yealamucka' and working together towards their vision for themselves, their families and men's group. Involvement of GY staff symbolised responsibilities the health service has assumed for community healing. Participation of university researchers represented the importance of their commitment to GY and the community. This dance internalised, culturally interpreted and communicated the empowerment process. For one university researcher, this recognition of traditional and European ways was the essence of reconciliation.

For this article, reflection on this collaboration was conducted through intensive group workshops and semistructured, in-depth interviews. The discussion framework identifies themes emerging from these two sources of data. It compares these with themes identified in the collaborative research literature including research method, core values and benefits and challenges of such research for both community and university researchers. Throughout this discussion, there is an attempt to maintain the voices of participants.

Collaborative research partnerships and community research

A major criticism of social research has been lack of consultation with communities regarding their needs and priorities. In some instances, this has resulted in mistrust and an antipathy to research within communities. This criticism has been particularly strong in regards to indigenous communities (Tuhiwai Smith 1999, Voyle & Simmons 1999, Holmes *et al.* 2002, Jones *et al.* 2006). Collaborative research has been increasingly recommended as a means of alleviating research inequalities and for achieving more appropriate outcomes (Rappaport 1987, Wandersman 2003), including training of community researchers and empowerment through participatory action research (PAR) (Voyle & Simmons 1999, Dickson 2000, Pyett 2002, Rowe 2006). As communities rarely have the experience or resources to conduct research, professional researchers are often still needed to develop reflexive processes, produce relevant research and strengthen capacity (Holmes *et al.* 2002, Pyett 2002). This is apparent in frameworks for practice recommended in academic literature (Beacham *et al.* 2004), in ethical research guidelines (Commonwealth of Australia 2003, CRAH 2006), and by the intention and form of community projects (K. Tsey personal communication).

In undertaking community research collaborations, a set of core values has been identified in the literature as necessary to achieving successful partnerships. These have been well-summarised by Beacham *et al.* (2004) and recounted for specific projects by other authors (Voyle & Simmons 1999, Holmes *et al.* 2002,

Pyett 2002, Jones *et al.* 2006, Rowe 2006). Core values most referred to are recognition of processes, reflexivity, commitment, trust, respect, patience and flexibility.

Collaborations have benefits and challenges for both university researchers and community researchers. For university researchers, collaborations allow close, ethical work with communities and increase institutional engagement and funding opportunities. However, this research may be time-consuming, risk conflicts of interest, may not meet academic standards, or be as academically recognised and rewarded as other types of research. For communities, such collaborations recognise and address community needs and aspirations, provide greater understanding of researcher and funding body perspectives, allow capacity strengthening and provide evaluations of projects. Challenges for communities include developing trust in outsiders, time-consuming processes, ongoing motivation of self and others, and projects may not be embraced by all community members (Beacham *et al.* 2004).

Evaluation is a particular challenge in collaborative research (Ansari *et al.* 2001, Miller & Shinn 2005). Its difficulty extends from collaborative research often emphasizing process rather than outcomes, that different participants may value different aspects of the collaboration, that significant levels of reporting are anecdotal, and that positive, long-term outcomes may develop after the life of a project (Voyle & Simmons 1999, Ansari *et al.* 2001, Holmes *et al.* 2002, Jones *et al.* 2006, Rowe 2006). Despite these difficulties, the importance of process for participants and long-term benefits of programmes have been identified as core strengths of collaborative research (Tuhiwai Smith 1999, Voyle & Simmons 1999, Pyett 2002, Rowe 2006).

This article directly addresses the process and experience of collaborative research for both community and university researchers. The voice of community researchers has often been recorded in the academic literature, but that of university researchers is often less explicit. Inclusion of the voice of university researchers from workshops and interviews is important to emphasise the programme's collaborative nature and to neither privilege, diminish, nor assume their role. Experiences of both community and university researchers have a resonance with core values, benefits and challenges listed above and these will be used in the Discussion of this article.

Background

Over the last decade, universities have worked with GY to deliver community-based, social health programmes. This relationship provides mutual benefits as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1 Institutional benefits of research collaboration between universities and Gurriny Yealamucka (GY) health service

| GY provides university partners with | University partners provide GY with |
|--|---|
| Collaborative submissions for grants | Direct funding of community based positions through National Health and Medical Research Council grants |
| Identification of issues of concern to Indigenous health | Assistance in funding submissions for priority programmes |
| Data for research papers for peer reviewed journals | Participatory action research reflections, debriefings, strategic planning, and support |
| Collaborative presentations at conferences | Credibility through conference presentations |
| Students in higher degrees | Encouragement and support with university degrees |
| Small funding grants for evaluations of social health programmes | Credibility of programmes demonstrated by published evaluations of programmes |

The most prominent social health programmes have been FWB, which includes training of facilitators from community. Family well being facilitators reflect on personal experiences and community problems and attempt to identify solutions. Some assume positions of community engagement and leadership. There is often a realisation of shared experience between themselves and participants. They also interact with organisations outside their previous experience such as universities and funding bodies. This can be empowering, but can also be overwhelming.

Men's and Women's Groups have been a significant site of FWB training. Within these, PAR has emerged as a strategy for documenting this process and supporting community facilitators (Tsey *et al.* 2004, Daly *et al.* 2005). Participants, supported by peers and facilitators, use a narrative approach to research their daily priorities, recognise resources, produce knowledge and act to improve their situation (Dickson 2000, Franks 2000, Reilly 2006). Projects such as formation of Yaba Bimbe dance group have emerged through this process. University researchers conduct regular debriefings to provide a mechanism to recognise and address effective strategies or problems as they arise. In debriefings, FWB participants have reported increases in self-esteem, resilience, reflexivity and problem solving. Facilitators and participants feel that the FWB experience may contribute to the capacity necessary to deal with broader community issues such as suicide, school attendance, housing and employment (Tsey *et al.* 2002, 2004).

Methods

How data was collected

This article is based on two complementary sets of reflexive data: (1) transcripts of two, half-day workshops for group reflections on the research collaboration; and (2) semistructured, in-depth interviews with five key university and community researchers.

'4Rs' intensive workshops

The half-day intensive workshops used small group discussion and provided a safe, supportive group environment that encouraged reflexivity. Participants were divided into community men, community women and university researchers to create spaces for discussion followed by feedback to the group. Discussions were orientated by a '4Rs' guideline similar to reflections used in PAR programmes. These guidelines asked participants to:

- recall details of the experience;
- relive programme highlights and challenges;
- reinterpret experiences to consider what was learnt about self and others; and
- respond to lessons and formulate future directions.

Themes have been identified from both sources, contrasted and compared to themes and core values identified in the literature. An attempt has been made to preserve the voices of participants in keeping with the programme framework.

The semistructured interviews

Interviews with five key researchers were conducted by a university researcher who had not participated in Yarrabah programmes, though familiar with PAR debriefing notes and transcripts of the intensive workshops. Invited interviewees were those with wide experience at Yarrabah at both facilitator and administrative levels. A general interview guide approach (Patton 1990) created a space for participants to focus upon professional and personal understandings and experiences rather than a group dynamic and context. Particular foci were:

- how the collaboration was perceived by both partners;
- how it was managed when resources were limited; and
- how challenges such as community politics, cultural difference and income disparity were recognised and negotiated.

Results

Themes

These workshops and interviews provide a complementary range of experiences from the collaboration. The workshop forum allowed less-experienced community researchers to voice personal experiences of joining GY and their professional successes and challenges. The responses by interviewees were more detailed, sophisticated and institutionally aligned than those shared by workshop participants, many of whom were less experienced. Similar themes emerge from both sets of data. Both data sources demonstrate the process and importance of building trust, reflexivity and capacity. Other themes included issues of workload, *de facto* management, programme momentum, community politics, and cross-cultural perceptions and interactions.

Building relationships, trust and reflexivity

From the two, half-day workshops, emerged a narrative of the collaboration experience reflecting the FWB process. This narrative told of initial wariness and reticence to participate, the importance of 'bottom-up' approaches, growth of confidence and trust over time and reflection as a tool for collaboration and consultation.

Many GY staff spoke of an initial reticence to participate in programmes; yet when they did, they found FWB provided them with a reflexive tool and guide for their work and personal lives. One staff member recalled her aspiration to be a facilitator, but how it required courage to apply. Another woman was reluctant to try FWB, because she did not think her 'brain could handle it, being out of school'.

Family Well Being provided a space for self-reflection and a desire to share the experience with others. For one woman, FWB provided guidelines to reflect on her behaviour and that of others and to see community needs. It was a process of self-healing as well as helping others. FWB participants that became facilitators also became community role models, because their experiences prior to involvement in FWB were similar to many in the community. One woman believed FWB would grow and have a huge impact through generational changes in the community. Several participants spoke of their enthusiasm in sharing FWB with young people.

Initial experiences for university staff were of a positive shift from an institutional to a community base for research. One woman described her previous experience of health programmes as 'top down interventions that had been decided by people in the hierarchies.' After hearing the first FWB talks, another woman thought, 'This is where I fitted and it was about this very issue of

people learning – getting together in groups, sharing stories, empowerment and basic sorts of guidelines for relationships and things.'

This sharing relationship required time to build trust and confidence. In discussing their relationship with universities, GY staff spoke of initial wariness and awe of university staff and how this changed to trust. This built over several years and faced a number of hurdles including the historical legacy of indigenous and non-indigenous relations. The GY women described that at first there was 'an element of fear' derived from wider relationships of the community with white people. One man said there had been a feeling that academics 'were people full of knowledge and you can't reach them.' Other men said that '... through the years it has helped us to realise they are normal. They have been able to connect and transfer knowledge to the community.' The women 'were surprised that people with those knowledge and experience could be so kind and helpful.' GY women described themselves as 'babies' whom the university team 'nurtured'. In this process, they 'really liked the one on one support' provided by the university team without GY staff losing control of programmes. It was important that they were 'allowed to run programmes on their own – there was a real sense of allowing people to take control'.

While women staff from the university found supporting Men's Group 'an interesting challenge', they considered the research relationship to have 'gotten better over time and trust has grown between community researchers and university researchers.' University staff were pleased that programmes were based on community aspirations driven by the community. It was also inspirational to see personal and professional growth in those participating and working in programmes. They felt that personal relationships with people in Yarrabah informed and developed their experiences and capacities as researchers.

Strategies for building trust were more detailed in the interviews. A university researcher considered that a partnership strength is that research is not a stand-alone initiative, but forms part of the GY social health agenda. Responses to the initial community engagement emphasised the importance of sensitivity, consultation and community priorities as an ethical guide for research.

Our starting point is always – what is the community trying to do and how can our research expertise be made relevant and value add to what the community is already trying to do?

He explained that sensitivity to historically problematic relationships in indigenous research and development of practical ethical/philosophical frameworks are needed to guide such relationships. Specifically, the National Health and Medical Research Council additional criteria

for Research Involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders provides an overall framework for the approach at Yarrabah.

Historical sensitivities were also evoked by a community researcher speaking of the communities' initial reluctance to work with the university team because of prior research experiences. Researchers had previously taken knowledge, and left only a PhD of limited relevance to the community. This had left 'a bad taste in the mouth'. It was also thought that the university would have a systematic way of working and expect particular results at odds with the 'laid back' community attitude. The experiences with the university empowerment team were, however, quite different. University researchers spent time building trust and 'working relationships', passing on skills that empowered community staff to choose their own directions.

He outlined three stages in developing a working relationship. In stage one, university researchers never imposed ideas about projects, but listened to community discussion and suggested working frameworks. In stage two, university researchers fed ideas raised in initial meetings back to community for reflection. In stage three, programme implementation and evaluation were discussed.

Another university researcher considered that FWB intrinsically allowed community members to reflect and work on priorities in their own lives. She found this more effective than attempting to force particular outcomes. Another community researcher felt that through association with university researchers and the experience of FWB, community staff began reflecting on activities automatically. This reflexivity did not just develop their awareness as researchers. It also influenced the organisations operational structures and provided greater understanding of research and funding strategies.

Workloads and programme management roles

A major challenge for community and university staff was the workload in establishing and delivering programmes. GY staff spoke in the workshops of challenges faced in maintaining momentum. They stressed the high workload of programmes, delivery of out-of-hours sessions and continual need for self-motivation and motivation of group participants. Being part of the community made drawing lines between work and personal time difficult, and as potential role models they were open to judgment and criticism. They acknowledged struggles with evaluation and report writing and felt need for more training.

A university researcher noted that issues of time management were inherent in the consultative process. Time spent sitting down and talking, building relation-

ships, developing trust and strategising around a range of funding, personal, professional and organisational challenges may impinge upon collecting and analysing data for publication, making it difficult to demonstrate academic productivity. 'The issue of where to put one's energy is a constant dilemma.'

He added that this can be exacerbated, particularly in early stages, when community-based researchers are inexperienced and university researchers may partly act as *de facto* managers. University researchers need to be supportive in this and provide advice, but must also understand that in building community capacity, management is not their role. Their core role is facilitating research and reflective processes. If community researchers needed training in areas outside of this, such as literacy or IT, then this needed to be encouraged but addressed through a skills audit and a delivery strategy involving specialised training organisations.

That early *de facto* management was both necessary and an issue was emphasised by all interviewees. The other two university researchers had become involved in time-consuming, administrative capacities due to lack of community management staff and some community researchers having limited experience and skills. One observed that this was also affected by issues of attaining recurring funding for positions. She thought it important for the university and GY to move beyond *de facto* management situations. The facilitation and evaluation of FWB and Men's Group were their main roles. These demanded time and discipline from themselves and community without which evaluation processes became difficult.

A community researcher considered it important for university researchers to have initially spent time within GY, developing community skills in research, documentation, planning and implementation. He said, 'community first expects university researchers to do more than they do and thinks of them as superhuman'. This shifts as staff understanding of empowerment grows and people develop hope in the system, and commit to it. This flows on to other programmes. In the example of Men's Group, its development created employment, led to formation of Women's Group and became a role model for Men's Groups in other communities. The organisation also came to understand the importance of programme evaluation for successful funding plans. These evaluations enabled GY to give national and international presentations. Through evaluations and high profile presentations, policy-makers have been able to see advances made by GY, creating faith in the organisation.

At a personal level, experience of working with university researchers led him and other staff, none of whom had gone higher than year 10, to undertake graduate and postgraduate study. However, he added that as programmes develop and staff acquire confidence,

then universities need to step back. This means a change rather than an end to the relationship.

The other community researcher recognised that some community staff viewed university researchers as support and that this reliance can produce *de facto* management. Clarity around roles is necessary with the understanding that capacity building is a significant part of the programme and situations need to be worked out according to individual abilities and needs, project by project. This was something the university must reflect upon, as it should drive the standard of research.

She stressed the need to monitor training as skill and confidence levels within programmes affected staff motivation. Lack of motivation can be a vicious circle since motivation is needed for success, which in turn motivates people to strive further. She also observed that sometimes staff attained comfort zones in their work and needed to be taken further.

She noted that although health delivery, not research, is the core business of GY, she saw the importance of research. She observed that while 'the university may be dependent on Gurriny to do research; Gurriny is also dependent upon the university and needs to recognise this.'

Community politics

Issues of politics, cultural misunderstandings and wealth disparity were not explicitly discussed in the workshops, but were directly addressed in the interviews. All interviewees considered community politics to be unavoidable, but that it was important not to become embroiled in them. One university researcher said that in dealing with community politics, researchers need to listen and to encourage reflection on a programme's core business, but not buy into politics. He thought that 'maybe we have been lucky because FWB is already reflective and conflict resolving.' He added that, 'With community politics and other intercultural issues, having formal or informal Aboriginal mentors and colleagues was critical.'

Another university researcher thought that community politics were encountered more by community staff than university researchers. University researchers could more easily remove themselves from direct involvement, though this distancing could result in criticism from other service providers. She observed that politics were not restricted to the community, as non-indigenous people and support organisations may compete over levels and forms of engagement. It was therefore important to develop broad relationships.

A community researcher recognised that community politics affected who supported or participated in programmes. He observed that the university stepped back from politics and encouraged wider community

engagement. This sometimes worked and sometimes did not, but, importantly, a reflexive space was created.

Cultural misunderstandings

Community researchers did not directly discuss cultural misunderstandings. The university researchers recognised that these happen and were best addressed by creating openness and understanding. Hence, it was important to recruit people who listen and reflect upon their role.

One researcher found that cultural misunderstandings were infrequent, because programme content was not culturally specific and that those involved accepted them as accidental. Her main difficulty arose from not being able to understand strong accents or local language usage.

Another researcher found that she was sometimes uncertain how to interpret interactions with community staff and members. Many people had family pressures and could be indirect in expressing their situation, feelings, or intentions.

Wealth disparity

A university researcher considered funding of positions to be the means of addressing wealth disparity. This was an important university role and a significant percentage of funding should be for community positions. It should not be tokenistic. Whether in funding allocation or routine practice, he insisted that, 'If you are claiming you are using a framework, the consistency with which you use it is going to be important.'

Another university researcher found wealth disparity to be a personal issue. While rationally she realised that she was attempting to affect social justice, emotionally she felt uncomfortable. Nonetheless, she felt that her work had a positive, personal significance and through her engagement with community she had built strong personal relationships. She said that it 'feels like there is a connection at a spiritual level with people, even though we have quite different perceptions of spirituality. There is a trust on that level.'

A community researcher felt that issues of wealth disparity were not dramatic as the attitude and behaviour of university researchers did not give it significance. He considered education as the long-term means of addressing inequality, and that engagement with universities was part of this.

I recommend every aboriginal community to latch onto a university and have a working relationship which benefits both. Aboriginal communities need to be educated like everyone else to come out of the mud that we are in.

Both university- and community-based researchers considered it important that FWB be sustained, and expanded by being carried into new areas and to new participants, by creating jobs with ongoing funding and by further professional development. Expansion towards community control of social health programmes required establishing credibility for GY through strong research and evaluation of programmes. It was felt that Yarrabah could become a model for indigenous communities across Australia.

Discussion

This discussion compares the collaborative practice at Yarrabah with the community partnerships literature. Foremost, the Yarrabah collaboration is directly aligned with literature advocating research that is appropriate to community priorities (Rappaport 1987, Commonwealth of Australia 2003, Wanderman 2003, Beacham *et al.* 2004, CRAH 2006). Community consultation, reflection and expression remained at the heart of programme strategies as summarised in Table 2. It is worth noting that in workshops and interviews the difficulties discussed were not concerned with research intention, but with implementation and future direction.

In implementation, reflexivity and relationship and capacity building is primary. In their initial response to FWB, many community members were reserved, with expectations that the community 'could not reach' university researchers. This related to historical sensitivities, prior experiences of research and mistrust of white society, issues highlighted in the literature (Tuhiwai Smith 1999, Voyle & Simmons 1999, Holmes *et al.* 2002, Jones *et al.* 2006). It was only by patience, commitment and building of trust and 'a working relationship' that this challenge was negotiated.

This has been expressed through participation of community members in programmes, and by inclusion of university researchers in community activities such as dance. Patience and commitment were important aspects of this achievement, particularly early in programmes when gains may have been quite humble (Beacham *et al.* 2004). These gains are, however, essential to building momentum within programmes so that positive outcomes for community become significant over time. This requires recognition that community empowerment is both a means and end. It is not simply about a research product, but also about capacity and trust strengthening within communities (Voyle & Simmons 1999, Pyett 2002, Rowe 2006).

A major challenge of the collaboration has been the workload added to researchers by the need to build community capacity. This includes university researchers assuming *de facto* managerial roles in early stages of

Table 2 Positive strategies for successful partnerships

- Negotiate and renegotiate with community to ascertain community priorities
- Develop framework for programmes reflecting priorities
- Create time and spaces for ongoing discussion within framework
- Assess skills and resources within community in relation to programmes
- Facilitate training to allow community members involvement at multiple levels
- Employ programme workers from community
- Employ staff who respect the programme framework
- Be aware of political implications of actions

Table 3 Challenges to collaboration

- Overcoming community and individual reticence to participate
- Time management of breadth of tasks when under resourced
- Maintaining funding especially early in programmes
- Developing appropriate skills and resources at community level
- Maintaining motivation and participation of staff and community
- Providing quantitative evidence of efficacy of reflective programmes

the programme that may impact upon their role as researchers. For community staff, workload, training and motivation have also been issues. For some of them, this process has shown the importance of education in improving their situation and for negotiating at institutional levels. These and other challenges are summarised in Table 3. Similar issues are identified in the literature (Pyett 2002, Beacham 2004, Rowe 2006).

Evaluation of the collaboration has conventional difficulties (Ansari *et al.* 2001, Miller & Shinn 2005), but has nonetheless been consistently given space through FWB framework, PAR process, workshops, conferences, reports and articles. Inclusion of supportive and reflexive processes within research frameworks is important for both ongoing orientation and evaluation. At participant and institutional levels, they are a means of debriefing and voicing experiences, understandings and aspirations; for developing community understanding of and engagement with external organisations; for developing programme and organisational credibility; and for recording experiences and a practical framework to guide future programmes at Yarrabah and other communities.

Conclusion

Finally, it is worth commenting that a subtle indicator of success in the Yarrabah collaboration is the interpretation of the research endeavour through dance. Communities may not only choose the type of research

conducted, but have their own expressions to depict its value, process and rewards. The idea of a 'research dance' is in this case one of inclusion in which university researchers act for the benefit of the community and gain access to community in return. It would, however, be problematic to imagine this as a metaphor for a western style of dance. The creation of a 'research dance' within Yaba Bimbie's repertoire highlights the acceptance of the university research team on local terms. It explicitly recognises trust and beneficial relationships. Implicitly, it demonstrates the efficacy and profound effect of empowerment frameworks, revealing the extent to which research processes can be internalised and used as local, creative means of disseminating community relevant research and messages.

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