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This is the author's version of a work that was submitted/accepted for publication in the following source:

Walker, Melissa, Fredericks, Bronwyn, Mills, Kyly, & Anderson, Debra (2013) "Yarning" as a method for community-based health research with indigenous women : the indigenous women's wellness research program. *Health Care for Women International*, pp. 1-11.

This file was downloaded from: `http://eprints.qut.edu.au/61835/`

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07399332.2013.815754

“Yarning” as a Method for Community-Based Health Research With Indigenous Women: The Indigenous Women's Wellness Research Program

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Abstract

This project explores yarning as a methodology for understanding health and wellness from an indigenous woman's perspective. Previous research exploring indigenous Australian women's perspectives have used traditional Western methodologies and have often been felt by the women themselves to be inappropriate and ineffective in gathering information and promoting discussion. This research arose from the indigenous women themselves, and resulted in the exploration of using yarning as a methodology. Yarning is a conversational process that involves the sharing of stories and the development of knowledge. It prioritizes indigenous ways of communicating, in that it is culturally prescribed, cooperative, and respectful. The authors identify different types of yarning that are relevant throughout their research, and explain two types of yarning—family yarning and cross-cultural yarning—which have not been previously identified in research literature. This project found that yarning as a research method is appropriate for community-based health research with indigenous Australian women. This may be an important finding for health professionals and researchers to consider when working and researching with indigenous women from other countries.

Indigenous people globally have been over-researched and inappropriately researched, with culturally respectful methodologies often disregarded or overlooked within Western research paradigms (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010; Smith, 1999). This has also been the case historically in Australia too, with indigenous peoples being actively involved in defining principals for researching indigenous issues and concerns (Rigney, 2001). This is particularly evident in health research.

In Australia, despite an ever-increasing volume of indigenous health research, there remains little change in the health disparities faced by indigenous Australians when compared with non-indigenous Australians. A clear indication of this non-Indigenous hierarchy is the life expectancy gap of 11.5 years for indigenous men and 9.7 years for Indigenous women (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011).

Indigenous researchers are increasing calling for new approaches to indigenous health research that will reframe Western research conventions and prioritize an indigenist approach. Indigenous health researchers are seeking to develop their own research paradigms and methods (Martin, 2008; Saunders, West, & Usher, 2010; Smith, 1999).

This article explores the successful use of yarning as a research method within a community-based indigenous women's wellness project. The project was based on the north side of Brisbane, a large urban city in Queensland, Australia (Walker, Fredericks, & Anderson, 2012). This article provides an overview of the yarning method and argues that yarning is a credible and valuable method for research in an Indigenous health context.

WHAT IS YARNING?

In Australia, indigenous people recognize yarning as a conversational process that involves the telling and sharing of stories and information. Yarning is culturally ascribed and cooperative; yarns follow language protocols and result in some acquisition of new meaning (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Feldman, 1999).

Extracting a single definition for yarning is tricky, as the term has various applications in different indigenous contexts (Dean, 2010). For the purpose of this article, we draw on recent work by Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) who characterize yarning as "an indigenous cultural form of conversation" (p. 37). The terms "yarn" and "yarning" are used daily by indigenous people, but they always refer to more than simple pleasantries in casual conversation or a light correspondence between people (Fredericks et al., 2011). Rather, as Towney (2005) indicates, yarning is a unique part of indigenous culture that is linked to spirituality, thus becoming a "special and powerful way Aboriginal people connect to each other" (p. 40).

As researchers, we understand that yarning is both a process and an exchange; it is reliant upon cultural protocol, relationships, and expected outcomes (Dean, 2010; Fredericks et al., 2011). This complexity, then, means that yarning establishes relationality between people and determines accountability between those people (Martin, 2008). These effects are important aspects that seem to be overlooked in much of the Westernized research conducted with Indigenous communities.

As observed by Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010), yarning can take a range of forms. They describe four main types of yarning: social yarning, therapeutic yarning, research topic yarning, and collaborative yarning. Each type of yarn will have rules, techniques, and roles that are implemented throughout the course of the yarn (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010).

This article explores research topic yarning and describes how it can be applied in health research with indigenous women. We concur with Dean (2010), who asserts that yarning as a formal research methodology could not only center Indigenous knowledge systems, but also permit partnerships with indigenous communities and thus develop culturally safe research.

RESEARCH TOPIC YARNING

Research topic yarning is a conversation that, whilst deliberate and with a determined beginning and end, is also relaxed and interactive (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). Unlike research that uses formal interviewing, research topic yarning provides an opportunity for participants to take the research topic and respond as they see fit. The yarn develops without the interruption of direct questioning (Fletcher et al., 2011). Significantly, this process results in the following:

Both the researcher and participant journey together visiting places and topics of interest relevant to the research study. Yarning is a process that requires the researcher to develop and build a relationship that is accountable to Indigenous people participating in the research. (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010, p. 38)

Through the strength of the yarning relationship, participants become both elemental contributors to the research decision making and crucial donors of information (Dean, 2010). Essentially, their values are centered in the research process, and this allows them to become an active voice for their community's needs and concerns.

The relationships of those participating in the yarn are important. Developing research that involves truly equivalent relationships is not easy (Franks et al., 2001), particularly in Westernized approaches to research that define hierarchical roles of “researcher” and “researched.” Franks and colleagues. (2001, p. 21) assert that establishing equivalent research relationships (or partnerships) requires a “safe environment, and a solid foundation from which to open one's self up to listen and give.” Yarning is a valuable approach here, as it allows for a relaxed and familiar communication process within a known and culturally safe environment (Fredericks et al., 2011).

A strength of yarning as a research tool for qualitative data collection is its familiarity as an everyday process of communication for Indigenous people. Because it is familiar, honesty and openness can unfold through the relationships that are developed and renewed as the yarn progresses (Fredericks et al., 2011). Yarning enables Indigenous people to talk freely about their experiences, thoughts, and ideas. It “enables the researcher to explore the topic in more depth, which results in information emerging that more formal research processes may not facilitate” (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010, p. 47).

Yarning also has a role in the triangulation of research data. As Chilisa (2012) highlights, data yielded from stories gained through yarning can enable the triangulation of postcolonial indigenous values, belief systems, and community histories with other sources of knowledge. This suggests that the data gathered through yarning about health, for example, can be particularly accurate and meaningful. Data gathered through yarning can have rigor and legitimacy amongst Indigenous people as well as within the broader research community.

YARNING AS A METHOD FOR DECOLONIZATION

Indigenous researchers and scholars are increasingly challenging traditional Westernized research doctrine. Within the context of Australian health research, several researchers are advocating a decolonizing approach (see, for example, Fredericks et al., 2011; Prior, 2007; Sherwood, 2009; Sherwood & Edwards, 2006; Vickery, Faulkhead, Adams, & Clarke, 2007; Walker, Fredericks, Mills, & Anderson 2013).

Decolonization is “a process of centering the concerns and worldviews of the colonized Other so that they understand themselves through their own assumptions and perspectives” (Chilisa, 2012, p. 13). The methods of conducting decolonizing research means that “the worldviews of those who have suffered a long history of oppression and marginalization are given space to communicate from their frames of reference” (Chilisa, 2012, p. 14).

Yarning contributes to the process of decolonization. As a research method, it centers indigenous knowledge systems, ways of doing, values, and perspectives (Dean, 2010). As a research strategy, it helps to reposition and support indigenous knowledges and methods (Rigney, 2001; Smith, 1999; Warrior, 1999). The increasing acceptance of yarning as a research method can be seen as a “step toward assisting indigenous theorists and practitioners to determine what might be an appropriate response to de-legitimise racist oppression in research and shift to a more empowering and self-determining outcome” (Rigney, 1999, p. 110). As Fredericks and colleagues (2011) note, decolonizing practices such as yarning may shift the way we research and manifest into the formation of “equal respectful partnerships, support, cooperation and respect for us as Aboriginal peoples” (p. 17).

Discussions about decolonization clearly indicate the need for indigenous-centered research practices. In much health research, however, the cultural values of indigenous peoples continue to have little influence in shaping the broader methods of inquiry (Prior, 2007). In our research about indigenous women's wellness, however, we chose to prioritize Indigenous values through our methods and processes. It was this priority that encouraged us to adopt yarning as a key method of data collection.

YARNING WITH INDIGENOUS WOMEN

As noted earlier, Bessarab and Ng’andu (2010) identify four main types of yarning: research yarning, social yarning, therapeutic yarning, and collaborative yarning. In our research for the indigenous Women's Wellness Project in North Brisbane, we moved between these yarning types at different stages of the work. While research topic yarning provided an overall framework, we moved between types as they seemed appropriate. We also identified two types of yarning that have not been previously identified in the literature—family yarning and cross-cultural yarning.

Indigenous women were recruited for the project through indigenous information processes. All participants were over the age of 18 and were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander women or of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background. At the outset of the project, we were aware that information flyers and standard research approaches would not be effective. Instead, indigenous women were invited to become part of the research via Indigenous yarning and communication pathways—including yarns with specific individuals from indigenous organizations and indigenous community interagencies.

Social Yarning and Research Topic Yarning

Our project began with social yarning. We sought permission to carry out the project from the Moreton Bay regional elders, a group of individuals who hold traditional ownership of this country and have responsibility for the North Brisbane region indigenous women's population. We followed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communications and hierarchy protocols and received permission to conduct our project.

In seeking permission for the project, we engaged in social yarning and research topic yarning with elders and influential indigenous community members. We offered in-depth information, answered questions, and accepted assistance from the elders in the process of developing the project. In these early stages, we also engaged in family yarning—a yarn about our family connections that is discussed in more detail in the following section. Food was shared at all meetings in a customary manner.

To recruit project participants, we moved from social and research topic yarning to direct recruitment. Under the guidance of community elders, and with their permission, we sent letters of permission and information briefs out to organizations and leading members of the two communities. The letters were presented to the elders and verbally signed off before distribution. The project was discussed by both male and female indigenous elders and then followed through with only the female indigenous elders.

Our community approval process with the elders was combined with mainstream acceptance and ethical protocols from our university and “official” letters of invitation to participate in the research. Interestingly, nearly all the indigenous organizations replied to the “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander style” of letter. Only one indigenous organization replied with an official, mainstream, university-style reply.

Our recruitment materials were sent to all of the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organizations except for one, which did not have any female members. In accordance with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural protocols, this noninclusion was both expected and respectful, as women's business is not mentioned or shared with male members of the community. We sought advice and clarification on this matter from female indigenous elders.

Our recruitment returned to social and research topic yarning as we began a process of telephone contact and word of mouth processes to identify participants. We sought and received permission for the project from all of the registered Indigenous organizations and the influential Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups within the region. As part of our commitment to yarning, we wanted all groups to understand our work and have an opportunity to engage with it. Melissa Walker and Bronwyn Fredericks attended indigenous community meetings and updated community representatives about the project's progress and the activities arising from the project.

At this point, we became aware that we were engaging in a different type of yarning as information about our project spiraled throughout the community. We identified what Bessarab and Ng’andu (2010) call “collaborative yarning” as we noticed the way that our recruitment depended on the social and collaborative yarning pathways that are part of indigenous cultures. Collaborative yarning involved community members yarning with one another, as information about our project spiraled outward through points within the community of indigenous women.

Participants self-selected into the project and formed a convenience sample across three Indigenous communities that fall into the larger region known as North Brisbane. This region is within what indigenous people know as Gubbi Gubbi Country, which includes the geographic areas from Petrie to Caboolture among other smaller indigenous communities (Horton, 1999).

Family Yarning

Although family yarning has not been identified in previous literature, we identified it as an important part of our work. Family yarning captures the family and personal connections and relationships that exist between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in regards to land, spirituality, and kinship.

Family yarning was evident in our earliest conversations for this project. Family yarning helped us to identify the Gubbi Gubbi Country and define the geographic scope of our work. It was also an important part of identifying and sharing family connections as we established a strong relationship with the community elders at the beginning of the project. Martin (2008) describes this as a process of relationality. Examples within our research included the phases such as “Where you mob from” and “Which way you.” This is done in a range of contexts (See Fredericks, Walker, Peacock, Duthie, & Best, 2012, for an example). Family yarning is part of the process of connecting and social positioning that occurs as participants discover their relationality to one another. We followed indigenous connections and information pathways to understand and connect through the use of family and community hierarchical protocols. This helped to establish our accountability to one another within our cultural contexts as explored by Fredericks and colleagues, 2012.

Family yarning was particularly important in our first meetings or yarning conversations with participants. We all asked or told one another where we were from and where our family was from, and we indicated our position within the community. It was the family yarning process that encouraged us to move our meetings to venues that were more family and community friendly, as large numbers of children attended our initial meetings. We started to hold our meetings at venues where the children could be seen at all times and where women could continue to yarn without feeling that their children needed to be closely monitored.

Cross-Cultural Yarning

Cross-cultural yarning was evident throughout our project. In much research, cross-cultural yarning involves the indigenous researcher or participant adapting to Westernized rules and protocols. It can be underpinned by “White privilege” and by university and institutional structures that are based on Western foundations (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010). Examples of this constriction include hand-shaking and asking direct questions during interviews, rather than focusing on storytelling or the development of yarning conversations. Another example is the omission or inclusion of “acknowledgment and welcome to country’’ when gatherings or meetings take place (Moreton-Robinson, 2000). In our experience, cross-cultural yarning predominately requires a shift by indigenous researchers or participants, rather than a shift by the non-Indigenous researchers who are a section of the dominant culture in Australia.

We identify cross-cultural yarning as a new type of yarning that was important in our project but has not been previously recognized in the literature. It involves communication and interactions between indigenous and non-indigenous people and requires specific attention to protocol and cultural respect.

In our project, for example, our research team included both indigenous and non-indigenous women, and the community information part of our project involved extensive work with non-Indigenous women. We brought in diabetes educators, health promoters, and other health professionals for a Women's Wellness Summit, and they were all non-indigenous women. We noticed that, in these interactions, both indigenous and non-indigenous forms of communication were used. Our research team engaged in a range of communication styles as we shifted between Indigenous domains, mixed domains, and non-indigenous domains that were dominated by Anglo-Australian protocols and rules and White privilege (Moreton-Robinson, 2000). We realized through our project that cross-cultural yarning is vital in order for all of the team and the expertise we drew on to be on the same page in terms of the outcomes we sought. We wanted everyone to feel safe and to feel that they were contributing to improving better health outcomes for and with indigenous women. We also knew that indigenous women did not have all the knowledge required, nor did non-indigenous women have all the knowledge required: We needed all of the knowledge, skills, and abilities from everyone to make it work. We also believed as a team that we wanted to develop everyone's ability to work with one another for a more inclusive and healthier future too. This might seem idealistic, but it is also what is required.

WEAVING WESTERNIZED RESEARCH REQUIREMENTS INTO THE YARNING

Throughout the project, we were able to weave together the indigenous practice of yarning with the more formal requirements of research. For example, we provided participant information materials and consent forms to women while we engaged in social and family yarning and prepared the lunch. We talked in lay terms about the research project, covering such things as consent, intellectual property, research guidelines, audio-tape access and permission, and individual unidentified number allocations.

Many participants (particularly the female elders) required substantial help to understand and complete the demographic details requested within our survey. Through the yarning, participants mentioned that they “want to know everything.” We talked about how participants only have to answer questions they were comfortable answering, and many participants left questions unanswered. During this process, children sat, walked, played, and ran about. All of the women collectively cared for the children and took turns speaking with the children to enable all women to participate in the yarning circles.

We noticed that the yarning continued beyond our research topic yarning, with women participating in lengthy conversations outside the venues.

CONCLUSION

Our work provides further evidence for the value of yarning as a community-based research methodology that is relevant to Indigenous communities. We adopted yarning for our work in the Indigenous Women's Wellness Project in Brisbane. Because yarning is a common form of communication that is undertaken daily by Indigenous women, it is a powerful form of information sharing and knowledge building. To achieve accurate, in-depth, and respectful research with indigenous communities, incorporating a familiar and culturally appropriate style of information sharing, such as yarning, is essential.

Our research builds on the work of Bessarab and Ng’andu (2010) to explore yarning as a method for developing a health and wellness project with a diversity of Indigenous women within a large urban context. We extend the types of yarning identified by Bessarab and Ng’andu to identify two types of yarns that were particularly important in our project: family yarning and cross-cultural yarning. Family yarning helped to establish relationality amongst project participants, while reflecting on cross-cultural yarning helped us to understand some of the cultural issues and dynamics at work.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge Aunty Honor Cleary, Aunty Faye Gundy, Aunty Selena Seymour, and the indigenous women of North Brisbane who participated in the Indigenous Women's Wellness Program project. Acknowledgment is additionally offered to the Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation and Diabetes Australia Queensland for funding.

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