Yarning About Yarning as a Legitimate Method in Indigenous Research

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Abstract

This article demonstrates the credibility and rigor of yarning, an Indigenous cultural form of conversation, through its use as a data gathering tool with two different Indigenous groups, one in Australia and the second in Botswana. Yarning was employed not only to collect information during the research interview but to establish a relationship with Indigenous participants prior to gathering their stories through storytelling, also known as narrative. In exploring the concept of yarning in research, this article discusses the different types of yarning that emerged during the research project, how these differences were identified and their applicability in the research process. The influence of gender during the interview is also included in the discussion.

Introduction

Doing research that takes into account culturally appropriate processes to engage with Indigenous groups and individuals is particularly pertinent in today's research environment. It is well known that Indigenous people world wide have been over researched (Smith 1999) with little thought given to culturally safe methods of engagement. In Western Australia two Indigenous doctoral researchers, one Aboriginal and the second from Botswana, gave careful consideration to how people would be approached, engaged and involved in the gathering of information for two different PhD research projects. Both researchers decided to use yarning an Indigenous style of conversation and story telling also known as narrative as a method for gathering information during the interview process.

Method

Examples of yarning in research will be drawn from two qualitative research projects; one by Ng'andu in Botswana and the other by Bessarab in Western Australia; field work on both projects were carried out during 2002. Ng'andu's research was a case study undertaken with a group of 50 participants over a period of six months aimed at investigating the HIV/AIDS policy processes in Botswana (2004). Part of her research involved the gathering of stories from community workers about their practice experience in the field. Conversation was employed during the in-depth unstructured interviews as a way of enabling participants to relax and allow for in-depth conversations on the issue of HIV/AIDS. Taking this interactive approach resulted in a mutually negotiated and contextually based interview which was conducive to both researcher and participant (Ng'andu 2004).

Bessarab's research was an interpretive study undertaken across two sites in Western Australia; Perth (urban) and Broome (regional). A total of 38 participants were interviewed, 16 in Perth and 22 in Broome. Of these participants, 21 were men and 17 women. The study which explored the gendered experiences of women and men growing up in their families engaged with an Indigenous methodology (Foley 2002; Moreton-Robinson 2000; Oxenham 2000; Rigney 1997; Smith 1999) in the design of the research project. Taking an Indigenous standpoint from a black woman's perspective (Collins 2000; Foley 2002; Moreton-Robinson and Walter 2009; Rigney 1997), yarning as an Indigenous research method was deliberately employed in semi-structured in-depth interviews to gather information from the participants of their lived experience.

Using yarning in research

There are numerous methods that can be applied in qualitative research to obtain information. Kellehear (1993) and Spradley (1979) suggest different ethnographic techniques such as semi-structured interviews, participant observation, conversation and storytelling. 'In-depth interviewing which is also known as unstructured interviewing' is often used to obtain a 'holistic understanding' of the participant's experiences (Berry 1999) providing the opportunity for thick description on the research topic that quantitative methods do not provide.

Kvale (1996) discussing the use of conversation in research describes the researcher as a traveler who embarking on a journey visits the lived experience of the research participant to find out about their life world. During the course of the research journey the researcher engages in conversation with the participant inviting them to speak about particular aspects of their world and in doing so is taken to different places of interest and significance.

Yarning in a semi-structured interview is an informal and relaxed discussion through which 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.

In utilising yarning/conversation both researchers were keen to interact and learn from the Indigenous people who agreed to participate in the research projects. Both researchers were interested in listening to participants' stories about their lived experiences, feelings, thoughts and ideas on the research topic.

Yarning

Conversation is a major form of communication between people and can take place in different forms such as oral conversation or written conversations where people converse through letters, memos and/or email. Formal or informal conversation is involved in the production of knowledge. People talk to each other to convey information or to receive information, which once received and processed can lead to different understandings of the subject matter at hand.

In different cultures there are different rules, language and protocols for conducting conversations. In Western Australia, Nyoongah[i] people use the term 'yarning' when they want to talk with someone. Terszack writing about her Stolen generation story describes yarning as 'a process of making meaning, communicating and passing on history and knowledge ... a special way of relating and connecting with the Nyoongah culture' (2008, 90). Across Australia, Aboriginal people constantly refer to and use yarning in the telling and sharing of stories and information. An internet search in 2010 using Google revealed 418,000 sites referring to yarning. When an Aboriginal person says "*let's have a yarn"*, what they are saying is, let's have a talk or conversation. This talk/conversation/yarn can entail the sharing and exchange of information between two or more people socially or more formally.

Similarly, in Botswana the language that is spoken is Setswana; a Setswana phrase '*A re bue'* means "to talk"; when a Motswana says, '*tla re bue sanye'* they mean "come and let's talk".
Let's talk implies a conversation that is two way and inclusive of both speakers. To have a yarn is not a one way process but a dialogical process that is reciprocal and mutual.

Yarning about stories in the gathering of information

When discussing the use of yarning to gather information, both researchers found that even though their two cultures were different in this aspect, they were similar. Both groups of Indigenous people have in their culture words that mean lets sit down and talk. Often the conversation took the form of a story in the way in which the information was communicated. Story telling is a feature of Indigenous societies where oral traditions were the main form of transmitting and sharing knowledge with individuals and between groups. Through oral traditions information was passed down through the generations in the form of stories and songs. Oral histories are another research genre where the information that is gathered and recorded relies heavily on conversation and story telling to elicit the information. One of the challenges for qualitative researchers when listening to stories of lived experience is that the teller decides what

parts of their story to tell and which parts to leave out, the researchers' role is to draw out the parts they are interested in which may not be told and which relate to the research topic. Everyone has a story (White 1995; Wingard and Lester 2001) which shapes and defines who they are or how they came to be who they are. Although storytelling in the non-Indigenous community is often referred to as narratives (White 1995), Indigenous people prefer to refer to the process as the telling of our story or stories (Wingard and Lester 2001).

When formulating the methodology and deciding on which research methods to use, both researchers independently decided to use yarning/conversation as a data gathering tool. This decision was based on the cultural match (Manley, Begay and Cornell 2008)[ii] of conversation to the cultural processes of both the Indigenous Australian and Botswana peoples.

Although supported by her supervisor, Bessarab's attempts to apply yarning as a research tool in her doctoral thesis in 2000 was challenged by other academics who argued it was not a 'bona fide' research method and was not recognized as a legitimate tool for gathering data by Western academia. A literature search on yarning at the time revealed a gap despite the noticeable presence of an emerging discourse on Indigenous research methodologies (Basso 1996; Battiste 2000; Foley 2002; Ladislaus and Kincheloe 1999; Little Bear 2000; Moreton-Robinson 2000; Rigney 1997; Smith 1999; Valaskakis 2003; Youngblood Henderson 2000). The collaborative voices of Indigenous authors speaking out and validating Indigenous knowledge systems strengthened and supported both researchers' resolve to use yarning as an Indigenous research method. Ongoing conversations with Australian and international Indigenous students during and since completion of Bessarab's research continue to highlight the gap in the literature on yarning. Today students still experience difficulty in applying yarning in their research because it is not recognized as a credible research method and is easily dismissed by their supervisors.

Although there was a gap in the literature on yarning, there were some references discussing the use of conversation in research by two non-Indigenous authors Feldman (1999; 2000) and Kvale (1996). Feldman (2000) talked briefly about the criticism of conversation as a research tool. He said that it was the lack of clarity and uncertainty about how conversation might achieve the purpose of research that was problematic. While Feldman did not say more on this, I suspect that the issue of using conversation relates to rigor and credibility. Similarly with yarning, perhaps, this is also why it is not seen as a credible research tool for data gathering. Another reason could be attributed to the nature of yarning which can be messy. Yarning about a story or an experience does not always follow convention and can meander all over the place. It is what I think Karen Martin, an Indigenous researcher, is talking about when she refers to 'messy texts' (Marcus 1998). Like a conversation, yarning has its own convention and style in the telling of a story and can be messy and challenging. Keeping the informant on track is sometimes difficult as the tendency to stray is always present. Protocols also inform the yarn particularly when interviewing an Elder, because it is disrespectful to interrupt if you think the Elder is straying from the topic. However, telling stories is part of Indigenous pedagogy (Martin 2008) and an established methodology in passing on information; as Indigenous people we have all grown up listening and learning from stories. Martin talking about her own research does not make excuses for the messiness of her text. She clearly states, it:

Is my reality and part of my ontology and epistemology that is my Ancestry, my genealogy and identity. To erase the messiness is to deny my identity … The messiness reflects how I have mediated both my own cultural conventions and expectations and those conventions and expectations of the academy. (2008, 21)

Reflecting on Martin's experience the challenge for researchers in applying yarning as a research tool is how to mediate both the cultural conventions and expectations of Indigenous communities and participants, and the academy.

Questions for Indigenous researchers using yarning are; how to differentiate the research topic yarn from the social yarn? How can yarning be more rigorous? What distinguishes ordinary social conversation from the research conversation and how do Indigenous researchers articulate to Indigenous research participants that the yarn that is going to take place is for the purpose of research. In making this distinction, certain conventions that are applicable to the research process are then made visible in the yarn. This fundamental question guided both researchers during their interviews when attempting to use yarning as a culturally safe Indigenous method in research.

Drawing on findings from the two research projects, examples are provided to demonstrate how yarning can be applied as a rigorous tool in the research process, the strengths and challenges of applying yarning and story telling as tools for generating information and the role and influence of gender during the research interview.

Using yarning as a means of obtaining information through stories, both researchers found that different types of yarns took place, which influenced the outcome, process and quality of the interviews in both projects.

Different types of yarning

There are multiple forms of conversations (Kvale 1996) that take place between people and which occur on a number of different levels. Conversations, to name a few, can involve the personal, academic, artistic, political, professional, religious or therapeutic. Depending on the genre of the conversation, there are different rules or protocols, techniques and purposes for carrying out and maintaining the discussion.

When unpacking and discussing the technical aspects of using yarning for their interviews both researchers identified an emerging yarning research process that encompassed four different types of yarning illustrated below and described in the adjoining matrix.

Figure 1: The Yarning Research Process

Social Yarning

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Research topic
Yarning

Collaborative Yarning   Therapeutic Yarning
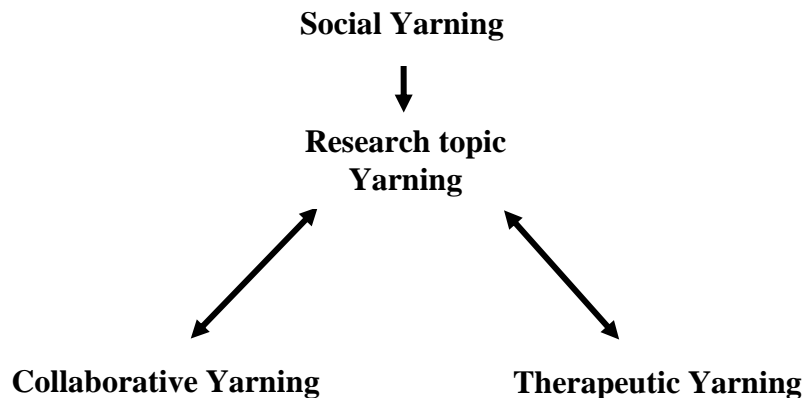
Social Yarning
Conversation that takes place before the research or topic yarn is informal and often unstructured, follows a meandering course that is guided by the topic that both people choose to introduce into the discussion. Yarns of this nature can include gossip, news, humour, advice and whatever information both parties feel inclined to share in the moment. It is usually during the social yarn that trust is developed and the relationship is built. The researcher is accountable to the research participant.

Research Topic Yarning
Yarn that takes place in a un or semi structured research interview. The sole purpose is to gather information through participants' stories that are related to the research topic. While the yarn is relaxed and interactive it is also purposeful with a defined beginning and end. Research topic yarning is a conversation with a purpose. The purpose is to obtain information relating to the research question.

Collaborative Yarning

Yarn that occurs between two or more people where they are actively engaged in sharing information about a research project and or a discussion about ideas. Collaborative yarning in research can involve exploring similar ideas or bouncing different ideas in explaining new concepts. The sharing of research findings

Therapeutic Yarning

Yarn takes place during the research conversation where the participant in telling their story discloses information that is traumatic or intensely personal and emotional. The researcher switches from the research topic to the role of a listener where the participant is supported in giving voice to their

can lead to new discoveries and understandings.

story, is assisted to make sense or have their story affirmed. In doing so the meaning making emerging in the yarn can empower and support the participant to re-think their understanding of their experience in new and different ways. This type of yarn is not a counseling yarn.

Sharing ideas through yarning

Collaborative conversations have the potential to transform the way in which people approach a project and/or their work. According to Hollingsworth, collaborative conversations can become "*a place for research that [goes] beyond … pleasant and informative chats to become a transformative process*" (1994).

Similarly both researchers found that collaborative yarns enabled them to unpack and discuss their research methods. The sharing of ideas led to new understandings that informed their research practice. During these collaborative yarns the subject of losing control of the interview was discussed, particularly when the research yarn appeared to be going off track and the participant's yarning seemed to be about other things. In sharing this concern, both researchers found that they reacted by interrupting the conversation to bring it back on track, only to find later when transcribing that they had cut across information that was highly pertinent to their research topic.

Collaborative yarning created new meanings for both researchers on the use of conversation/yarning as a research tool. In attempting to understand why they interrupted the research yarn, both found that these interruptions occurred because they were so focused on their research question and looking and listening for language steeped in academic concepts that they failed to hear that what the person was talking about was in fact to do with the research topic.

Collaborative yarning led to the realization that the conceptual baggage and understandings that the researchers brought with them into the research interview sometimes became the driver of their conversations. When the language used by the participant to describe their experiences was not familiar or readily translatable into research or academic language, both researchers found they became nervous, quickly intervening and steering the conversation back to their research topic. Later, reading their transcripts they realized that the story the participant was telling was in fact to do with the topic but to get there they were engaging in a meandering route and not, as previously thought, digressing. By intervening and cutting across the participant's yarning/conversation, they limited the potential of the information being imparted through the storytelling process.

Willink (2006) researching the lived experience of Mrs. Womble talks about the tensions between her research plan, the participant's telling of the story and her (Willink's) 'hearing' of the story; pointing out how she failed to hear what her participant was telling her until she heard it repeated several times. She said that "*stories work as doubles. They guide and transgress, organize space and tell our transportable limits*" (Willink 2006, 505). Stories do not always fit into neat little categories and will sometimes take a meandering route to arrive at the same destination as the researcher. Although the research yarn can appear messy, it is following its own convention in relaying information. The rigor in the yarn is to listen and allow the story to flow while looking for threads that relate to the research topic.

Paying attention to the participant's story from their telling and not according to a research plan based on specific research language is extremely important as the participant may use different language to describe their experiences when responding to a prompt relating to the research question. The home language used by the participant will often portray a different landscape to the academic landscape described through the research language.

One of the outcomes of collaborative yarning was the new insight gained increasing their awareness of their roles as active listeners and observers in the research process. Both researchers are now more cognizant of the role, influence and impact that language and western/academic theoretical understandings can have on their relationship and communication during the interview process.

Utilising yarning as a research tool means that the researcher needs to allow the participant some flexibility in responding to their questions and like the traveler engage with the journey and not be so focused on the destination.

Connecting and building a relationship is more than just establishing rapport

Massarik says that the quality of the relationship between the interviewer and the participant can resemble several different types of relationships, for instance, the *"hostile interview where the interviewer is the enemy and the relationship is combat…the limited survey interview (the interviewer is an automaton ….[recording data only]…there is no human interaction and the rapport interview (the interviewer is a human being in a role)"* (1981). Both researchers sought early in the contact stage to establish a connection in building a relationship with their participants prior to their interviews.

Alasuutari (1998) asserts that if the researcher makes friends with the participants and the participants trust the researcher they will also be honest with him/her. Spradley sees this as *"the establishment of a human to human relation with the respondent and the desire to understand rather than explain"* (1979, 3-4). Similarly, Fontana and Frey (2000) emphasized the importance of establishing a rapport with the participant, stating that it is important for the researcher to see the world through the participant's world view. Yarning as a research method goes beyond rapport which suggests that establishing a relationship with the participant is enough to ensure a good interview.

Rather, social yarning which is the first stage of the research process is about establishing a connection by sharing information about you as the researcher. In identifying who you are in the research process the relationship shifts from expert to person to person, enabling a more real and honest engagement as researcher and participant.

During the social yarn which can sometimes take place more than once before the research or topic yarn begins, boundaries and protocols of engagement are negotiated through the sharing of personal information, where the Indigenous participant listens and observes the verbal interchange with the researcher. In the space of the social yarn, the type of language used and the response of the researcher to the participant's yarn forms part of an informal boundary setting of the research relationship. This is where trust is established which then determines what will be told or withheld in the research topic yarn. The social yarn decides what each party will bring to the research topic yarn, committing both parties to a joint understanding and expectation that something will happen, holding the researcher accountable to the process. Both researchers found that the social yarn was integral preparation in setting up the research interview.

Social yarning

Social yarning is a significant pre-cursor and an entry point in developing a connection and building a relationship. The social yarn lays the ground work for the research topic yarn or conversation to occur.

Bridget

One of the challenges I faced was initiating a conversation to establish a relationship with the participants. As a researcher, I felt anxious about starting an interview with a stranger. I thought I had to be resourceful in finding a way in which to engage people. The following is an extract to demonstrate the usefulness of social yarning in commencing an interview and the process that I used to do this.

B: Dumela mma? Ke kopa gobona Mma Thabiso. (How are you Madam? May I please see Mrs Thabiso?).

MT: Dumela.   Eehe, ke na. Tsenang.

Dawn

Similar to Bridget I found it important to establish a connection with the people I was going to interview before commencing the research conversation. Unlike Bridget, when I engaged in social conversation I usually did it without the recorder being on so as not to make the participant feel uncomfortable. My social yarning went something like this:

D: Hi John how you going, good to see you. How you been?

J: Good, what about yourself, come inside.

(Good morning Madam. I am Mrs Thabiso. Come in). I didn't know that you could speak Setswana. Come on in. Where did you learn Setswana from? Are you married to a Motswana?

B: Oh, no! (I laugh). I lived here in Botswana for nearly 10 years before going to Australia. My parents work here as teachers and live in Moshupa.

MT: Oh, that explains the Moshupa connection. I was worried that I will have to be perfect with my English. You know how you people are with research. Everything should be perfect.

B: No please don't worry about being perfect. This is a conversation, and it is not about rights or wrongs. Besides we will be exploring together.

MT: OK. (laughs).

B: I think to start with you could tell me the background of the Hospice, when it started.

In the above extract, I opened the conversation by code-switching to a greeting in Setswana as a way of using social yarning to break the ice and establish a relationship. The use of Setswana as a tool for establishing rapport was very helpful because it enabled me to develop a relationship within a limited time frame. Ely et al. (1999, 61) refers to this as the notion of 'judicial entering', letting the interviewee know that 'you have been there'. While judicial entering in its real essence refers to the researcher being able to sympathize with the participants, I used judicial entering to show that there was something that I the researcher had in common with Mma Thabiso; in this sense we could both speak Setswana. After the social pleasantries, I steered the conversation into research yarning by asking a research question signaling the start of the research interview.

What is important to note in the conversation with Mma Thabiso is her assumption about me as a researcher. She thought that she would have to use 'perfect English' to speak with me and was relieved when told it was not necessary. This highlighted for me that participants' can also have their own sets of assumptions and expectations in the research relationship.

D: thanks, I've been pretty busy you know, what with my research and all.

J: Oh! Would you like a cuppa?

D: Oh! Only if you are having one. Yep, white no sugar.

J: Where did you say you were from? (preparing the tea).

D: OK, I'm from Broome you know, my mob are Bardi mob from up the Peninsula. My family name is D and I'm related to the H, T, A, S, A's on my dad's side. My mum is from the Pilbara and she is Indjabardi, her family are the C, L H, C and C's, probably missed some but they're the ones that I know. You know any of them? Thanks (handed the cup of tea).

J: Oh, what you to KH?

D: Oh, he's my cousin, you know cousin brother blackfella way, his mom is my mom's sister.

J: Ooh, so you related to that mob, he's a good guy that K. Now what you wanted to talk to me about?

To establish a connection I found that I used an Aboriginal introduction if I was speaking to someone who did not know me. I told them a little about myself; my family and language group connections and the town where I grew up. If they recognized a family name they would usually ask what my relationship was to a specific person or family; in this way we were able to establish a common link and they were able to place me in their meaning system (Bessarab 1996; Moreton-Robinson 2000; Martin 2008).

If the participant already knew who I was, we engaged in social yarning about their family, what was happening in the community or how their day had been. When the relationships started to feel comfortable, made evident by the body language; either I would start to direct the conversation away from social yarning or the participant would ask what I wanted. At this stage I would introduce the tape recorder asking permission to record the conversation. Most people said yes, there were only two who refused.

Research topic yarning

When discussing Feldman's (1999) comment on the use of conversation as a research tool and looking at how yarning as a research tool could become more rigorous, both researchers found that prior to commencing the research interview they signaled the commencement of the research yarn both verbally and behaviourally.

Bridget

Commencing the research yarn can be a challenging exercise. To introduce the research yarn, I signaled to Tebogo that I was changing the conversation and becoming serious. I further emphasized this by switching on the tape recorder as Tebogo had agreed to the interview being recorded.

> **B:** If we could start by you telling me your thoughts about the Botswana AIDS policy, how inclusive was it in the beginning?

> **T:** I would not say that it was inclusive if you are saying…talking about how it was formulated or from its inception. What they did was that they had a workshop and they invited what they called stakeholders…but then it depends on how many stakeholders you have in HIV/AIDS.

In this conversation with Tebogo, I ask her the question that signals the end of social yarning and introduces the switch to research yarning.

In revisiting the issue of how I introduced the research question, I realized that I asked a closed question that had a short answer to it.

Tebogo responded by telling me the process taken by the Government at the time to develop a National AIDS policy. As a researcher interested in the participation of various sectors of the community in the policy process, I had to ensure that the conversation remained on that course.

Dawn

When switching to research yarning I found that my manner changed; I became more formal, thanked the participant for agreeing to let me interview them and then moved straight into the research question.

The following extract from one of my interviews provides an example of how I switched to research yarning, letting the participant know that we were now going to talk about the research topic.

> **D:** I'd like to thank you for agreeing to talk to me today, it's Wednesday the 19 June and I guess what I'd like to start with is just asking you um what sort of experiences you had growing up in your family as a girl? Tell us your story, what was it like being a girl in your family?

> **A:** I don't know, we grew up close in the family, very strict, yeah.

After asking the first question in relation to the research topic, Angie in responding told me her family was close and very strict. As a researcher looking at gender I had to choose which direction I would steer this conversation with Angie.

Both researchers discovered similarities and differences in the way in which they introduced their participants to the research conversation. Bessarab found that she followed the same process in all of her interviews; beginning with a social yarn and following with an introduction to the research topic yarn. She signaled the end of the research topic yarn by thanking the person for participating and letting them know what was happening next.

Similarly, Ng'andu ended the interview by thanking the participant for their time. However, reflecting on the process, Ng'andu realized that she could have been more consistent with informing the participants about what would happen next. Although this was shared at the beginning of the conversation, it would have been helpful to reiterate the information at the end.

Therapeutic yarning (TY)

Therapeutic conversation according to Osborn "*is the mutual search for new meaning and is continuously evolving. Change is the evolution of new meaning through dialogue*" (Osborn 2005, 1). Gergen has pointed out that meaning making is relational and that it *"is jointly negotiated. Thus, while the 'client' may transport the new narrative into the life world, he/she does not control its meaning. Its meaning and implications are open to continuous reshaping as relationships proceed"* (Unpublished, 10)*.*

Although Gergen is writing in the context of a therapeutic relationship; within the context of a research relationship the participant transports their story into the life world of the research topic yarn where it is open to interpretation. The following are examples of therapeutic yarning:

Bridget

B: How big is the issue of stigmatization for people who are HIV positive?

N: It is very big. And it is strange because people like you and me, the kind of people you would expect to be educated, they still stigmatize people who have HIV/AIDS. When somebody is sick in the work place, they all seem like, they are supportive, but you can see that some things are just like mockery.

At this point, I realized that N had a personal story to tell, so I let her continue.

N: There is one woman, she works in our registry. The other day I was talking to someone and this person is also supposed to be one of the peer educators, but the way she was talking she even irritated me. She was saying 'you know I don't want to sit near her, and I hate it because this young woman just takes everybody's cup'. You expect this person who has trained as a peer educator to be different. What kind of peer education does she give with that attitude?

N and I talked about stigmatization, and it was apparent that N was finding it difficult about how this young woman was being treated. After the therapeutic yarn, N appeared relieved and comfortable to continue with the research.

Dawn

T: As I've said before that's one of my greatest heartaches … my greatest shame is that I did hit my partner …

D: Did you see anyone when you were growing up hit their partner?

T: Yeah, my father was quite aggressive towards my mother at times … I do, remember um, aah, I can't remember dad hitting her, but I know it did occur … Oh, another time I remember, I was going outside chopping wood, till I wanted to chop him up. Because … they were having a fight inside the house.

After this response by T, I tried to change the course of the yarn but realized that he was in a very emotional state. I directed the yarn back to the DV as he wanted to talk about it.

D: Hmmm, so getting back to the DV, like when you said that you hit your partner, did it ever occur to you that maybe that was something you inadvertently picked up from watching your dad?

T: Umm, I don't know, don't know, it may very well have been. But I like to put it down to me not being able to control my anger.

T talked at length about his experience stating it had left a 'huge emotional scar' and that he couldn't stop thinking about it. Until the TY took place, the research conversation was suspended and could not proceed until he felt comfortable enough to re-engage

For both researchers, when an Indigenous participant during a research interview disclosed an experience of trauma or deep emotional intensity the research topic yarn shifted from a yarn about research to a therapeutic yarn which either confirmed or re-interpreted their experience from the standpoint of the researcher. Allowing the participant the space to voice their story without judgment,

enabled the yarn to keep moving, almost akin to a winding down process to a safe space where the conversation could be re-directed back into the research yarn and continued.

Gender issues in research

Research can become a political and challenging process for the researcher. During a collaborative yarn about research process both researchers became aware of their gender and the role it sometimes played during interviews. The cultural and gendered context of their positioning as female researchers sometimes influenced how they were perceived.

Ng'andu's age cast her as a young, Indigenous, female researcher who was a threat to Motswana masculinity. At one point during her research, Ng'andu was told by a young Motswana male that her ambition to achieve her doctorate would affect her chances of finding a marriage partner. During Bessarab's research the gender issue of women interviewing men emerged when a male participant chose to speak about his early sexual experiences. For both researchers these issues did not become apparent until the transcription stage when they engaged in collaborative discussions. It was then; they realized that the language used by some male participants in the research had a strong gender bias that impacted on the way in which they as females responded to the conversation taking place during the interview.

Bridget

R: So, what would you like to know? Tell me what this big project is all about?

B: I am conducting research on the HIV/AIDS policy in Botswana, to establish how different organisations work together at the different levels of the policy process. I thought that starting with your organisation would give me a better understanding of what is going on in the AIDS area. So, to begin with may be you could tell me about your organisation's role in the AIDS policy process.

Dawn

C: Oh, I guess, I want to tell you my first sexual encounter because I (burst out laughing) might incriminate myself.

D: (Laughs) Okay then … but just going back to like your mum and your dad, did your mum have expectations with you as a young boy in the family or as a young man growing up?

Ng'andu was surprised when R asked the leading question about her research because she assumed that since she was the interviewer she would be in control of the discussion. R challenged this assumption with an opening question emphasising the 'big project'. Ng'andu said that R's reference to her PhD as a 'big project' unsettled her, making it difficult to concentrate. She felt as though she was being put on the spot to explain 'what this big project' was all about. For Ng'andu this experience jolted memories of writing an examination paper where she felt she had to be correct with her answers. Engaging in a collaborative yarn, Bessarab pointed out the issues of language, gender and power that can take place in the interview process referring to a situation from one of her interviews.

Bessarab was surprised when C wanted to talk about his early sexual experiences; her first reaction was to try and change the subject because she felt uncomfortable. Like Ng'andu Bessarab found it hard to concentrate on the interview and was distracted by C talking explicitly about his experiences.

A collaborative discussion with Ng'andu revealed that the issue was not so much about C wanting to talk about his sexual experiences but was more to do with Bessarab's feelings and thoughts of whether this was appropriate. Reflecting on the issue both women agreed that gender is an issue that is always present but can emerge at different times during an interview where it can challenge, confront, distract and place the researcher in an awkward situation.

Gender issues emerging may be about power and loss of control, or it may simply be a reminder of feminine and masculine differences. As researchers it is strategic to be mindful of gender issues when

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[i] Indigenous language group of the Southwest of Western Australia.

[ii] Using Manley, Begay and Cornell's concept of cultural match I am referring to 'embody value that Indigenous peoples feel are important and are generated through Indigenous efforts (2008, 11).