

Bulldust, flat tyres and roadkill: a disorderly decolonising fieldwork journey through remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia

Suzanne Plater

with Julie Mooney-Somers, Jo Lander and Lesley Barclay

The University of Sydney

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to discuss the iterations and outcomes of a doctoral fieldwork experience where the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants challenged me to radically adapt my constructivist grounded theory methodology and commence decolonising data gathering and analysis while in the field. The starting point for the research was a discourse of defeatism in the literature around mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university graduates and students, which the participants, my doctoral supervisors and I perceived as unjust and unjustifiable. The aim of the ongoing research, therefore, is to explore and explicate an alternative discourse, beginning with the emic perspectives of mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university graduates. In the context of the remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander field, I detail the early and somewhat disorderly enactment of decolonising methodology — disorderly because I was unprepared for the extent to which the participants would take control of both the research agenda and methods. Disorder also partly characterised our collaborative methodological adaptation, in that it was initially more intuitive than deliberate. I discuss how the participants shifted the post-graduation narrative from one of personal and professional uplift to one they dubbed ‘the blessings and burdens of being an educated black’. This narrative unequivocally challenges the notion of Australia as a postcolonial society and positions the participants as activists in the fight for indigenous self-determination. I reflect on mistakes made and lessons learned, and articulate pragmatic and achievable fieldwork research methods that privilege participants as knowledge producers and custodians. The paper concludes by discussing the next stages of the decolonising constructivist grounded theory project, which necessitated a return to the field to test and refine the emerging conceptual categories with the participants, most of whom have remained active partners in the research.

Introduction

In mid-2014 I hitched my camper trailer to my four-wheel-drive vehicle and left Sydney with a companion to drive (and ferry) to remote regions of northern Australia (my companion would provide logistical support). The purpose was to gather data for my ongoing doctoral study, which explores and explicates what having a university education means to mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander¹ university graduates in the context of age, life-stage, history, culture, socio-economic status, race and place. My methodology at the time was constructivist grounded theory using elements of ethnography (Aldiabat and Le Navenec 2011; Babchuk and Hitchcock 2013; Charmaz 2014). I intended to gather the data using semi-structured in-depth face-to-face interviews with 22 university graduates who live and work in 15 remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, with participant observation providing additional insights.² A second round of data gathering would take place later in the year in regional and urban communities, and is not discussed in this paper.

I was not a stranger to the participants, since I had either been directly involved as an academic co-ordinator and lecturer in their university education, or they were aware of my connection to the degree(s) they had completed. I was also known to the participants through other personal and professional connections, such as mutual family, friends and colleagues. It was my intention to further develop these relationships by treating the interview encounter as additional to interacting with and learning from the participants and other community members in and about their daily lives. This could only be practicably achieved by travelling to and staying in or near each participant's community. The outcome my doctoral supervisors and I were seeking was a deep exploration of the meaning of mainstream university education in the context of each participant's habitus; that is, the complex embodied interplay between individual agency and socialised norms that habituate the ways people think, feel and act (Bourdieu 1990).

Context

Research starting point

'If they're sayin' don't give me [the chance to go to university] 'cause I'm gonna die soon, they can kiss my black arse' (participant, Hank).

The starting point for my doctoral research was evidence in the literature of a defeatist discourse around mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and graduates (Plater et al. 2015), which included an especially fatalistic tone to discussions around the educational aspirations and capabilities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote communities. Our critical analysis attended to omissions, paradoxical positions and the language used to frame what could reasonably be called a 'realist' stance, meaning one that is informed by data. We found the overall tone to be at stark odds with the buoyant discourse around mature-age students in general, and argue that this appeared to be due to superficial 'common sense' ideas: the number of post-degree productive years 'lost' by graduates who had not followed the traditional pathway from school to university, the average lower life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and the focus on economic productivity as the sole measure of the value of education. We appreciate that the authors of the literature are respected scholars, public service professionals and commentators, and some are Aboriginal people who have extensive experience working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. However, and while not claiming a more authoritative position, I am an experienced educator of mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and my doctoral supervisors are also involved in teaching and supporting this cohort. Many graduates from our programs were and still are from remote communities, and were aged 35 or older at the time of university commencement.³ Anecdotal and limited empirical evidence indicates that the majority of these graduates experience socio-economic uplift and enhanced self-esteem and self-efficacy, and use their knowledge and skills to benefit their communities (Asmar et al. 2011;

Plater 2012). Obviously, we do not share the defeatist view that dominates the literature around mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and, as Hank's quote indicates, nor did this study's participants when they were asked to comment on extracts from the literature as part of our early research discussions.

Positionality

I appreciate that, at this point, positioning myself might be helpful to the reader and demonstrates that I have engaged in the kind of rigorous and principled reflexivity that is expected of social researchers. This paper is also, in part, a reflection of the challenges I encountered in the field, and the changes the research and the participants and I underwent as a result. I am therefore firmly located in the narrative. However, and precisely because of its experiential nature, I am anxious to avoid taking an autobiographical approach to this text. Notwithstanding the many researchers who exemplify insightful scholarship within the intercultural space, I have become chary of the way some authors attend too much to their 'emotional inner life' (Atkinson 2015:472), treating the self as the predominant interest at the expense of exploring and analysing shared social and cultural interactions. This can present a problem for the decolonising project, in that the unintended result is researcher subjectification and participant objectification. At its worst, this tendency towards self-essentialism shifts attention from the outward and forward looking work of transforming the systems and structures that oppress indigenous peoples (Smith, A 2013). I prefer instead to accept Paul Atkinson's (2015:473) challenge to eschew the 'genre of selfhood' and invest in the hard intellectual work of 'taking the role of other'.

In brief, then, my positionality is this: I have Scottish, Irish and Aboriginal ancestry and was raised as urban working-class white. I have never personally experienced racial discrimination and have benefited from opportunities to progress educationally, economically and socially. These attributes and experiences encapsulate the main points of difference between the participants and me, and they matter in that they largely confer

outsider status and make sceptical and questioning reflexivity essential. However, my habitus is also a collection of experiences that include living and working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from remote communities, and having deep emotional ties to Aboriginal family and friends. The differences between the participants and me are meaningful but I suggest they are also subordinate to our shared life experiences, history, existing relationships and ambitions for this research project.

Perhaps the most significant attribute that threatens to derail my interactions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from remote communities is my attachment to what I perceive as orderly processes and identifiable outcomes. I am still learning how to calibrate this structured way of thinking and behaving so it complements my work with people for who constructs of certainty are often provisional (Mahood 2016). I have also learned that the innate decolonising mindset I held prior to entering the field in 2014 did not fully compensate for my low level of engagement with the activist, intellectual and lived intercultural and decolonial space that many indigenous and some non-indigenous scholars have striven to construct and inhabit over the past two decades (Denzin et al. 2008; Dudgeon and Walker 2015; Kovach 2010; Redman-MacLaren and Mills 2015; Smith, LT 2012; Wilson 2008). In hindsight, this omission left me under-prepared and at risk of making avoidable errors of judgment prior to and while in the field. I discuss this in more detail later in the paper.

Early methodology

Due to the apparent disconnect between the public representations of mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and graduates and our own knowledge and experiences, the participants, my supervisors and I agreed early on that the research would focus explicitly on exploring an alternative discourse, beginning with the emic perspectives of the graduates.⁴ This meant adopting a qualitative methodology capable of accessing alternative realities from each participant's point of view and of generating rich contextualised data and attaining interpretive

depth. It also needed to support this research's manifesto — that access to universal and lifelong education is a human right (Blessinger 2015). At the time, and given my unsophisticated understanding of decolonising methodologies, constructivist grounded theory using elements of ethnography seemed an excellent fit. Grounded theory has often combined interviews with ethnographic participant observation (Babchuk and Hitchcock 2013) and its constructivist turn has strengthened the methodological ties between the two (Charmaz 2006). Both methodologies value the researcher as the primary data gathering instrument, pay attention to researcher and participant subjectivity and position, and recognise that knowledge is co-constructed by the researcher and participant (Babchuk and Hitchcock 2013). They view and portray realities that are meaningful to the participants and strive to access their lived realities, as well as their internal constructions (Aldiabat and Le Navenec 2011). They also encourage deep and useful analysis that has the potential to transform social process and practice (Charmaz 2014). Appealingly, both methodologies are inherently flexible. They allow researchers to attend to their specific conditions of inquiry by creatively adapting their methods to suit the research situation (Charmaz 2014). In the context of my research, combining in-depth interviews with participant observation was considered appropriate. My aim was to better understand and develop a rich description of the meaning of university education to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people whose daily lives are very different to my own.

Given the particular pessimism around the educational aspirations and capabilities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who live in remote communities (Plater et al. 2015), my supervisors and I considered it vital that we prioritise participants from these locations. We also judged that my largely superficial understanding of each participant's geographical, historical, cultural and social realities meant that a conceptual rendering of the range of events and behaviours that stem from their encounters with university education should only be attempted if I could observe the participants' actions during their daily rounds. This meant spending adequate time with the participants and other community

members on both research activities and non-research everyday routines, taking photographs and film footage (to evoke person and place during analysis), and recording field notes for later reference. Locating myself within each participant's 'seat of power' rather than remaining within the safe and comfortable confines of the university was not simply a pragmatic methodological imperative. It was also an important egalitarian gesture that was consistent with the nature of our existing relationship, and one that was acknowledged and valued, as exemplified by participant Rose's comment: 'Thank you for all the time you took to come all this way...I know it's not the best place on earth but it's still home to us.'

Financial, geographical, logistical and ethical challenges

The fieldwork journey lasted three months and covered more than 16,000 kilometres. It was partly funded by two modest university faculty scholarships and my manager allowed me to remain on the university payroll while I was away. The majority of the costs were borne by me and were significantly more than I had anticipated (vehicle and camper trailer repairs alone amounted to more than \$15,000). There were also many geographical and logistical challenges to overcome, which added to the expense. The communities in which I conducted the fieldwork are located significant distances from each other and the nearest service town. They are isolated and access can be difficult, even for well-equipped and experienced four-wheel-drivers. During the wet season, communities are often cut off by flooding, and roads and airstrips damaged by monsoonal rains and cyclones, while in the Torres Strait, storm surges, sea mists, tidal currents and cyclones can make travel by air or sea hazardous or impossible. Even in the dry season, mainland roads will suddenly deteriorate from potholed bitumen to rutted yellow dirt, boggy white sand, sticky black mud or deep, billowing orange bulldust (a very fine, talcum powder-like dust that can blind drivers and disguise road hazards). Flat tyres, broken axles, flooded waterways and misadventures with kangaroos, buffalo or wedgetailed eagles are common experiences. To reach each destination, my companion and I faced days of bone-jarring driving and roadside camping in

locations empty of people, without telecommunication coverage and populated by territorial snakes, buffalo and crocodiles. It was usual upon arrival to have no access to fuel, food or hot water.

None of this is to deny the remarkableness of the country or its human and non-human inhabitants, or downplay the privilege of having the means and personal contacts that made possible my sustained entry into each community. However, I agree with Kim Mahood (2016:296) that urban Australians of any race who have contact with the remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander space are likely to experience a condition coined by Canadian anthropologist Christopher Fletcher as ‘dystopothesia’, which in this context means ‘the incompatibility of bodies to the space they inhabit’. Reading Mahood’s description of her own remote community experiences, I recalled a note from my fieldwork journal that was penned after weeks of enduring relentless midge and mosquito bites, mysterious rashes, heat exhaustion, sunburn, giardiasis and wounds that festered and resisted treatment (all the while observing the physical ease of the participants and other community residents). In it I bemoan that ‘I am being continually assaulted by the landscape’.

Given these and other challenges, it is understandable that many researchers choose to travel to remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities by plane (if they choose to travel at all). I did not, however, consider this a viable option for my research. Apart from the need to familiarise myself with each participant’s setting, there was the scarcity and exorbitant cost of flights, unavailability of vehicle hire once in the community, unrealistic time constraints and a lack of accommodation options to consider. I also preferred to be self-sufficient and not place additional burdens on the participants and their communities. Most importantly, however, I was not prepared to risk being seen as a ‘fly-by-nighter’ or ‘helicopter’ researcher. These are pejoratives used to describe researchers who have little or no understanding of the community, and who fly (often literally) into communities, gather data and leave again without any obvious gain accruing back to the participants or their communities (Brunger and Wall 2016; Campbell 2014). In many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, particularly those in remote areas,

hastiness can also indicate a lack of understanding and respect for important relational protocols. If community members perceive this to be the case, researchers will most likely be met with polite resistance, superficial encounters, indifference or hostility.

Not being answerable to a research funding body also freed me to pursue my research in ways I felt were ethical and appropriate. Funding is, of course, often necessary, and would have been very helpful for my fieldwork. I could have extended the practical and intellectual work that sustained fieldwork makes possible (Atkinson 2015), and kept my savings intact. However, it may also have destabilised the research. Control of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and the right to use them is wrapped up in Australia’s long and relatively recent history of exploitative and harmful research (Fredericks 2007; Gower 2012; Nakata 2007). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are therefore understandably wary of researchers who are answerable to masters who are not in turn answerable to them. Researchers may need to carefully consider how the parameters imposed by funding bodies construct boundaries around which research is worth pursuing, whose human rights are explorable and valuable, and whose interests are advanced (Cheek 2011). I am not suggesting that funding is loaded with expectations that are antithetical to ethical research practice, or that researchers are incapable of sensitively navigating a path through or around competing agendas. I am saying that the unchallenged freedom to pursue a social justice and human rights agenda, and prioritise the processes and outcomes that would best serve the participants and their communities, largely took the sting out of having to pay most of my own way.

Being overrun by polite warriors

Decolonising data gathering

I don’t think educated [Aboriginal] people are being given the opportunities to do their roles, especially in the remote areas, in the health centres. It’s like the [non-Aboriginal] clinic manager is the sheriff...it’s still that way. That’s the real story, right there. You need to back up the truck a bit, take that road. (participant, Russ)

Russ was the first participant to be interviewed. Our conversation, and each participant conversation after that, exposed flaws in my thinking and methodological approach. First, I had presumed that the participants and I would engage in a deep exploration of the transformative nature of university education (a presumption a more experienced grounded theorist would most likely have acknowledged then placed to one side to attend to the participants' leads). Second, I was confident that, given my life and work experiences, I was inherently capable of enacting ethical research methods with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and of appropriately and creatively adapting my methodological approach. I had also underestimated the participants' interest in participating in the research processes beyond sharing stories, fact-checking and approving the final product before dissemination. Instead, and as noted in one of my campfire memos, my agenda was 'overrun by polite warriors', as this excerpt from Jim's transcript illustrates:

Jim: ...this [research] really matters to me, you know, and I don't think, no offence or nothin', but how can you know from one interview and a bit of a nosey around, what matters to us?

Me: Well, I can't really. Not in the same way you can. But I can keep coming back to you, as in, you know, get you to help me make sense of what you've told me and make sure the end product is...a good representation of what you meant...I'm sure that could work. Might take up a bit of your time, but...

Jim (emphatic): No, no, that's what I want. Get it right and get it out there and we'll see what happens. I'll tell you what I'd like to see. I'd like to see every blackfella comin' back from university and kickin' every bloodsucking whitefella outta here.

Not only did the participants make clear their determination to share processual power, and demand accountability, transparency and a promise of change, but they also viewed the research as an opportunity to provide politicised and personalised counter-narratives that talked back to power-holders, do-gooders and naysayers who exert control inside and outside their

communities. The alternative narrative I had been anticipating for almost two years changed overnight from one characterised by personal and professional potency to one far more complex. There certainly were celebratory post-graduation tales; however, I also found myself privy to riveting testimonies of their individual and collective lives as colonised people in a neocolonial society.⁵ Indeed the immediacy of neocolonialism as an ongoing historical force was made obvious to me each day I spent in the participants' communities, not only through their stories but by what I witnessed and heard. The raw products of our conversations were gritty accounts of power and powerlessness, rewards and stifled expectations, uplift and oppression, pride and put-downs, and transformation and inertia. These accounts were impossible to play down or treat as side issues. To the participants, the great and good of having a university education came loaded with the bad and ugly (as exemplified by the interview excerpt below) and this was the story that mattered:

Patti: Them [white bosses] just want you to fail.

Me: Why do they want you to fail?

Patti: Lot of them ones, we're the grassroots people, and, you know, we got the knowledge and experience for the community and they don't want someone from the grassroots up there.

Me: Why's that?

Patti (emphatic): Probably because we got more experience in Indigenous [matters]... they see us as having more experience even than the [non-Indigenous experts] that come in, they get offended that we tell them, you know, how we want things to be done.

To respect and make space for the participants' activist stance, I immediately adapted my data-gathering methods while in the field. This work could best be characterised as intuitively, rather than deliberately, decolonising. The deliberate and explicit decolonising process began when I returned home and had the wherewithal to conduct an in-depth exploration of the literature around indigenous and decolonising methodologies, and the opportunity to discuss the research with my supervisors and other scholars who were

engaged in decolonising projects. As mentioned previously, at the time I had little empirical knowledge of decolonising methodologies as they were enacted by indigenous and non-indigenous scholars and activists worldwide (Campbell 2014; Gower 2012; Kanuha 2000; Knudson 2015; Rix et al. 2014; Sherwood 2010; Smith, LT 2012; Wilson 2008). Rather, my research practice was led by the participants', as well as my own, embodied decolonising perspectives. I appreciate that engaging more deeply with the global decolonial project before embarking on the fieldwork journey would have been preferable. It certainly would have forestalled the need to radically adapt constructivist grounded theory 'on the run'.

Briefly, research guided by indigenous and decolonising methodologies prioritises the right of indigenous peoples to set research agendas, construct the knowledge, and control, distribute and use the research findings. Developing and sustaining genuine relationships with participants is foundational, and this is part of a broader understanding between the self, others and nature (Knudson 2015; Louis 2007; Wilson 2008). Because each indigenous world is located within and shaped by colonial and neocolonial experiences, indigenous and decolonising methodologies often seek to interrogate indigenous-colonialist dynamics, and expose the powerful social relationships that marginalise and silence indigenous peoples (Kovach 2010). At their core is a commitment to human rights and indigenous self-determination (Smith, LT 2012). Indigenous and decolonising methodologies differ in that, according to many scholars, indigenous methodologies can only be enacted by researchers who are guided by indigenous epistemological perspectives (Foley 2003; Smith, LT 2012; Wilson 2008).

At the time (and this remains the case), my layperson understanding of indigenous and decolonising methodologies supported retaining constructivist grounded theory as my primary methodological approach. It may not have remained an 'excellent fit' for this research, but it did become a 'good neighbour' (Kovach 2011) to the decolonising process. The adaptation process began by throwing away the interview prompts and stepping back so the participants could range among topics they considered significant and worthy. Constructivist grounded theorists are

urged to remain open to following the participants' leads; however, the methodology does implicitly position the researcher as in control of the scope and direction of inquiry, deciding which leads to follow and which to park or discard. Relinquishing control to the participants was the first modification. Data relevance became negotiable, with the participants becoming joint, and sometimes primary, decision makers. As a result, the direction and methods of inquiry shifted, and the timeframe expanded.

Next, I extended the grounded theory practice of allowing the research question to drive the methods of generating data. Usually, as the process of gathering data unfolds, a grounded theorist's engagement with the data determines how future data is created, and from who and where (Charmaz 2014). In this study, the participants were part of this process. We decided together which methods should be employed to elicit further data, and who and what to theoretically sample. Grounded theory's preference for creating narrative data was also extended beyond its methodological commitment (S Carter, personal communication, 9 August 2015). To a grounded theorist, narrative data is useful because it provides rich, contextualised and insightful reflections of the self, and in-depth explorations into a specific aspect of life about which the participant has substantial experience (Charmaz 2014). In the hands of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants, narrative, or storytelling, became a more performative and explicit method of knowledge construction. It was systematic and normative — there was a right way and a wrong way to do it. It was certainly not a quaint folkloristic tradition but rather a contemporary social, cultural and political norm that evolves and adapts to suit the needs of the teller and audience (G Angeles, personal communication, 4 February 2016). It is also a creative, vibrant and subversive decolonising strategy (Suim and Ritskes 2013), and has long been employed by indigenous scholars as a method of gathering knowledge in ways that honour the deeper purpose of sharing story as a means to assist others (Kovach 2010; Whiteduck 2013; Wilson 2008).

Embracing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander storytelling as a method of inquiry did, however, have logistical and ethical implications.

First, I had to ignore the clock, which became an issue when interviews took place late in the day. The fieldwork note below explains why:

Took a long time to drive back to camp. Left at sunset — beautiful. But it got dark fast. Moonlit but so risky. So much going on — horses with foals, cows with calves, roos with joeys. Frogs. Potholes everywhere. River crossings. Was due back at 6 pm. Got there 8.30 pm. I was exhausted and G was beside himself. Not doing that again.

Ignoring the clock also produced lengthy recordings that required transcribing and analysing while in the field. Narrative, or storytelling, does not usually produce linear, easily categorised accounts (LeFrancois 2013). It is multi-layered and event-centred (Whiteduck 2013), and many happenings — that seem off-topic — may be woven into the telling before the listener receives a glimpse of the answer to the question she or he asked. I learned to sit and listen for hours. There was always a natural progression to each story, they often ended up a long way from where they began, they all answered my question, and they gifted me with more contextualised data than I could ever hope to glean from a more narrowly focused or structured interview encounter. While this compensated for the additional hours spent recording, and transcribing and coding the interview data back at camp or while on the road, it is worth noting that it did impact on my research schedule and resources.

More profoundly, our relational dynamic also changed. Although I already considered myself an ally, I did not presume trust or comradeship. However, the distance between the participants and me undoubtedly shrank further. I was also now a far more active actor in the resurgence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge production and the disruption of the neocolonial project. A number of ethical challenges ensued. The personal links the participants and I forged meant that my objectivity was compromised beyond what is usual for grounded theorists. I was also expected to honour my position as a friend first and a researcher second. Rigorously scrutinising my place in the narrative — without fixating on the self — remains a test I could still fail. On the upside, stronger personal connections encouraged

broader community acceptance of the research. Many participants subsequently chose to share the storytelling with family and other community members (only some of whom had directly experienced the phenomenon being explored). This collectivist process further enhanced the organic, inherently relational, dialogic and dynamic norms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander storytelling (Eickelkamp 2008) because the knowledge shared was reflected on and validated by the group. However, while making space for respected community members to participate in the co-creation of new knowledge was the right way to behave in a communitarian society, it meant that I was gathering what was essentially group data without ethics approval. A retrospective ethics modification was obtained (the first of many), although concerns around participant confidentiality remain unresolved. Some participants did prefer private one-to-one interviews; however, they were careful to speak only on behalf of themselves and at times suggested that I follow a particular lead by speaking with those who held that knowledge. The referral nature of this strategy once again raised the issue of participant confidentiality, particularly as it is mandated by human research ethics committees.

Then there was the question of participant agency. Researchers are constantly cautioned by human research ethics committees that indigenous people may be vulnerable, coercible, naturally circumscriptive and unused to occupying agentive positions in their everyday lives. They are portrayed as unlikely to have the necessary training, time and language skills to engage as partners in a complex research project, and are therefore limited in their capacity to share equal ground with researchers. While I understand why these perceptions exist and why protections may be necessary, I respectfully challenge the normative assumptions around ethical research partnerships that are implicit in indigenous research ethics policies and practices. In my experience, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have always possessed more agency than this reductionist interpretation allows. In this description offered by Mahood (2016:269), I recognise the fiercely resilient and autonomous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people I have come to know: ‘The desert people...have...an astonishing capacity to

recover and endure. They did not survive one of the harshest environments on the planet and the vicissitudes of colonisation through passivity and fatalism.’

I have also found that institutional attempts to protect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research participants from harm can sometimes act as barriers to indigenous self-determination. For example, although I have received much helpful advice and assistance from research integrity officers, I have also experienced the confounding situation of community approval being regarded as less legitimate than ethics committee approval. Nonetheless, during the early stages of decolonising data gathering, I was somewhat concerned that I may overreach and place too great a burden on the participants, who are, after all, volunteers in the research process. The solution was to check and keep checking, and to accept the participants’ assurances — as one does from one’s peers. Just as they did not expect me to demonstrate mastery over their social and cultural norms, or have more than a superficial understanding of their epistemological framework, I should not be concerned that they were not adept at enacting research methods.

Decolonising data analysis

Once the data had been gathered, I transcribed each interview and began the process of asking analytic questions and assigning initial codes. Sometimes this occurred while I was in or near the participant’s community, and other times I was on my way to or in the next community before I could begin. I used line-by-line coding — or gerunding — to label segments of the data and attempt to define the actions inherent in the participants’ stories (Charmaz 2014). It is a particularly useful way to approach interview data and is commonly used as a first step by grounded theorists. However, once the researcher begins to interact with the data in an analytic space, this usually spells the end of interaction with the participant in a personal space (member-checking aside). It is at this point — where the primacy of the researcher in making sense of the data is realised — that constructivist grounded theory and decolonising methodologies are in danger of becoming less neighbourly. Using the participants’ stories as a decolonising tactic depends

on their voices being heard first, loudest and, in some cases, only. The whole point is to make clear their views, feelings, intentions and actions by having them contribute their epistemological sensitivities to the knowledge and its contextualised interpretation. Adopting this tactic meant that I was committed to sending each participant the initially coded interview transcripts for in-depth checking, adding-to and interpreting, thus effectively recruiting them as co-analysts. Among experienced decolonising researchers, this may now be conventional practice: at the time, however, it was not a method I was familiar with, nor am I aware that it is a method commonly employed by my academic colleagues.

Once this process commenced, my personal and professional position became more fragile. The first analytic turn in my journey tested my ability to see the world through the eyes of the participants, my willingness to expose my fallibilities as a researcher and my commitment to privileging each participant’s interpretation over my own (S Carter, personal communication, 9 August 2015). Instead of retreating back to my academic cocoon, where the only audience was my supervisors, my constructions were in the hands of the owners of the words. There were three aspects to this process I found challenging. One was language. Decolonising methods means avoiding the language of deficits that perpetuates the stereotype that indigenous people represent a ‘problem’ that needs to be fixed (O’Donoghue 2008; Smith, LT 2012). Using language that does not offend is not as easy as it may seem. Researchers who have not been subjected to lifelong race-based discrimination are unlikely to be attuned to the subtle racial expressions found in the everyday insults, indignities and demeaning messages received by many indigenous peoples (Sue et al. 2007). I also found it challenging to avoid using language that had the potential to alienate or intimidate the participants, simply because I am a long-time academic and my everyday vernacular reflects my training and level of education.

The second challenge related to honesty. How would the participants feel, for example, when they read my codes relating to what I perceived as their possible complicity in their own oppression? Below is an excerpt from my fieldwork notes that illustrates my dilemma:

It's an old mission. R and others still remember the mission school and being taught by missionaries. R said they learned to do as they were told, not step out of line, just say 'yes boss' to the whites who were in charge. I heard this from P and A as well. And J too. J said that her ex-husband still struggles to say no to whitefellas. It seems the 'yes boss' mentality is deeply ingrained. Does a mission mentality meet the missionary mentality of some of the whites who are there now (to do what? Save them? Rule them?) and create some kind of co-dependent relationship? That reproduces and reinforces the bad old days of colonisation?

While I did not share my fieldwork notes with the participants, the notes were used to contextualise and inform my initial coding of the interview transcripts. The participants were therefore privy to much of my unfolding thinking. I have no answer for the risks posed by 'oversharing' except to say that I had to trust that the relationship the participants and I had developed was strong enough to withstand some misunderstandings, differences of opinion or unintended offence.

Not every participant responded to my request for verification and co-analysis, and my supervisors and I were concerned that this posed problems for data trustworthiness and therefore the decolonising project. One solution was to return to the field, which I briefly discuss in the next section. Those who did respond returned the coded transcripts with confirming and disconfirming comments, and their imprimatur to continue with the process. Sometimes there were only minor corrections to my interpretation. Other times, satisfaction with my representations of their words, meanings and actions was only partial, and some participants also demanded that I use more accessible language and clarify my meaning. One thing all the participants had in common was their willingness to correct me: none unquestionably accepted my representations of the data or privileged my voice over their own.

The third challenge was to come to terms with what co-analysis and co-interpretation means for my research. I am not going to pretend that my doctorate has become 'our' doctorate when a doctorate can only be awarded to an individual and not a consortium. Nor can I take credit

for the processes or assert ownership over the knowledge produced, even though its controversial nature may deter the participants from explicitly claiming their contribution, leaving me as the only disclosed author. I do not yet know how joint 'ownership' will be managed but suspect that uncertainty is a constant for researchers who choose to experiment with methodologies and methods that sit outside organisational and institutional parameters. At its core, decolonising methodologies is an imaginative, creative, optimistic and humanising project that strives for utopian goals (Smith, LT 2012) — risk is inherent in its radicalism. Adopting strategies that attempt to level the playing field on which researchers engage with participants is a critical step towards constructing the social systems and structures that make decolonising research possible. I now see adopting decolonising methodologies as a non-choice, simply because I do not hold the lived insights needed to understand the complex historical, cultural, political and social processes that are woven through the participants' narratives. As many scholars have discovered before me, if I was to follow a more conventional path and place the attainment of my doctoral degree ahead of genuine participant involvement in the research processes and outcomes, I would most likely produce a thin rendering of a very important story.

Taking the next steps

Even before the 2014 fieldwork journey was over, I realised that I would need to return to the field to continue the decolonising process. During the 18 months I spent in Sydney, I focus-coded the data, wrote memos and constructed tentative conceptual categories. Once I was ready to test and refine the categories with the participants, I set off once more by car and camper trailer, this time for six months. Together, the participants and I elaborated on and honed the conceptual categories, making them robust enough to act as a framework for a grounded theory. This second fieldwork journey added to the holistic conceptualisation of the stories shared, ensuring that I attended to both the 'berries and the bush' (Kovach 2011), meaning that the interpretive work remained located within the context of the participants' lives. It also strengthened our partnership

and enriched our relationship. It reinforced the need to embrace — rather than limit — personal links if we are to engage in insightful collaborative inquiry where we learn from each other rather than about each other. The knowledge the participants and I co-constructed gained in authority, credibility and potential usefulness, and is now in the process of being co-theorised, co-authored and co-shaped into accessible and meaningful research outputs. A third return to the field to finalise these outputs has not been ruled out.

Discussion and conclusion

Me: Do you know why you're not given the chance [to progress at work]?

Patti: Well they probably sees us as a dying race, you know. Can't do anything for ourself.

Me: I don't see you that way.

Patti: They probably see it differently too after your trip [laughs]. Do you see it a good thing, interviewing us?

Me: Absolutely.

Patti: And that'll...they'll hear about us?

Me: Yes. I want your words to be heard.

Patti: Yes.

The aim of this paper has been to explicate the iterative and at times messy process of decolonising constructivist grounded theory methodology and methods while in the remote Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander field. The journey I embarked on in 2014 has so far delivered a noisy and colourful chronicle of resistance, dignity, pride, battle and survival. It carries within it Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander epistemologies and has the potential to powerfully rebut the meagre and simplistic discourse found in many of the public representations of mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students and graduates. Decolonising methodologies gives primacy to research methods that unequivocally support indigenous self-determination (Jackson 2013). It requires long-term investment in developing and maintaining genuine friendships, commitment to respecting the authority of participants as knowledge producers, and attending, to the extent possible, to all aspects

of community life. It challenges the notion that researchers can remain aloof from the habitus of participants, and when they do not remain aloof, are able to convincingly account for their presence simply by practicing reflexivity. As costly and time-consuming (and sometimes physically discomfoting) as it may be, I suggest that decolonising methodology and methods may only be achieved by being present in, and adaptable to, the lives of people who dwell primarily on the margins of mainstream society. I do not wish to overstate the 'sacrifices' this strategy may entail. Nor do I wish to play down the problems or the obstacles that exist within organisations and institutions that measure success (or indeed privilege it) by the amount of funding leveraged, number of academic papers published, contribution to global rankings and universality. Advocacy to change these rigid metrics is required. In the meantime, I choose to 'embrace the work and commit to building a career from that place' (Smith, LT 2012:213). My hope is that, together with the participants and my supervisors, we will in the end (re)present a far more grounded, authoritative, legitimate and intimate narrative of indigenous struggle, resilience, second chances and new beginnings — one that is worthy of and useful for the local and global decolonising project.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge and pay my respects to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university graduates and their family and community members who welcomed me into their communities, workplaces and homes. Each person gave generously of their valuable time, knowledge and experiences. My supervisors and I are immensely grateful for the opportunity to work with them towards our shared goal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination.

NOTES

- 1 To avoid confusion, I have used the broad term 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' to describe people who identify as belonging to Australia's First Nations peoples. In the context of this paper, this descriptor was deemed acceptable by the participants, even though some identify as Aboriginal only and others identify as Torres Strait Islander only. I use 'indigenous' only in the global context, hence the lower case 'i'.

- 2 This paper was shared with the participants for approval and feedback prior to submission, and their contributions have been included in the text with their permission. All identifiers have been removed from the interview data and pseudonyms are used to protect each participant's identity.
- 3 Internationally, the age at which a student is classified as 'mature' is usually 25 and over (Chesters and Watson 2014), although some Australian universities define a mature-age university student as aged 21 and over.
- 4 The emic approach to research is one in which the participants are the primary source of knowledge.
- 5 Neocolonialism may be defined as the intertwined, indirect, and structurally and systemically embedded formations that invigorate and sustain colonialist dominance over indigenous peoples (Denzin et al. 2008).

REFERENCES

- Aldiabat, Khaldun and Carol-lyne Le Navenc 2011 'Clarification of the blurred boundaries between grounded theory and ethnography: differences and similarities', *Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry* 2(3):1–13, <<http://dergipark.ulakbim.gov.tr/tojqi/article/view/5000093452>> accessed 10 April 2016.
- Asmar, Christine, Sue Page and Ali Radloff 2011 *Dispelling myths: Indigenous students' engagement with university*, AUSSE Research Briefings, v.10, April, <<http://research.acer.edu.au/asse/2/>> accessed 12 November 2016.
- Atkinson, Paul 2015 'Rescuing interactionism from qualitative research', *Symbolic Interaction* 38(4):467–74.
- Babchuk, Wayne A and Robert K Hitchcock 2013 *Grounded theory ethnography: merging methodologies for advancing naturalistic inquiry*, Proceedings of the Adult Education Research Conference, <<http://newprairiepress.org/cgi/view-content.cgi?article=2980&context=aerc>> accessed 7 April 2016.
- Blessinger, Patrick 2015 *Why universal and life-long higher education is the next step in advancing the social contract*, Scholars Strategy Network, Cambridge, <www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org/brief/why-universal-and-life-long-higher-education-next-step-advancing-social-contract> accessed 22 August 2015.
- Bourdieu, Pierre 1990 *The logic of practice*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.
- Brunger, F and D Wall 2016 "What do they really mean by partnerships?" Questioning the unquestionable good in ethics guidelines promoting community engagement in indigenous health research', *Qualitative Health Research* 26(13):1862–77.
- Campbell, Theresa D 2014 'A clash of paradigms? Western and indigenous views on health research involving Aboriginal peoples', *Nurse Researcher* 21(6):39–43.
- Charmaz, Kathy 2006 *Constructing grounded theory: a practical guide through qualitative analysis*, Sage Publications Ltd, London.
- 2014 *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd edn), Sage Publications Ltd, London.
- Cheek, Julianne 2011 'Points of hesitation: human rights, social justice and qualitative research', *International Review of Qualitative Research* 4(2):209–18.
- Chesters, Jenny and Louise Watson 2014 'Returns to education for those returning to education: evidence from Australia', *Studies in Higher Education* 39(9):1634–48.
- Denzin, Norman K, Yvonna S Lincoln and Linda T Smith 2008 *Handbook of critical and indigenous methodologies*, Sage Publications Inc., Thousand Oaks, NY.
- Dudgeon, Pat and Roz Walker 2015 'Decolonizing Australian psychology: discourses, strategies, and practice', *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 3(1):276–97.
- Eickelkamp, Ute 2008 "I don't talk story like that": on the social meaning of children's sand stories at Ernabella' in J Simpson and G Wigglesworth (eds), *Children's language and multilingualism: indigenous language use at home and school*, Continuum, London, pp.79–99.
- Foley, Dennis 2003 'Indigenous epistemology and Indigenous standpoint theory', *Social Alternatives* 22(1):44–52, <www.researchgate.net/profile/Dennis_Foley/publication/256702869_Indigenous_Standpoint_Theory_An_Indigenous_Epistemology/links/02e7e523a517289f60000000.pdf> accessed 18 May 2016.
- Fredericks, Bronwyn 2007 'Which way health research? Reflections on the past, present and future', Aboriginal Health Research Unit, Flinders University, South Australia (unpublished).
- Gower, Graeme C 2012 *Ethical research in Indigenous Australian contexts and its practical implementation*, Edith Cowan University Research Online, <<http://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2012/131>> accessed 11 September 2014.
- Jackson, Moana 2013 'Ngati Kahungunu, Rongomaiwahine, Ngati Porou', *Proceedings of He Manawa Whenua Conference 2013*, Hamilton, Aotearoa NZ, pp.59–63, <https://issuu.com/teko-tahi/docs/proceedings_final_hi_res_version_si> accessed 30 June 2016.

- Kanuha, Valli K 2000 “‘Being’ native versus “going native”: conducting social work research as an insider’, *Social Work* 45(5):439–47.
- Knudson, Sarah 2015 ‘Integrating the self and the spirit: strategies for aligning qualitative research teaching with indigenous methods, methodologies, and epistemology’, *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 16(3), <www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/2362/3846> accessed 20 July 2015.
- Kovach, Margaret 2010 ‘Conversational method in indigenous research’, *First Peoples Child and Family Review* 5(1):40–8.
- 2011 ‘Indigenous methodologies & modified grounded theory method’, Summer Institute Seminar Series, University of Manitoba, Canada, <www.thesummerinstitute.ca/wp-content/uploads/Indigenous-Methodologies.pdf> accessed 17 August 2014.
- LeFrancios, Brenda A 2013 ‘The psychiatrization of our children, or, an autoethnographic narrative of perpetuating First Nations genocide through “benevolent” institutions’, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2(1):108–23, <www.landonpearson.ca/uploads/6/0/1/4/6014680/decolonization.pdf> accessed 10 September 2016.
- Louis, Renee P 2007 ‘Can you hear us now? Voices from the margin: using indigenous methodologies in geographic research’, *Geographical Research* 45(2):130–9.
- Mahood, Kim 2016 *Position doubtful: mapping landscapes and memories*, Scribe Publications, Melbourne.
- Nakata, Martin 2007 *Savaging the discipline: disciplining the savage*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra.
- O’Donoghue, Lowitja 2008 ‘Fix the white system, not the “Aboriginal problem”’, <www.abc.net.au/news/2008-05-28/fix-the-white-system-not-the-aboriginal-problem/2451316> accessed 17 September 2016.
- Plater, Suzanne 2012 “‘For the life of me, I can’t see why those students were let go on so long”: educating the educators, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander style’, *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* 41(2), doi.org/10.1017/jie.2012.24.
- , Julie Mooney-Somers and Jo Lander 2015 ‘The fallacy of the bolted horse: changing our thinking about mature-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students’, *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* 44(1), doi.org/10.1017/jie.2015.6.
- Redman-MacLaren, Michelle and Jane Mills 2015 ‘Transformational grounded theory: theory, voice and action’, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 14(3):1–12, doi.org/10.1177/160940691501400301.
- Rix, Elizabeth F, Lesley Barclay and Shawn Wilson 2014 ‘Can a white nurse get it? “Reflexive practice” and the non-Indigenous clinician/researcher working with Aboriginal people’, *Rural and Remote Health* 14:2679, <www.rrh.org.au> accessed 3 March 2015.
- Sherwood, Juanita 2010 Do no harm: decolonising Aboriginal health research, doctoral thesis, University of New South Wales, Kensington, NSW.
- Smith, Andrea 2013 ‘The problem with privilege’, *Andrea Smith’s Blog*, blog post, 4 August, <<https://andrea366.wordpress.com/2013/08/14/the-problem-with-privilege-by-andrea-smith/>> accessed 3 January 2017.
- Smith, Linda T 2012 *Decolonising methodologies: research and indigenous peoples* (2nd edn), Otago University Press, Dunedin, New Zealand.
- Sue, Derald Wing, Christina M Capodilupo, Gina C Torino, Jennifer M Bucceri, Aisha MB Holder, Kevin L Nadal, and Marta Esquilin 2007 ‘Racial microaggressions in everyday life: implications for general practice’, *American Psychologist* 62(4), <<http://world-trust.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/7-Racial-Microaggressions-in-Everyday-Life.pdf>> accessed 17 September 2016.
- Suim, Aman and Eric Ritskes 2013 ‘Speaking truth to power: indigenous storytelling as an act of living resistance’, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2(1), <<http://decolonization.org/index.php/des/article/view/19626/16256>> accessed 10 September 2016.
- Whiteduck, Mallory 2013 “‘But it’s our story. Read it.” Stories my grandfather told me and writing for continuance’, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2(1), <<http://decolonization.org/index.php/des/article/view/19119/16237>> accessed 10 September 2016.
- Wilson, Shawn 2008 *Research is ceremony: indigenous research methods*, Fernwood Publishing, Manitoba, Canada.

Ms Suzanne Plater (first author and PhD candidate) is a teaching and research academic in the Sydney School of Public Health at The University of Sydney. She co-ordinates and teaches in the School’s Indigenous Health and Master of Public Health programs. Suzanne has worked for many years with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from remote communities to improve health and wellbeing.
<suzanne.plater@sydney.edu.au>

Dr Julie Mooney-Somers is a social researcher looking at equity in health and health services, primarily in relation to sexuality, gender, indigenous status and youth. She is a Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Values, Ethics and the Law in Medicine, Sydney School of Public Health, The University of Sydney.
<julie.mooneysomers@sydney.edu.au>

Dr Jo Lander is an Associate Director of Teaching and Learning with the Sydney School of Public Health, and an Associate Dean with the Sydney Medical School at The University of Sydney. Her professional and research interests include linguistics, e-learning and academic literacies, with a particular focus on the learning needs of mature-age postgraduate students. Jo teaches in the Graduate Diploma in Indigenous Health Promotion program and has developed online resources to support students in this program.

<jo.lander@sydney.edu.au>

Emeritus Professor Lesley Barclay is an educational leader, health services researcher and systems reformer whose projects have improved maternal child health services in urban and remote Australia and internationally. Much of her recent research has been rural, remote or Indigenous focused. In 2015 she was formally recognised as one of Australia's top researchers.

<lesley.barclay@sydney.edu.au >