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Reciprocity and Indigenous knowledge in research

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Ganma is a metaphor. We are talking about natural processes but meaning at another level. Ganma is social theory. It is our traditional profound and detailed model of how what Europeans call ‘society’ works. (Yunipingu, 1994)

I try to follow the threads of local arguments wherever they lead. That is to say, I take them seriously as theory — as texts to learn from, not just about. (Connell, 2007, on the project of theorising in the global periphery)

Indigenous peoples think and interpret the world and its everyday realities in particular ways that are different from non-indigenous peoples because of their relationships to land, their cultures, histories and values (Rigney, 1999).

However, indigenist researchers have demonstrated that one of the legacies of scientific racialisation and its ideology has been the construction of knowledge about Indigenous peoples through the ‘common sense’ colonial view. In doing so, they have revealed the ways in which Northern epistemologies reproduce and reaffirm the cultural assumptions of ‘the world’ and the ‘real’ by the dominant group (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Jones, Lee & Poynton, 1998; Smith, 2004).

The perspectives of Yolngu people are an important part of this study and throughout the project I have remained aware of and taken steps to avoid the dangers of a Northern-centric approach to my research. The study design, fieldwork, analysis of Yolngu practices and the research outputs are informed by Indigenous methodologies, especially Yolngu epistemologies and the work of Kaupapa Māori1 researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith, which emphasises that the quality of the interaction between the researcher and participants is more important than ticking boxes or answering closed questions (Smith, 2004, p. 136).

Smith (2004) observes that some methodologies regard the specific research setting, characterised by the practices of Indigenous communities as ‘barriers’ to research, or as exotic customs that researchers need to be familiar with in order to carry out their work without causing offence. Indigenous methodologies, on the other hand, approach these practices in a respectful and ethical way as an integral part of the methodology:

They are factors to be built into research explicitly, to be thought about reflexively, to be declared openly as part of the research design, to be discussed as part of the final results of a study and to be disseminated back to the people in culturally appropriate ways and in a language that can be understood. (Smith, 2004, p. 15)

Yolngu knowledge systems involve thinking from, and with, the sea and the land. As Connell (2007) observes more generally of Indigenous cultures, ‘land and sea are not just geographical co-ordinates, but a concrete presence in social reality’ (Connell, 2012, p. 212). Being welcomed on to Yolngu country — learning about it in conversation and by walking upon it with senior women; the many background discussions, interactions and social experiences I had with Yolngu — was a crucial part of the research process because it established a rapport between us. Spending time getting to know people, driving into town together, having some lunch, going for a walk, meeting family —

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1 Maori researchers in New Zealand call ‘methodology’ ‘Kaupapa Māori research’ or Māori -centred research. Smith explains that ‘this form of naming is about bringing to the centre and privileging indigenous values, attitudes and practices rather than disguising them within Western labels such as ‘collaborative research’ (Smith, 2006, p. 125).
was how I discovered what is important from a Yolngu perspective — and why.

**Ganma**

Yolngu use the Ganma metaphor to explain how knowledge is produced and it is therefore one of the foundation philosophies for their bilingual/bicultural schools, which are central to my research questions. It has also emerged through the research process as the theoretical base of my doctoral project, which brings together Northern and Southern theory in a particular ecology. This places Ganma at the philosophical front and centre of this research journey. It is also part of the land on which the research is based. Some would describe this as a ‘grounded theory’ approach but I prefer Connell’s suggestion. She gives a new meaning for the term ‘grounded theory’, which involves ‘linking theory to the ground on which the theorist’s boots are planted’ (Connell, 2007, p. 206). This study is an attempt to do just this. Connell calls this approach ‘dirty theory’, and defines it as theorising which is ‘mixed up with specific situations’: ‘The goal of dirty theory is not to subsume, but to clarify; not to classify from outside, but to illuminate a situation in its concreteness’ (Connell, 2007, p. 207):

> To think in this way is to reject the deeply entrenched habit of mind ... by which theory in the social sciences is admired exactly in the degree to which it escapes specific settings and speaks in abstract universals. Connell, 2007, p. 206

The thinking and action the Ganma metaphor has inspired can be understood as a response to Yolngu participants’ self-determinist aims for the research, which included writing works of journalism about bilingual education for mainstream news media audiences that present their perspective. This critical studies approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008) has resulted in a model of academic journalism based in Indigenous research methodologies (Waller, 2010a). Its aim is to contribute to improving news media representation of Indigenous people and issues. It draws from Indigenous epistemologies that emphasise the centrality of trust, listening, reciprocity and maintaining consent (Waller, 2010a).

**Decolonising research**

This work of journalism is a form of ‘decolonising research’, which is enmeshed in activism. From the outset Yolngu participants were more interested in what I could offer their community as a journalist in return for their input and guidance, than what I could offer as a PhD student writing a thesis and conference papers. We agreed from the beginning that I would produce a work of journalism for the mainstream media that advocated for their policy position on bilingual education. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) describe this approach as ‘decentring and redefining the field of research so the Western academy is not the locus of authorising power that defines the research agenda’ (2008, p. 38). My project had ethics clearance from the University of Canberra, which included writing works of journalism. The article was constructed upon the Indigenous ethical framework I describe here and elsewhere (Waller, 2010; 2012).

Denzin and Lincoln (2008) stress that decolonising research emphasises performativity:

> It is not only concerned with building a theoretical foundation but researchers are engaged performatively in decolonising acts framed as activism, advocacy or critical reclamation. ((Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 38)

This essay traces the development of the journalism methodology and its operationalisation in the article ‘Learning in both worlds’ (Waller, 2011), which presents the Yolngu perspective on bilingual education.

**Journalism**

It is important to note that, from an Indigenous perspective, no difference exists between journalism and other
forms of non-Indigenous research. For Indigenous people, research is one of the key means that colonisers and imperialists have used to ‘take’ their knowledge, objectify them as ‘Other’ and rob them of their sovereignty (Rigney, 1999). Kaupapa Māori researcher Linda Tuwai Smith says: ‘the word itself, “research”, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world’s vocabulary’ (Smith, 2004, p. 1). Mainstream Western journalism still operates mainly with the positivist–objectivist epistemology that reproduces and reaffirms the cultural assumptions of ‘the world’ and the ‘real’ by the dominant group (Rigney, 1999; Meadows, 2001).

Therefore, new epistemologies are needed if journalism is to reflect Indigenous understandings of ‘the world’ and ‘the real’. Indigenous researchers have drawn upon the critical studies paradigm that advocates for those most oppressed in society and incorporated feminist theory in their development of qualitative methodologies for decolonising research about Indigenous peoples (Rigney, 1999). These methodologies demand greater self-reflection in research and emphasise ‘the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the

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2 Indigenous researchers are involved in the project of ‘decolonising’ research (see for example, Smith 2004). Decolonising research involves activism and is based on postcolonial theory and postcolonial studies. Denzin & Lincoln (2008) explain: ‘... decolonising research recognises and works within the belief that non-Western knowledge forms are excluded from or marginalised in normative research paradigms, and therefore non-Western/Indigenous voices are silenced and subjects lack agency within such representations. Furthermore, decolonising research recognises the role of colonisation in the scripting and encrypting of a silent, inarticulate and inconsequential indigenous subject and how such encryptions legitimise oppression. Finally, individually and collectively, decolonising research as a performative act functions to highlight and advocate for the ending of both discursive and material oppression that is produced at the site of the encryption of the non-Western subject as a “governable body” (Foucault, 1977)’. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, pp.35-36).
silencing Indigenous people and making them invisible:

Sensitivity to such issues might invoke reporting strategies such as using an indirect approach in news interviews, consultation and negotiation over meaning, acknowledgment of the existence of indigenous English and local languages, and making use of translators or subtitles where appropriate — in other words, negotiating Indigenous identity through dialogue with Indigenous public spheres. (Meadows, 2005, p. 36)

Listening

Some senior Yolngu who participated in the project said the big problem with the news media is that journalists don’t present their perspective often or well enough, so the public and politicians do not listen to them or take an interest in issues they regard as important. In an interview for this project, the highly regarded Indigenous affairs reporter Tony Koch, of The Australian newspaper, said the best advice he could offer about reporting on remote Indigenous communities was ‘... you don’t go there to speak to them, you go there to listen, and that’s just a wonderful experience if you’ve got the patience for it’. Yolngu people’s frustration with not being heard and Koch’s advice for other journalists provide evidence from the field on the fundamental importance of listening in responsible reporting of Indigenous affairs.

Yolngu people’s experience of the news media is also reflected in the growing body of research concerned with the politics and value of listening, which this essay draws upon. Scholars observe that the difficulty of producing positive changes in marginalised groups’ access to media and their representation is not an inability to speak up on their part. Rather, it is an inability or a refusal to listen on the part of both news media producers and their assumed audiences (Dreher, 2010, p. 98). This essay suggests the university ethics process for working with Indigenous people provides journalism academics with a framework for developing a new approach to reporting based on an obligation to listen.

The literature on race and media representation discussed in this report shows that Indigenous people often have little power over the ways in which they are depicted and that the routines and values of mainstream journalism present barriers to them telling their stories. Indigenous research ethics can offer a framework for ensuring Indigenous people have greater control over the ways they are represented and are empowered to tell their stories. Adopting this ethical paradigm involves a commitment to respecting difference, listening to Indigenous people and ensuring that their needs and priorities are emphasised in the news reports that are created.

Dreher (2010) suggests that entrenched news values and existing story agendas often work to shape listening and speaking by focusing on addressing the stereotypes and concerns of ‘mainstream’ audiences, rather than providing ways through which marginalised voices can be heard. She says our thinking needs to change to include hearing and listening as well as speaking.

Dreher is one of a group of media scholars who are concerned with the politics and importance of listening. Charles Husband advocates for a universal right to be understood (1996), and John Downing (2007) builds on Husband’s work with his concept of ‘active listening’. He argues that positive cultural change depends on developing ‘a sense of obligation to listen’ to people who have been historically excluded from public conversation. Susan Bickford (1996) says change can occur when we understand that how we listen determines the ways in which others can speak and be heard. In her recent work on listening, Dreher (2010) suggests that the

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3 Interview conducted by Lisa Waller at Deakin University Management Centre, 23 May 2010.
nature of media power can be usefully rethought:

Media power might entail the privilege of choosing to listen or not, the power to enter into dialogue or not, to seek to comprehend the other or not, the privilege of demanding answers and explanations and justifications. The challenge for media change then might be how to undo the privilege of not listening at multiple levels — including the news conventions which structure journalists’ hearing stories, and the presumed interest of the assumed audience in listening to others. (Dreher, 2010, p. 101)

Fair representation and access to news media for Indigenous people are more likely to be achieved by working outside or re-imagining news conventions, challenging routine source strategies and using different modes of information gathering and storytelling (Dreher 2010). Journalism academics are well placed to take up the challenges of media change suggested here by working through the university ethics process, which facilitates dialogue with Indigenous public spheres. New subjects as well as ways of storytelling can be developed from Indigenous peoples’ definitions of issues and priorities for research. Different modes of information gathering would include working together to negotiate what will be investigated and how that inquiry will be carried out. Establishing meaningful relationships that extend beyond information collection can displace routine source strategies. Respecting Indigenous cultures and knowledge, including people’s right to be understood in their own languages, facilitates speaking and listening.

The university ethics process is designed to ensure research outcomes that satisfy the needs and aspirations of Indigenous people, which could be works of journalism that tell the stories Indigenous people want the world to hear.

Writing: ‘Learning in both worlds’

Learning in both worlds (Waller, 2011) can be described as a piece of ‘experimental’ journalism as it contributes to operationalising the ethical framework developed through my research. It could also be used to ‘test’ some of the research findings, especially the local understanding of participants that Australia’s southern mainstream news media has little interest in the topic of bilingual education. It could also be used to ‘test’ whether a substantial piece of journalism that advocates an Indigenous perspective could influence the bilingual education policy debate (Koch-Baumgarten & Voltmer, 2010).

The article was published by the online news and opinion outlet Inside Story almost one year after I had completed my fieldwork in north-east Arnhem Land. There were two reasons I did not write it sooner. The first was that I had further interviews to complete with members of the policy field who I believed might not be prepared to participate if they did not like what I wrote. The second goes to my journalistic habitus, especially my news sense (Benson & Neveu, 2005). The aims of the feature article were to present the Yolngu policy perspective, reach as wide an audience as possible and ideally to

**KEY POINTS**

- The main outcomes of the project stem from Yolngu participants’ self-determinist aims for the research.
- A major aim was writing a work of journalism that advocated the Yolngu policy position on bilingual education.
- The article that resulted can be viewed at [www.inside.org.au/learning_in_both_worlds/](http://www.inside.org.au/learning_in_both_worlds/)
- Working with Indigenous research ethics resulted in the development of a model of academic journalism based in Indigenous research methodologies.
have an impact on the policy process. The wind did not blow the right way, according to my journalism ‘nose’, until I could spot a suitable opening in the national news agenda. The House of Representatives inquiry into Indigenous languages (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee, 2011), announced in July 2011, provided an opportunity to link the bilingual education lobby with a broader discussion about Indigenous languages at a national level.

There are strong similarities between ethnographic and journalistic methods (Waller, 2010b). My brief immersion in Yolngu society while conducting fieldwork provided much of the observation used in the work of journalism. I quote some material from my research interviews, from interviews that were conducted specifically for the news article, and draw upon the scholarly literature and news coverage of bilingual education. The journalism I produced is therefore a hybrid of my academic research and journalism research, undertaken to meet a stated goal of the research.

**Journalism as a research instrument**

Writing and placing the article provided a research instrument I could utilise in my scholarly work in several ways. Firstly, the process of researching and writing the article contributed to operationalising the ethical framework developed through the university ethics process (Waller, 2010a). Reader feedback to Inside Story and discussion of the article in the Friends of Bilingual Learning Google group provide a measure for evaluating whether the ethical framework supported the desired outcome. The comments suggest these readers are not disinterested members of the public, but rather active members of the bilingual education lobby with an understanding of the Yolngu perspective. Comments include:

> It is a tremendously well written and correct version of things at Yirrkala. Lisa has got so many things right, and has sympathetically reported the events and people’s feelings and reactions. A real change, easy to read and the truth.

Lisa Waller has got it right, crafting a respectful and accurate account of the continual battles (war) Yolngu have fought for many years to have their land, ceremonies, culture and languages acknowledged, and their rights to continue utilising their land, ceremonies, culture and languages in contemporary Australia. Lisa has also shown us the long and significant history of Yolngu public contributions to wider Australian society ...

Importantly, Multhara’s voice can be heard, sharing with Lisa on her country at Garrthalala, the depth of Yolngu feelings, about land, culture, family and two-way education.

Lucky Lisa — reciprocity — well done.

This article should be read by everyone and serves an excellent model for us language activists. It’s a clear and grounded summary of the issues that never devolves into righteousness and slogans. Of course, I think we have every right to be mad as hell but emotive language gives readers a license to switch off. Worse, it offers ‘proof’ to the Abbott’s/Brough’s/Scrymgour’s of this world that we are somehow motivated by ideology over evidence (just as they are).

The main aims of the ethical framework are to ensure reciprocity with indigenous participants and privilege their perspectives (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2003), which the comments suggest the article has succeeded in achieving.

Secondly, the process allowed me to index my experience against research participants’ accounts of having difficulty getting stories about bilingual education through gatekeepers in southern newsrooms. Academics recounted having opinion pieces rejected and journalists reported having difficulty interesting editors in Indigenous stories that did not fit the routine frames of violence,
dysfunction and failure (McCallum, 2010). My experience of having the article rejected by several major metropolitan dailies aligns with participants’ experiences, providing further evidence to support the argument that most editors find little interest in the subject and do not think it will appeal to their assumed audiences.

Thirdly, publication of the article has allowed me to ‘test’ whether news media coverage can amplify marginalised people’s perspectives in the policy process, as the literature says (Koch-Baumgarten &Voltmer, 2010). The ‘experiment’ suggests it does. The article was a ‘top read’ in the influential Australian Policy Online, ensuring it was brought to the attention of opinion and policy makers. In the week of publication I received an email from a highly placed public servant who participated in the study. He wrote: ‘I talked with [NT Opposition Leader] Terry Mills, and he’d like to see it if you have the link.’ It is possible to pinpoint the impact of the article through reader comments, any reference to it in Hansard, press releases, follow-up media interest and participants’ comments.

Can the ‘experiment’ be replicated?

This form of ‘experimental’ journalism can be replicated by academics and participants working together within a critical studies paradigm, guided by liberation epistemologies. As Dreher (2010) argues, fair representation and access to news media are more likely to be achieved by using different modes of information gathering and storytelling, as this ‘experiment’ does. This approach requires journalism academics to be committed to their research and its design supporting the self-determination struggle of their participants, as defined and controlled by their communities (Rigney, 1999, p. 109) The ‘experiment’ strengthens the wider project’s finding that news media can amplify the perspectives of marginalised groups (McCallum, Waller & Meadows, 2012) and that journalism academics are well placed to work with them towards these ends. This approach demands reflexivity on the part of the researcher through acknowledgment they are an active participant in their field of research. It also rests on the assumption that research participants are in the best position to speak on their own behalf. This underpins my research and is materialised through the Yolngu voices and perspectives in the work of journalism. The approach offers a number of benefits, including reciprocity with research participants; providing a research instrument for testing theories and findings; making research topics accessible for mainstream audiences and developing journalism academics as public intellectuals.

References


