

Being, Knowing, and Doing: A Phronetic Approach to Constructing Grounded Theory With Aboriginal Australian Partners

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Abstract

Researchers working with Aboriginal Australian partners are confronted with an array of historical, social, and political complexities which make it difficult to come to theoretical and methodological decisions. In this article, we describe a culturally safe and respectful framework that maintains the intellectual and theoretical rigor expected of academic research. As an Aboriginal woman and two non-Aboriginal women, we discuss the arguments and some of the challenges of using grounded theory methods in Aboriginal Australian contexts, giving examples from our studies of Aboriginal empowerment processes. We argue that the ethics of care and responsibility embedded in Aboriginal research methodologies fit well with grounded theory studies of Aboriginal social processes. We maintain that theory development grounded in data provides useful insights into the processes for raising the health, well-being, and prosperity of Aboriginal Australians.

Keywords

Aboriginal people, Australia; constructivism; grounded theory; epistemology; ethics / moral perspectives

Epistemologies that differ from traditional Western epistemologies have given rise to alternate ways of knowledge production in a contemporary space. These alternate epistemological positions have introduced changes in research methodologies and methods, “shaped by the interests and positionality of the researchers who use them” (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004, p. 117). As researchers, our ways of knowing and being are inseparable from our ways of doing, and all ways of doing make epistemological claims. We should, therefore, seek answers to our research questions in a strategic process of knowledge construction. For Aboriginal researchers, as described by Dei, Hall, and Rosenberg (2000), Moreton-Robinson (2000), Martin (2003), and Martin (2008), establishing a standpoint in research involves consideration of “the inseparable nature of ways of knowing and being against the problem of defining ‘Indigenous knowledges’ and establishing workable boundaries for studying them” (Dei et al., 2000, p. 5). For non-Aboriginal researchers, it requires recognition of being outside the Aboriginal colonized experience while at the same time seeking to be an “allied other” (Denzin, 2007, p. 457).

Equally important to assumptions about what knowledge and whose knowledge can be accessed, is how knowledge is obtained. For researchers contemplating the development of research studies within Aboriginal

Australian contexts, an array of historical, social, and political complexities can also make it difficult to come to a theoretical and methodological decision. Researchers must grapple with Western-influenced notions about what constitutes a valid method of inquiry and what can be described as valid knowledge. This issue is complicated by a history of negative research practices and experiences in Aboriginal settings. Quite expectedly, the performance of these processes is complex.

Background

For Aboriginal people worldwide, the decolonization of research methodologies has been at the forefront of research priorities for over two decades (Bishop, 2005; Semaili & Kincheloe, 1999; Smith, 2005). Non-Aboriginal researchers working with Aboriginal populations have also recognized the significance of decolonizing research approaches to bring about beneficial social change

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(Muller, 2007). Decolonizing research advocates building a coalition of knowledge, relevance, practical application, and vision for Aboriginal people. However, it requires more than a simple shift in the conceptualization of the research process. With the development of a new paradigm comes a need for different ways of perceiving reality, thinking about what is possible and new ways of doing. Such shifts often lead to innovative approaches and repertoires of social science methods.

Striking a balance between methodological rigor and the creativeness of the research design is imperative for innovative research. For researchers partnering with Aboriginal Australians, reevaluating existing research paradigms means finding new ways of integrating concepts of knowledge, ways of being, and knowing. The subsequent merger of innovative and emancipatory research practices benefits both the researcher and those with whom collaboration occurs. The object is not to discard "all theory or research or Western knowledge" (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 39); rather, decolonizing methodologies draw from existing knowledge, working the cultural interface between Western and Aboriginal knowledges. The concerns of Aboriginal people, including their cultural protocols, values, and behaviors, are central to the process (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). As well, decolonizing methodologies can contribute to "self-determination and liberation struggles as defined and controlled by Aboriginal communities" (Irabinna Rigney, 1999, p. 110). Thus, decolonizing or anticolonial research needs to move beyond theory to inform the ethics of practice and the practice of ethics in everyday action. Research presented in an anticolonial framework must concentrate on both colonial relations and practice and create a critical link between theory and practice (Dei, 2005).

Critiquing conventional epistemologies and understanding how to achieve these decolonizing propositions in reality is inherently difficult for many researchers. In this article, we describe a methodological framework that seeks to "de-legitimate racist oppression in research and shift to a more empowering and self-determining outcome" (Irabinna Rigney, 1999, p. 110). We propose a culturally safe and culturally respectful framework (Irabinna Rigney, 1999) that does not value Western over Aboriginal epistemologies, does not reproduce colonial relations or the exploitation of Aboriginal people through research, and in which we are "aware and more respectful of each other's cultural traditions" (Irabinna Rigney, 1999, p. 118).

We demonstrate how Aboriginal and Western knowledges can be reconciled while maintaining the intellectual and theoretical rigor expected of academic research. We argue that the ethics of care and responsibility embedded in Aboriginal research methodologies fit well with grounded theory studies of Aboriginal Australian social processes. Moreover, we contend that the development of theory grounded in data provides useful insights into the processes for promoting the health, well-being, and prosperity

of Aboriginal Australians. We present Flyvbjerg's (2001) notion of phronetic social science as a philosophical framework for integration into professional research regimes to ensure the practice of ethics required when partnering in Aboriginal research (Tsey, 2010).

In addition to Flyvbjerg's (2001) framework, described in more detail later in the article, we propose that using grounded theory methods offers flexible opportunities in both conducting and producing anticolonial research. By using these methods, researchers can create new theories or develop useful theoretical perspectives on the relationship of individuals' or groups' experiences to society and history (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Researchers following these methods acknowledge people who are living with and experiencing the situations under study as active participants in shaping and managing their lives, and build a theoretical base from data gathered about their experiences. In grounded theory, the importance of cultural influences can either be framed within the research question or allowed to emerge as a significant dimension, construct, or property during analysis.

Since its inception by Glaser and Strauss (1967), there has been a philosophical progression in methods which generate grounded theory (Birks & Mills, 2010; Mills, Bonner, & Frances, 2006). The evolution of a postmodern push by Clarke (2005) and the constructivist approach of Charmaz (2006) are notable examples. In this article, we explore the potential of constructivist grounded theory methods for engaging new interpretive approaches and challenging Western social theories. We do so by investigating how the integration of phronetic research epistemologies and constructivist grounded theory methods works alongside ethical and decolonizing practices in Aboriginal research agendas to create new knowledge. We ground the investigation in Flyvbjerg's (2001) conception of a phronetic social science as a way of being, knowing, and doing in collaborative research with Aboriginal Australian people. We describe the positioning of researcher ethics as ways of being, and then analyze the practical ways of doing. Thus, researchers are able to operationalize ethics in the research process. Three examples from our own work, independently conducted at the interface of Aboriginal and Western knowledge systems, support this theoretical background to give concrete meaning to the practice of phronetic social science.

The Ethics of Practice: Positioning the Researcher

In his proposal, Flyvbjerg (2001) gave new significance to praxis as part of social science research. His thesis of a phronetic social science rested on the Aristotelian philosophy that well-functioning societies are reliant on the concurrent interaction and functioning of three knowledge systems: (a) phronesis: ethics and values; (b) techne: arts and craft; and (c) episteme: scientific knowledge. Flyvbjerg

proposed that the interaction between the different schools of knowledge provides a holistic and contextual orientation toward gaining knowledge of the social world—important in considering researcher positionality.

Flyvbjerg (2001), like Aristotle, prioritized the role of phronesis. Phronesis, or practical wisdom, concerns how one should act ethically in situations. Importance is also placed on the experience of its application. In an Aboriginal Australian context, this places a premium on gaining insights into the experiences of Aboriginal populations and how their Aboriginality, unique ontologies, epistemologies, and specific heritage and cultures saturate the research experience. In practice, it promotes responsive and innovative ethical research practice linking action and change. The values, interests, and power relations of the dynamics between the researchers and those with whom we collaborate need to be made explicit. The central task is to identify how current relations of power could be altered to incorporate new practices to improve outcomes for both groups.

In a contemporary world, phronesis is best achieved by the analysis of values and power “as a point of departure for action” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 57). The phronetic researcher aims for pragmatism (a workable ethical course of action), focuses on context (localized Aboriginal knowledge), and responds to the variable or particular, as opposed to the universal and context-independent (Flyvbjerg). A phronetic research approach enables movement beyond epistemologies centered on the privileges, beliefs, and experiences of dominant others to those seeking action to deliver social change for the common good. Phronetic approaches as advocated by Flyvbjerg align well with Aboriginal ethical guidelines. Prominent research guidelines (National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC], 2003) raise the significance of six intertwined principles: respect, reciprocity, equality, responsibility, survival and protection, and spirit and integrity. These address context and power relationships, acknowledging the position of the researcher and working from a values base in research partnerships. But what does ascribing importance to power as a point of departure entail? And what does it look like in practice?

The Practice of Ethics: A Strengths-Based Approach

Strengths-based research approaches build on the strengths of individuals, families, and communities to assist in recovery and empowerment, and are increasingly advocated by international support agencies and others to create sustainable change (McCashen, 2005). This approach assumes there are pockets of resilience from which to work, and that individuals and groups can be supported and guided by research findings to take control

and create change from within (Tsey, Harvey, Gibson, & Pearson, 2009). Self-initiated and self-empowered actions taken by Aboriginal people to improve their own situations (Tsey et al., 2009) are illustrated in our studies. For example, Bainbridge worked with urban-dwelling Aboriginal women to understand their performance of agency in the everyday. Agency is here defined as the individual’s capacity to differ from, rather than replicate, social discourses, and engage as a significant actor in that process (Bainbridge, 2011; Davies, 2000). It is performed by defining goals and acting on them (Kabeer, 1999).

Participatory and collaborative research processes lead the agenda in methodological reform for Aboriginal people. Most research concerning Aboriginal Australian issues overwhelmingly emanates from a deficit model of research, which identifies the Aboriginal problem and imposes a Western cultural framework of meaning and interpretation to the findings. As a result, this type of research fails to adequately capture the perspective of the Aboriginal population participating in the research. In contrast, a strengths-based model of research focuses on the population’s own resolves in life. It attends carefully to the voice of the research population by promoting them as experts in their own lives.

Strength-based research positions the researcher and researched as partners. Collaboration and negotiation of meaning inform the interpretation of findings and encourage participant engagement in the research (Bainbridge, McCalman, Tsey, & Brown, 2011). It invests in phenomena that already work and which can logically serve as the foundation for real growth and change. Working in this way demonstrates that researchers’ expertise is both relevant to Aboriginal priorities and makes social research relevant to people’s daily lives, needs, and aspirations (Minkler, 2004; Tsey et al., 2009). Ignoring this process exposes the researcher to the risk of perpetuating power imbalances within the research relationship and retaining paternalistic practices associated with colonization.

Context-Dependent Research

Contextually responsive research allows power to reside more equitably with Aboriginal populations. To some degree it resolves conflicts about how research is initiated, who benefits, and how it is used (Bishop, 2005). Building a phronetic research agenda based on a strengths-based paradigm fits well with Aboriginal aspirations and expectations of the research project. In the social sciences, little attention has been given to promoting the interests of Aboriginal people in ways that adequately address power and privilege. Also, diversity has been primarily treated as an add-on and not as a discrete construct in its own right (O’Neil Green, Creswell, Shope, & Plano Clarke, 2007). These inadequacies mean there is a need to ensure that the conduct of research with

Aboriginal people promotes empowerment, benefits, sustainability, mutual trust, and respect in the process (NHMRC, 2003).

The practice of grounded theory involves analytical, open-ended inquiry and is thus ideal as a tool of decolonization for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers (Denzin, 2010). One way to address the challenges of privileging Aboriginal voices and experiences vis-à-vis those of researchers, and thus recognize that other realities and truths are valid, is to conduct context-dependent research. One of the inherent strengths in grounded theory is that it closely attends to context by “turning away from acontextual description” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 271). Instead, its practice encourages the construction of theory in the substantive area under study. The capacity to listen carefully to the beneficiaries of proposed initiatives and position them at the center of efforts to promote the well-being of individuals, families, and communities is a critical part of providing an evidence base for action. This practice means valuing Aboriginal knowledge systems, with researchers playing a facilitating role in linking these systems with scientific knowledge. According to the Maori researcher, Tuhiwai Smith, such an approach promotes the development of a localized theory and avoids “universal characteristics that are independent of history, context and agency” (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 229).

Grounded theory was designed to explore the nature of complex social phenomena, particularly phenomena about which little is known (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It is ideally suited to the task of conducting exploratory research, particularly in areas like Aboriginal research, where an evidence base is lacking. Its distinctive methods of concurrent sampling, data generation, and constant comparative analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) enable researchers to systematically develop theory derived directly from the data. It facilitates the emergence of the central concern of participants, as well as the basic process facilitating that concern (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss). Thus, grounded theory methods are invaluable as an explanatory tool. Their use enables researchers to explicate all constituent elements of the research phenomenon and their interrelationships, and then construct analytical explanations of what it means (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss). Furthermore, grounded theory methods generate an account of how the research phenomenon occurs, the contexts and conditions under which it develops, the actions/strategies in the process, and the consequences of those actions.

The development of theory is grounded in specific evidence. The aim of the theories is emancipatory because they focus on the context and lives of the participants (Charmaz, 2006). They also have a pragmatic core that systematically attempts to resolve complex social processes. The iterative cyclical processes of concurrent theoretical sampling, data collection, and constant comparative

method assists to emerge theory, streamlines data collection, and directs the research according to what is important for participants (Charmaz, 2006). The latter is imperative when working with populations that have traditionally been both overresearched and disempowered during those research processes (Bainbridge et al., 2011; Tsey et al., 2009).

Decolonizing Approaches: Accounting for Diversity and Power

The application of grounded theory methods resolves issues of researcher bias and power relationships characteristic of many conventional research processes. One way of addressing issues of power in research relationships and contributing to decolonizing projects is to take a constructivist view. This view assumes the relativism of multiple social realities, recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims for interpretive understanding of subjects' meanings (Charmaz, 2000). This perspective is enhanced by a strengths-based approach, both of which are congruent with Aboriginal epistemologies and methodologies. Charmaz proffered an interpretation of constructivist grounded theory which

recognizes that the viewer creates the data and ensuing analysis through interaction with the viewed. Data [do] not provide a window on reality. Rather, the “discovered” reality arises from the interactive process and its temporal, cultural, and structural contexts. Researcher and subjects frame that interaction and confer meaning upon it. The viewer then is part of what is viewed rather than separate from it. What a viewer sees shapes what he or she will define, measure and analyze. (2000, pp. 523-524)

Summarizing our argument, constructivism stresses an intersubjective relationship between the knower and the known in the coconstruction of meaning, and the subjective position of the researcher and associated biases (Charmaz, 2000). Using a constructivist grounded theory approach can help legitimize the experience of Aboriginal people as a source of knowledge and facilitate the development of theory directly interpreted from Aboriginal people's own words. It also acknowledges the influence of contextual social processes and structures, the diversity of experience, and the relational aspects of the research enterprise.

Methods

To demonstrate the utility of a decolonizing research framework, we evoke the operationalization of constructivist grounded theory methods embedded in a phronetic social

science philosophy. We provide examples from our own studies of Aboriginal empowerment processes. These studies illustrate the application of localized approaches to our doctoral studies relating to three Aboriginal-defined concerns: (a) Bainbridge developed a model of how Aboriginal women perform agency; (b) Whiteside demonstrated how Aboriginal people achieve empowerment; and (c) McCalman theorized how Aboriginal programs are transferred across settings and adapted to meet the needs of diverse groups of Aboriginal people.

All authors participated in an empowerment research program located at a regional Australian university. This program aims to establish the connection between the concept of empowerment and the social determinants of health and well-being for Aboriginal Australians. The studies of Whiteside and McCalman were embedded in the research program and based on an empirical empowerment program, the Family Wellbeing Program (FWB). The FWB Program is an Aboriginal-developed empowerment education program that aims to strengthen people's capacity to deal with the challenges of everyday life by providing an understanding of self-in-context and teaching the social and emotional skills required to cope with everyday circumstances (Bainbridge et al., 2011). Bainbridge's project was a related but discrete study. It was conducted in natural settings, meaning participants were not involved in the FWB Program.

The framework for this research article was developed by applying grounded theory methods to analyze the three study narratives. We each wrote a narrative of our doctoral research approach and exchanged drafts for analysis. We identified and compared categories from each study narrative to emerge a set of common categories. We then reflected on the categories evident in the three datasets. This process enabled the articulation of an overarching concern for us all—coming to an ethics of practice. This concern referred to our struggles to develop ethically sound research practices that were congruent with the aspirations and expectations of the Aboriginal people with whom we worked. Our research processes reflected Karen Martin's (2008) Aboriginal research framework—ways of being, knowing, and doing. We reconstructed the drafts to fit with the categories being, knowing, and doing to develop the article.

Roxanne Bainbridge

Project Background

In the study I aimed to identify the process underlying the performance of agency for urban-dwelling Aboriginal women in contemporary Australian society. My aim was to facilitate social change strategies for Aboriginal people. I took a strengths-based approach and built on the findings

of my previous study with Aboriginal women (Bainbridge, 2004). Autoethnography, "the study of a culture of which one is a part, integrated with one's relational and inward experiences" (Davis & Ellis, 2008, p. 284), was used as a sensitizing tool for initial sampling and analyzing. Constructivist grounded theory methods, theoretical sampling, and constant comparative method were used in the conduct and analysis of 20 face-to-face life history narrative interviews with Aboriginal women from across 14 different language groups in Australia. I had a relationship with all of the women interviewed. Analysis identified a specific ecological model of Aboriginal women's empowerment, defined as "becoming empowered." Performing Aboriginality was identified as the core category, and encompassed the women's concern for carving out a fulfilling life and carrying out their perceived responsibilities as Aboriginal women. Although confirming much of the extant literature on empowerment, the analysis also offered unique contributions: a spiritual sensibility, cultural competence, and an ethics of care and morality.

Being

I am an Aboriginal Australian woman (Gungarri/Kunja nations), a daughter, sister, mother, aunty, and grandmother. These subject positions infuse my life with meaning and purpose. I passionately strive toward perhaps what many might term utopian desires and visions for Aboriginal people. I advocate positive social change and improved circumstances to better accommodate the futures of our children. First and foremost, therefore, it must be acknowledged that my Aboriginal feminine ways of being in and viewing the world cannot be set aside as I assume the role of researcher. My Aboriginal self and relationality infused my role of researcher, as did the life experiences and beliefs I brought to research as the foundation for knowledge construction. I also recognized the multidimensional nature of reality and truths, realizing I was "not the essential woman and that the other realities and truths . . . are just as valid and valuable" as my own (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004, p. 115).

I see research as a conduit to achieving social change and developing and sustaining a more just and moral society. In my experience as a researcher, reconciling my ways of knowing, being, and doing in the world with Western research practices formed an additional layer for negotiation. In my study (Bainbridge, 2004) I explored the nuanced elements of personal agency demonstrated in the sociopsychological life-history narratives of Aboriginal women. The research area itself was intuitively defined by the boundaries of my assumptions around what can be known and who can know. It made sense that I sought an area of investigation in which I already engaged—something within my realm of being

and knowing. In this sense, I entered the research process as both a knower and the known; both a participant in the study and the researcher.

Knowing

The process of coming to a methodological decision in my study was difficult. I was developing competence as an Aboriginal woman researcher with an anthropological background and Western-influenced notions about what constitutes a valid method of inquiry and what is described as valid knowledge. Juxtaposed with this position were my cultural location and my knowledge and experience of negative research practices. Practical issues aside, for these reasons in particular I was concerned about the selection of an appropriate research methodology.

An internal dialectic of nonconformity evolved as I began to consider the realities of conducting the research act with Aboriginal women. I took solace in Maori scholar Tuhiwai Smith's writing on decolonizing methodologies:

Decolonization . . . does not mean and has not meant a total rejection of all theory or research or Western knowledge. Rather, it is about centering our concerns and world views and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes. (1999, p. 39)

I asked myself how one moves from Western research scholarship to anticolonial practice in the search for this knowledge. I pondered how my methodology would differ from conventional methods of research; after all, I was using current Western research practices. I did not wish to replace the errors of colonial practice with the errors of another paradigm.

As an Aboriginal woman in a similar subject position as the participants in my study, and a participant in the study myself, I brought certain biases to the research. For instance, the original assumption underpinning this research was that there are cohorts of Aboriginal women who have been able to flourish in life and change the circumstances of their existence by using particular strategies such as strengthening human and social capital. I did not have predetermined hypotheses about the phenomenon I was researching, but I did have a personal sense of being an Aboriginal woman and the difficulties involved in voicing beliefs in a contemporary Western-dominant society. Therefore, I entered the research with some broad sensitizing questioning regarding the meaning of being an Aboriginal woman, about negotiating boundaries and discourses and how self-development emerged in the enactment of agency.

Subsequently, I was concerned about imposing a prior frame of reference on the participants' realities. I required a methodology that avoided the imposition of theory on the

data and promoted the separation of knowledge and ways of producing it. I believed that knowledge of Aboriginal women's realities was best accessed from the privileged position of Aboriginal women themselves. Critically, the methodology had to be authentic for the contexts and practices of the women with whom I collaborated to develop a substantive theory of agency. Based on my ontological and epistemological assumptions, I identified a decolonizing methodological approach which suited my inquiry and ways of working. From this point of departure, I allowed the research to emerge quite intuitively and organically. In discussion with other researchers, I was alerted to the objectivist traditions and rhetoric of grounded theory, but I came to employ a constructivist grounded theory approach as advocated by Charmaz (2000, 2003, 2005, 2006). For me, there were most convincing and persuasive arguments for grounded theory methods:

1. Grounded theory methods correlated closely with my intuitive needs and ways of working and with my way of thinking about and studying social reality;
2. Indigenist perspectives share epistemological congruency with symbolic interactionism inherent in grounded theory;
3. Grounded theorists account for variation in behavior because they interrogate and compare data to data as part of their core method (Wuest, 1995); and
4. Data are also examined at a micro- and macro level for influences on the interactional processes.

My intention was not to develop innovative methodologies to challenge and/or reject Western systems of knowledge that have largely influenced my ways of researching. Instead, I sought to use Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) notion of decolonizing methodologies. Using grounded theory methods offered possibilities for proposing new interpretative approaches to research inquiry and possibilities for challenging Western social theories. I was able to capture, center, and privilege our voices and concerns in all their complexities and heterogeneity. The data expressed the concerns of Aboriginal women who are rarely heard and whose realities and identities have been distorted over centuries by others. In doing so, Aboriginal ways of being, knowing, and doing were invoked and guided the research process.

Doing

The research was an organic process that grew from personal experience. Because the study (Bainbridge, 2004) was not conceived as a grounded theory study from the outset, methodological clarification increased as data

were acquired and I engaged more intensely in the sampling and analysis. Grounded theory methods have been historically repositioned to accommodate changing philosophical and epistemological landscapes (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Denzin, 2010). Just as new and alternative epistemologies have been tested over time, grounded theory methods have developed in diverse directions (Charmaz, 2006; Clarke, 2005, as cited in Denzin, 2010; Mills et al., 2006). It was the tool that “stresse[d] its emergent, constructivist elements” (Clarke, 2005, p. xxiii) that was used in this study.

I invoked critical, poststructural, and feminist theories of self, agency, power, and discourse in an effort to reveal new knowledge and generate substantive theories through the utility of grounded theory methods. The value of this theoretical approach stemmed from the ability of such discourses to assist my description of themes and issues of women’s subjective experiences. The approach also emphasized the participatory and diverse nature of associated research methods. Implementing empowering research strategies to uncover both the power of the women and the nature of oppressive power structures provided the first steps toward redressing social disadvantages (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005).

I came to this research with particular urgency to understand how we, as Aboriginal women, intervened in reality to achieve emancipation within the context of oppressive and restrictive policies and social practices. To understand how women came to achieve agency in their lives, I needed to document the process across time. This realization prompted me to conduct life-history narrative interviews to document our psychosocial development. The study followed grounded theory practices of simultaneous theoretical sampling, data generation, and coding to build meaning and theory as expressed by our narratives of agency and development.

I especially focused on the interplay between the researcher and the data, particularly the analytical tools and techniques—the core practices of coding, memoing, constant comparative method of analysis, theoretical sampling, and theoretical sensitivity in the literature. I used autoethnographic methods to sensitize myself to concepts and further facilitate my understanding and stimulate reflexivity. This method provided the option of drawing directly from an inner dialogue—my knowledge as an Aboriginal woman. Intuitive understandings of the research phenomenon were brought to the surface through writing my story. This method illuminated the phenomenon under study as I became a more intimate part of the emerging research process and more connected to the participants. I was engaged in varying kinds of relationships with all participants. An autoethnographic approach helped me both participate more in the lifeworld of the participants and bring the participants closer to my theorizing (Bainbridge, 2007).

Mary Whiteside

Project Background

In my study I examined the concept of empowerment for Aboriginal Australians through analysis of the stories of people who had participated in the FWB empowerment program and experienced empowerment. As part of the evaluation process of the program, 47 participants (16 men, 31 women) documented their responses to the program in reflective diaries or through interviews 6 to 12 months after completing the program. Thirty-three of the 47 responses were analyzed using a constructivist grounded theory approach. The emergent theoretical model delineated central interconnected and mutually reinforcing elements that enabled people to affect life changes, even when many aspects of their social context remained constrained. The elements involved particular beliefs, attitudes, skills, and knowledge that manifested in agency. Agency then led to achievements. All elements corresponded with the theoretical literature pertaining to empowerment. The emergent theory placed a greater emphasis on attributes associated with a belief in God, strong personal values, and having the skills to help others. These attributes resonated with Aboriginal concepts of culture and spirituality (Whiteside, Tsey, & Earles, 2011).

Being

I did not come to my PhD study a blank slate or *tabula rasa*. As a social worker and family therapist with some 25 years of experience, I held strong values and theoretical positions. The desire for fairness and equity in society was embedded in my psyche. I was not undertaking research for research’s sake, but hoped that both the process and the outcomes of the research might make some contribution to social change. At face value, as a non-Aboriginal person I was an outsider to the research, inevitably precluded from a full understanding of the values, meanings, and worldviews of those I studied (Hodkinson, 2005). I was acutely aware of this challenge as I embarked on the research. It potentially involved not only my ethnicity but also the power differential associated with my social position and role as a researcher. Yet, as Hodkinson argued, identities are generally less absolute and more complex than would appear on the surface, and social groupings are rarely one dimensional, fixed, and mutually exclusive.

In 2000, I was introduced to the FWB Program. In this year-long program participants meet weekly, providing an environment for people to have different conversations from those they might have experienced in the past. Historical injustices, and their ongoing impact, were acknowledged. However, rather than dwelling in the

problem-saturated past, new and more helpful conversations developed in the context of people's own stories. This helped people to move from self-blame, victimhood, and poor self-esteem to positions of greater strength and control. When I was invited to be part of the empowerment research program, it felt like a natural progression for me. In the period to follow, the FWB Program was implemented and evaluated with a range of Aboriginal groups and organizations as a central strategy within the research program. After 5 years of micro-level program evaluations, there was a rich data base of personal stories of change on which to base further research. These stories enhanced the theoretical understanding of empowerment. The use of existing data to undertake further research respected the need to avoid, when possible, further burdening overresearched people. Building a theoretical understanding of empowerment, based on the experiences of the FWB Program participants, became the subject of my PhD work.

Knowing

In my professional training and work and in my personal life experience, I had long been drawn to constructivist ways of knowing and poststructural and critical perspectives. These explore both agency and the ability of ordinary people to exercise power and influence on the broader social or structural environment. I was trained in narrative and strengths-based approaches to counseling and community practice, approaches which focus on capacity, resilience, and knowledge (as opposed to problems or deficits). I witnessed the potential of these methods to radically transform people's views of themselves and their lives, regardless of background.

Whereas the FWB Program was developed by and for Aboriginal Australians, and was not explicitly identified as a strengths-based program, the strengths approach was manifest in its essence. My research took place within longstanding personal and working relationships with the empowerment research program team, many of whom were study participants themselves. I had trained with some of the participants as a FWB Program coparticipant. Some participants I had trained as a program facilitator and some I had continued to support in their follow-up community work. I had interviewed some participants as part of program evaluations. These relationships were critical to my overcoming some of my personal constraints and added depth and quality to the research.

Through the relationships I built with participants, I learned a great deal about the situation of people's day-to-day lives—their beliefs and attitudes, the problems they faced, and the opportunities and constraints to change. I, too, shared my stories within the groups and found my relationships were strengthened as a result. I built strong, mutually supportive friendships with people who know

about the difficulties I have confronted in my life; for example, the grief and loss I have experienced and the chronic illness of one of my family members. This closeness was remarkable considering the history we had to overcome to build this friendship, evidenced by this comment by one participant:

When I was growing up, we always see the European people. We looked at them in hate, that was the mentality, you know? I didn't know that White people could be good; this sort of changed my way. I can use this Family Wellbeing to make myself better . . . and relate to our European brothers and sisters.

I was the only European person in this group. I was very moved when I realized the impact my stories and friendship had on the beliefs and attitudes of this participant. Despite these friendships, I remained conscious that I might not fully understand people's stories and that my need for learning would be ongoing. A senior Aboriginal member of the empowerment research team took on a role as my cultural mentor. I had periodic meetings with groups of participants through related program activities and I attended Aboriginal research forums in which I became acquainted with others doing Aboriginal research. All of these connections provided opportunities for conversation, reflection, and deeper understanding.

Doing

The multiple lenses of relationships, agency, history, structure, and change were with me as I considered how to undertake the research. Because the research aim was to capture theory contained within rich data, the study was necessarily qualitative. I needed a methodology that enabled people's stories, and the knowledge within them, to be heard. I required methods that would systematically guide a process of building theory without being overly prescriptive. The method also needed to allow me to bring my epistemological and theoretical frameworks to the analytical process.

I examined a range of methodologies in relation to my study needs. Thematic analysis was relevant but the analytical guidelines were less evolved. Content analysis was more useful for confirming preexisting theory than building new theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ezzy, 2002). Narrative analysis lacked a clear description of analytical methods and was less suited to the size of my data set (Feldman, Sköldberg, Brown, & Horner, 2004; Rogan & de Kock, 2005). I was drawn to take a constructivist grounded theory approach because it provided analytical guidance, could embrace a large data set, and appeared appropriate for a study aimed to bring people's experiences of agency to the fore (Charmaz, 2006; Mills et al., 2006).

The use of existing data potentially limited the possibilities for constant comparison and theoretical sampling. However, the size of the data set (47 reflective diaries and interviews collected across four sites) was sufficient to overcome much of this limitation (Goulding, 2005; Whiteside, Mills, & McCalman, 2012). I was able to sample and compare data on the basis of differing sites, genders, ages, and levels of education. I was also able to selectively seek more information within the data set on emergent themes as these became evident. Broad grounded theory guidelines did exist, but I often found the methods difficult to apply in my research situation. For example, I felt a tension between remaining open to the theoretical leads and not imposing myself on the data, yet needing to have some analytical direction. The data contained multiple threads and tangents and initially I felt somewhat rudderless—in uncharted waters and not knowing exactly what I was looking for.

In the end, I had to trust my instincts. I found I naturally drew on the analytical processes I used as a counselor, which helped me to search for and identify people's experiences of change and the meanings they cast around these (Morgan, 2000). I sought the advice of my research friends. Feedback from study participants and Aboriginal researchers indicated that the findings captured their experiences, was validating and confirming, and gave me the confidence to go on. Ultimately it was the being and the knowing that supported the research process.

Janya McCalman

Project Background

In my study I used a three-part research approach to describe the untold history of FWB program transfer, theorize the process underlying program transfer, and determine the significance of the theory. To understand the context of the program transfer, I drew on historical and evaluative published papers, reports, and project documents. I constructed a historical account of program transfer, including the agents of change, the extent of program transfer and adaptation, and the conditions that had enabled and constrained program transfer. I drew on the accounts of people who had been active in transferring FWB to 56 sites across Australia since the program's start in 1993 to theorize the process of program transfer. I then compared the theoretical model identified in the study with other knowledge for action models to establish the implications of the theory of program transfer for practice and broader policy.

The process and rationale underlying program transfer was identified as embracing relatedness to support inside-out empowerment. The core process, embracing relatedness, referred to a three-dimensional dynamic process in

which organizations and individual agents engaged in program transfer by connecting with their purpose, ethical practice, and development; other organizations and individuals; and broader structural factors. Program transfer required all three elements to be operating at both organizational and individual levels. Embracing relatedness involved four components: establishing credibility and trust, taking control to make choices, listening and responding, and adding value. Supporting inside-out empowerment was the core construct and referred to a situation in which organizations and individuals supported Aboriginal people's participation, responsibility for, and control of their own affairs. Supporting empowerment is inside-out because it starts by prompting the individual to address his or her own issues of purpose, ethical practice, and development, and then works outward in a ripple effect to family members, organizations, communities, and ultimately Australian society at large.

Being

Every researcher holds preconceptions about how the world works, which might unknowingly influence what we focus on and how we make sense of research phenomena (Charmaz, 2006). As a non-Indigenous New Zealander from a middle-class educated family, I learned early that there were contradictions inherent in what was promoted as an egalitarian and universally prosperous society, having "reap[ed] the rewards of beneficent colonization" (Huygens, 2007, p. 42) to achieve harmonious race relations, full employment, the third-highest standard of living in the world, and free education to the university level (Nolan, 2007). As Huygens described it, such a "culturally blind or colo[r] blind community" imbued "racis[m] in more subtle ways than an overtly hostile one" (2007, p. 10). Conducting research in Aboriginal Australian settings required an ongoing and sometimes uncomfortable process of deconstructing these contradictory learned colonial discourses.

O'Neil Green et al. (2007) suggested that as researchers we can improve our cultural competency with respect to race and ethnicity by gaining awareness of our own assumptions, values, and biases with respect to diverse populations or issues relevant to the study. My early commitment to fair play led to situations in which social injustices needed to be identified, acknowledged, and discussed, and solutions needed to be cooperatively found if we were to move ahead as a healthy society. I was interested in a holistic view of health and well-being, particularly the underrecognized spiritual, emotional, and mental aspects. Working as a health-promotion practitioner since the early 1990s, I attempted to implement strengths-based processes to "enable people to increase control over the determinants of health and thereby improve their health" (World Health

Organization, 1986, p.1). In Aboriginal research contexts, this meant working in collaboration with Aboriginal people and using research to “value-add” to priorities and initiatives identified by Aboriginal people.

Knowing

Achieving intimate familiarity with the studied phenomenon was one strategy suggested by Charmaz (2006) for revealing the researcher’s preconceptions. Like Whiteside, I had long worked in the empowerment research program at James Cook University and built respectful relationships with Aboriginal community-based and university empowerment researchers. Through participatory action research, we had sought to increase knowledge and understanding of family violence, suicide prevention, settlement sustainability, men’s and women’s health, youth crime prevention, cultural dance, and values-based capacity building. This method put Indigenous values at the center of the research process and honored traditional and Indigenous knowledge, views, and values. This meant that Indigenous people and communities controlled what, why, how, and when research was done, as well as how it was used. Indigenous participation and decision making was therefore required throughout all parts of the research project (Dunbar et al., 2002).

Motivated by the desire of Aboriginal community research partners to network, transfer programs, and share their knowledge and experiences with other Aboriginal communities, the goal of my PhD study was to draw on these extant research relationships to theorize the factors and processes critical to the successful transfer of an Aboriginal empowerment program. The FWB Program provided an excellent example of Aboriginal-led program transfer, having been sustained for 19 years, transferred to Aboriginal organizations and communities across Australia, and adapted for diverse health, well-being, and development issues. It was also adapted for groups from school children to adults. My intention was to both better understand the opportunities and challenges in such processes, and to theorize the success factors to improve practice and policy. I had been involved with the North Queensland implementation of this program for several years and was able to draw on preexisting research relationships in my initial sampling.

As a non-Aboriginal researcher, I sought to be “an allied other” (Denzin, 2007, p. 457), respecting Aboriginal epistemologies, while acknowledging that there were Aboriginal knowledges I could not comprehend (Christie, 2006). For example, an Aboriginal research colleague described the influence of social, historical, and cultural forces on Aboriginal knowledge sharing:

Knowledge sharing for Aboriginal people is much deeper, because if you take knowledge to

other places, you will have family connections in most of those places. You talk and find out the connections. So it goes much deeper. Most people find family members. Things like that quickly open up relationships and trust in communities; like you’re one of them—one of the lost sheep. (Father Les Baird, personal communication, 2009)

Therefore, my study was a “trace of a knowledge production episode” (Michael Christie, personal communication, 2010) based on my interpretation of research participants’ constructions of their experiences of program transfer.

Doing

Using constructivist grounded theory methods, I theorized from interviews with 18 Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal FWB Program agents, sampled from varied roles in the program transfer process (Charmaz, 2006; Mills et al., 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Interviews were informal and open ended. I asked participants to tell their stories of involvement with the FWB Program and its transfer and adaptation. I coded interview transcripts using NVivo computer software (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2010) to develop initial codes, then sorted codes manually as a tactile and flexible way by placing categories into relationship with others for intermediate and advanced analysis (Birks & Mills, 2010; Charmaz, 2006).

I also developed a discrete historical account of the broader structural factors of interest in the research inquiry. Understanding the context required a systematic historical reconstruction and analysis of FWB program transfer. This analysis included the broader arenas within which program transfer had been conducted, as well as the broader conditions influencing FWB transfer. Based on the feedback from research respondents, I recognized that telling the story of the big picture not only described the contextual setting for program transfer, but also did justice to the efforts of those involved.

Explicit consideration of the variation in program transfer across settings made it challenging to come to a coherent storyline which was both trustworthy and significant (Charmaz, 2005). Decolonizing theorists such as Tuhiwai Smith (1999) placed importance on the heterogeneity of Aboriginal communities. Thus, “situated analytic claims making and the avoidance of overgeneralisation and overabstraction” (Clarke, 2005, p. 29) became important. I therefore wrestled with the opposing processes of describing the variance between the locally situated episodes and theorizing a single process of program transfer. To explore the considerable variation across developmental phases, geographical location, type and sector of organization, setting and group, and issues, I used situational analysis mapping exercises (Clarke, 2005; Clarke & Friese, 2007).

Table 1. Integrating Being, Knowing, and Doing

| Ways of Being, Knowing, and Doing | Aboriginal Research Methodologies | Phronesis | Constructivist Grounded Theory |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Being | Inseparable nature of ways of knowing and being | How one should act ethically in certain situations; importance placed on experience of the application of practical wisdom | Positioning the researcher to determine preconceptions |
| Knowing | Strongly asserts the validity of Aboriginal people's diverse and unique ontologies and epistemologies in the construction of knowledge Centers the concerns of Aboriginal people Attends carefully to Aboriginal voices, promoting them as experts in their own lives | Three different types of knowledge need to operate in experiencing our relatedness to the world; the most important task of social science studies is to develop society's value rationality vis-à-vis its scientific and technical rationality | Assumes the relativism of multiple social realities Recognizes people are active participants in shaping and managing their lives Recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims toward interpretive understanding of subjects' meanings |
| Doing | Context-dependent based on Aboriginal people's resolves in life Promotes Aboriginal ownership and empowerment in the process and benefits to the research population Aims for mutual trust and respect in the research relationship; ethics of practice and the practice of ethics in everyday action Positions researcher and researched as partners with analysis and interpretations of findings conducted through collaboration and negotiation of meaning Invests in phenomena already working Promotes sustainability | Promotes responsive and innovative ethical research practice, linking action and change Aims for pragmatism (a workable ethical course of action) that focuses on context (localized Aboriginal knowledge) and responds to the variable or particular Places a premium on gaining insights into the experiences of Aboriginal populations and how Indigeneity saturates the manifestation of the research phenomenon Analysis focuses on clarifying values, interests, and power relations between the researchers and those with whom we collaborate Identifies how current relations of power could be altered and incorporate new practices to improve outcomes for both groups | Builds a theory from concepts derived from data gathered from persons who are living with and experiencing the situations under study Requires a capacity to listen carefully to study participants, enabling the researcher to discover their central concern and the basic process facilitating that concern Importance of cultural influences can either be framed within the research question or allowed to emerge as a significant dimension, construct, or property during analysis Intimately attends to context by turning away from acontextual description Designed to explore and understand the nature of complex social phenomena; in particular, phenomena about which little is known |

Ultimately, the use of situational analysis increased my confidence in the trustworthiness of the theoretical model by describing how program transfer played out across diverse situations.

The theoretical model identified in the study was consistent with other knowledge for action models described in the international and Aboriginal Australian health literature. However, it extended these models in the Aboriginal Australian context by providing a new conceptual rendering of three-way relatedness as a process for transferring programs. These findings have implications for equity and social justice, because they confirm the efficacy of supporting and adding value to long-term Aboriginal initiatives and multiagent networks and partnerships.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the works of Aboriginal researchers such as Tuhiwai Smith (1999, 2005), Bishop (2005), and others, Denzin (2007) asserted that without modification, grounded theory would not work in Aboriginal settings. Influenced by an empowerment research program based in North Queensland, each of us struggled to customize grounded theory approaches to Aboriginal research

contexts within our doctoral studies. Difficulties were based on researcher position, research questions, and data sources. Using constructivist grounded theory methods offered an opportunity for researchers and participants to produce change by working together in a more equitable relationship. Our underlying philosophical position was the most important element.

A phronetic research approach incorporating a resilient model of research, and used in conjunction with grounded theory methods, was effective in promoting a contextual, workable, ethical course of action and in decolonizing our research practices. This responsiveness and sensitivity to context, which also fulfilled the requirements of grounded theory methods, facilitated the process by keeping the analysis immersed in participants' lived experiences. It captured the meaning of data through reiterative cycles of theoretical sampling, coding, and constant comparative method. As summarized in Table 1, we drew out categories between the three research projects to summarize how we integrated our being, knowing, and doing within the constructs of Aboriginal research methodologies, phronesis, and constructivist grounded theory.

Researchers in social science inquiry are confronted with an array of choices "about how each of us wants to

live the life of a social inquirer” (Schwandt, 2000, p. 205). Like Aristotle, we assumed that the most important task of social science studies was to develop society’s value rationality vis-à-vis its scientific and technical rationality (Flyvbjerg, 2001). We recommended a method of bringing ethics, values, and power into the mix of research activities by using contextually sensitive planning and practice that does not treat the issue in terms of “universal characteristics that are independent of history, context and agency” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2000, p. 229).

We have described how the dimensions of an ontological and epistemological premise informed an ethics of responsibility and care. In agreement with Flyvbjerg (2001), we recognized three different types of knowledge that needed to operate in experiencing our relatedness to the world. We acknowledged that all knowledge levels needed to be present to create higher-functioning societies and effective research practices. We described how the three levels of knowledge—ways of being, knowing, and doing—worked to enrich social science research, particularly research conducted with Aboriginal partners in the coconstruction of knowledge.

The approach engaged Aboriginal communities by being directly responsive to their needs and focused on their own solutions to implement specifically tailored actions. The approach produced grounded knowledge that substantially contributed to Aboriginal aspirations of self-determination and empowerment. The imperative for all researchers is to think beyond simple paradigmatic shifts. Researchers need to critically reflect on their methods of practice to incorporate an underlying practice of ethics that aligns with decolonizing visions and alternate productions of knowledge.

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