

Participatory research in challenging circumstances

Lessons with a rural Aboriginal program

The evaluation of a crime prevention program for Aboriginal boys in a rural setting (Tirkandi Inaburra Cultural and Development Centre) faced a number of challenges, such as geographic distance, a modest budget, and the need for culturally appropriate and sustainable methods that capture a multitude of program effects while minimising the burden of data collection.

Literature suggests the value of participatory methods. However, would this approach work in these circumstances? Would it threaten the probity of the evaluation?

This article describes a case study of participatory methodology used in challenging circumstances and considers the factors that contributed to its successful implementation. These included mutual respect, willingness to work together, high capacity within Tirkandi Inaburra, funding-body support for a participatory approach, a common concern for the program's mission, and strategies for ensuring probity.

It is recommended that funding bodies accommodate the resource implications involved in developing relationships and accommodate changes to research plans that can be necessary for genuine participation.

Introduction

There is substantial literature on the value of participatory research methods, but few demonstrated case studies from which researchers can draw lessons. This article describes the application of a participatory approach with an Aboriginal organisation in challenging circumstances.

The Tirkandi Inaburra Cultural and Development Centre (TI) is an Aboriginal community-controlled program that aims to reduce the risk of program participants becoming involved in the criminal justice system. Program participants are 12- to 15-year-old Aboriginal boys from across a catchment area that encompasses central southern New South Wales (NSW). TI is funded by the NSW Attorney General's Department (AGD) as a demonstration project and opened its doors to the first intake of

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participants in January 2006. In 2006, the AGD sought tenders from organisations: (1) to assist TI in its conceptualisation and development of data collection tools for ongoing monitoring; and (2) to conduct an outcomes study that would assess the effectiveness of TI in achieving its objectives for participants, particularly in relation to education, social integration and involvement in the criminal justice system. The research project is important for both program development and for funding decisions. Information from the evaluation aims to contribute to decisions on funding of the program and the possible expansion of the program to other sites in NSW.

In developing a research protocol to meet the AGD's needs, a number of challenges were identified. Foremost of these challenges were two issues related to geographic distance. First, the Chief Investigator was based in Sydney, 600 kilometres from the site of the TI program. This suggested that on-site data collection and liaison with program staff would be a costly endeavour. Second, the homes of the program participants were geographically dispersed across communities up to 600 kilometres from the TI site, so follow-up would be difficult.

The evaluation faced numerous additional challenges. One was ensuring the evaluation was culturally appropriate. The program participants and most staff were Aboriginal, whereas the Chief Investigator was not. The program participants were young (12 to 15 years), geographically dispersed and generally had a history of problem behaviours, so engagement, obtaining informed consent and follow-up was likely to be difficult. In addition, the research brief stipulated that evaluation and monitoring should continue after the evaluation was completed, so the methods and instruments needed to be sustainable. The evaluation needed to capture a multitude of possible program effects while minimising the burden of the data collection on program participants and TI staff members. Finally, the research budget was small, so monetary solutions to these challenges (e.g. travel and an on-site research team) were not possible.

It was envisioned that a participatory research approach in which the program being evaluated was active in all stages of the research would help to address the challenges listed above. Involving TI staff in research design would hopefully ensure that the evaluation was appropriate and captured the domains of interest. In addition, data collection by TI staff would reduce costs and embed the data collection methods in the program's routine.

There is an extensive literature on the benefits of participatory research methods (outlined below), particularly with marginalised communities (Power 2002) and with Aboriginal communities (Fisher & Ball 2003) suggesting that it was an appropriate approach. Nevertheless, in planning the research, it was not certain that participatory methods would be feasible or effective. A number of problems could arise. For example, would the geographic distance between the researchers and the program

site impede authentic participation? Would program staff be willing and able to participate in the research? Would involving program staff in data collection with minimal on-site supervision affect the probity of the evaluation?

In this paper, we report on how a participatory research approach was implemented in a situation that was not highly conducive to such a collaborative approach. We identify strategies we used to make the approach work as well as factors that fortuitously aided the process. While there is substantial literature on the value of participatory research and possible problems, there are few reports on the use of participatory research in challenging conditions. We go on to consider how researchers and funding bodies can reduce the risk associated with participatory research in such conditions.

Participatory research

The following section contains a brief overview of participatory research literature.

What is participatory research?

The term 'participatory research' (PR) can refer to a wide range of research practices that might also be described as collaborative, cooperative or empowering. As discussed by Patton (2002), the fundamental element of PR is a 'commitment to involving people in the setting being studied as co-inquirers'. While actual methods can vary, a number of principles of genuine PR have been identified by Patton. These include:

- involving participants by encouraging and teaching inquiry logic and skills
- participants owning the research—participation is real, not token
- participants work as a group, the researcher supports group cohesion and functioning
- all aspects of the research are conducted in ways that are meaningful and understood by the participants
- the researcher acts as a facilitator, collaborator and resource; participants are co-equal
- the researcher recognises and values the views and skills of the participants and works to help participants recognise their own and each other's expertise
- status and power differences between researcher and participants are minimised.

These principles guide both what is carried out during PR and the manner in which it is performed.

Reasons for using participatory approaches

PR is a breakaway from the tradition of 'experts' conducting research *on* people (Levin 1993). Levin identified three aims of PR:

- to increase the use of the findings by those involved
 - to ground the data in participants' perspectives
 - to mobilise social action.
- Other researchers have identified additional benefits such as:
- the ability to teach inquiry logic and skills (Patton 2002)
 - cost-effectiveness (Chambers & Mayoux 2004).

Issues in conducting participatory research

While PR has potential benefits, it also has potential problems. For example, Lennie (2006) identified the following issues:

- ensuring stakeholder representativeness
- managing conflicting agenda
- naive assumptions about participation leading to empowerment
- the need for time and resources to develop relationships.

Other issues that require consideration include:

- ensuring genuine participation
- probity
- intellectual property.

These are discussed briefly below.

Ensuring genuine participation

An often-discussed issue in relation to PR is the level of participation. A number of models have been published to represent the range of possible levels of participation from non-participation to tokenism to empowerment (Cornwall & Jewkes 1995). In the 1960s, Sherry Arnstein conceptualised eight levels of participation from non-participation to tokenism to citizen power (Arnstein 1969). More recently, and drawing on Biggs (1989), Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) identified four levels of ascending participation; contractual, consultative, collaborative and collegiate. The former types of participation they describe as being 'shallow', while the latter types are identified as 'deeper' participation in which the researchers relinquish more control to the participants. The aim of genuine participation then is to move towards deeper participation.

Chambers and Mayoux (2004) argued that it cannot be assumed that participants will benefit or be empowered by participatory approaches. They claimed that in some instances participants will actually bear a cost or burden as a result of their participation. For example, people's enthusiasm might inadvertently cause them to reveal sensitive information that could be harmful to themselves or their community (Chambers & Mayoux 2004). Further, they noted that power relations need to be considered but not just between the researchers

and the researched, but also between participants themselves (Chambers & Mayoux 2004). This can occur when one participant dominates the process, intimidating other participants and thereby skewing representativeness of the research. Similarly, Fisher and Ball (2003) identified the possibility of a backlash if a community perceives the 'participatory' aspect to be superficial.

Ensuring stakeholder representativeness

As discussed by Farrington (1997), participation is not only about *depth* (how people are involved) but also about *breadth* (who is involved). Some advantages of broadly involving stakeholders are that the research may be perceived as being more legitimate, it may build social capital and can more readily overcome conflicts. However, the disadvantages may include a proportionally larger expenditure of time and resources as well as the potential to generate more conflict if the representation is too broad (Koontz & Johnson 2004). De Lancer Julnes (2001) emphasises that diverse stakeholder representation is essential to successful participatory evaluation but cites a number of potential problems that can arise when consultation is wide and stakeholders are broadly involved. De Lancer Julnes warns of the potential for certain voices to dominate others, and for narrow agendas to be promoted to the detriment of others.

Managing conflicting agendas

Gregory points out that while power almost always underpins participatory evaluation, it is often ignored (Gregory 2000, cited in Lennie 2006). The conflicting agenda and perspectives that individual stakeholders and groups bring to an evaluation can impede its effectiveness. The more people are involved in a project, and the more deeply they are involved, the more ideas and agenda there are to be managed. Accordingly, communication is even more important in larger research projects with large numbers of stakeholders, such as the TI evaluation.

The need for time and resources to develop relationships

Lennie (2006) argued that there is a need for sufficient time and resources to be invested for the participatory method to succeed. This is particularly important in the early stages of the process. Some participants might not be familiar with the method or might think that the evaluation could have ramifications for funding or their employment (Lennie 2006). Further, Letiecq and Bailey (2004) explained that when the non-Indigenous researchers are physically separated, these investments are crucial for successful PR.

Probity

Some literature has thrown doubt on the validity of participatory approaches, claiming that it is biased and political (Cornwall & Jewkes 1995). However, others have argued that the participatory approach is more rigorous because it acknowledges more overtly its intentions to all participants—

researchers and observers (David 2002). Either argument could have substance, depending on how the approach is implemented.

Intellectual property

The participatory methodology raises the question of who owns the intellectual property from the research. Chambers has commented that, 'in good PRA [participatory rural appraisal] practice there is a tradition that the data—the maps, matrices and diagrams—belong to those who created them' (Chambers & Mayoux 2004, p. 16). The principle that intellectual property generated from the study of a particular group should remain under the control of that group is linked to the recognition of the tradition of power relations, and the need to address this (Fitzgerald 2005). Guidelines for research with Indigenous peoples affirm this principle; for example, see the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies' (AIATSIS) *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies* (2000). This can be challenging if there is a tension between the Indigenous participants' requirement for empowerment, and the obligations of the researcher to report results.

PR with Indigenous peoples

PR has been used extensively with Indigenous populations around the world, including Australia, New Zealand, the United States of America and Canada (Caldwell et al. 2005; Couzos et al. 2005; Fitzgerald 2005; Kowal, Anderson, & Bailie 2005; Letiecq & Bailey 2004). PR that is consistent with the principles outlined above is recommended by Indigenous research guidelines such as those of the AIATSIS (2000), the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council (AHMRC 2007) and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC 2003). These guidelines also emphasise the need to acknowledge historical disempowerment by ensuring there be a benefit to the community, reciprocity between the researcher and researched, and most importantly, community control over data produced.

Current literature notes the importance of identifying the tradition of power differentials between the researcher and the researched and identifies the need to lessen the impact of this. For example, Fitzgerald argued that 'the goal is not to replicate these power relationships but to challenge and change them and work towards a "cross-cultural competency"' (Fitzgerald 2005, p. 18). Participatory approaches can address an Indigenous community's need for empowerment through research. Conversely, the non-Indigenous academic relies on the Indigenous participant(s) to allow 'cross-cultural competency' to be realised.

As noted by Chambers (1997), PR with remote or rural communities is difficult given that most academics are urban-based. The physical distance between the researchers and the researched can create problems, even if they are recognised and attempts are made to compensate by adopting a participatory methodology. A project that

found logistical constraints was conducted on an American Indian reservation, which was located approximately 300 miles from the university base of the academic researchers (Letiecq & Bailey 2004, p. 354). While visits were made to the research site, they were infrequent due to constraints on time and resources and additionally restricted by adverse weather conditions. Letiecq and Bailey (2004) noted that while contact via telephone and email allowed communication with local project staff, these technologies could not substitute for face-to-face interaction. Such interaction, they argued, is essential for developing relationships 'above and beyond professional relationships' (Letiecq & Bailey 2004, p. 354) or to meet the requirement of 'reciprocity' that such cross-cultural projects demand.

Thus, the literature suggests that PR can be a valuable approach, but is susceptible to a range of possible problems. Given the challenges to the research project discussed here, the feasibility, value and probity of the PR approach were uncertain. In the next part of this article we go on to describe how we used a participatory approach despite geographic distance and limited resources, the benefits obtained by using a participatory approach, and the factors that contributed to the feasibility, value and probity of the approach.

Participatory methods in the current study

In this section, the processes, outputs and problems of the participatory approach in our study are outlined. To reiterate, the obstacles to the approach working included the small budget for travel for face-to-face meetings and on-site observation, and the geographic distance between the research team and the program being evaluated. Program participants were a marginalised group: young, rural, Aboriginal boys with behavioural and literacy problems. The program was run by an Aboriginal community with whom the research team had no prior relationships. The factors that contributed to the success of the approach in this situation are discussed below.

Processes and outputs

The current study included a participatory approach from its inception. An outline for a study was presented to the funding body with a participatory approach proposed for developing the research. Consequently, while the study was imposed on TI by its funding body, the funding body allowed a participatory approach to be used.

In terms of breadth of participation, consultation occurred with the TI Board, TI Manager, TI staff, the funding body (AGD) and TI participants ('boys'). Consultation on research design with the parents of the boys could not be conducted due to resource constraints. Consultation with the boys by research staff was minimal for the same reason, and was restricted to a discussion about a draft questionnaire. Otherwise, the research team was reliant on the TI

Manager and staff to inform the project regarding the parents' and the boys' perspectives.

Consultations with others were conducted via workshops and meetings. In these meetings, the key domains of interest to the evaluation, the research methods, instrument design and the study results were discussed. All participants contributed to discussion, and decision-making was based on group consensus. Meetings necessitated research staff travel by aeroplane to a regional airport and a drive of one-and-a-half hours to a purpose-built facility in a rural setting.

Further (and frequent) collaboration occurred between the researchers and the TI Manager and Case Manager via telephone and email.

Specific immediate outcomes of the collaborations were:

- identification of important domains for measurement
 - instrument design
 - TI staff involvement in obtaining informed consent
 - TI staff involvement in data collection
 - TI staff priming participants for follow-up
 - interpretation of the study results
 - a joint presentation by the Chief Investigator and the TI Executive Officer at the Australian Social Policy Conference
 - this journal article.
- Anticipated longer term outcomes are:
- TI will be able to monitor and evaluate itself better after the evaluation is completed
 - TI will own the report when it is released and be more receptive to it as a tool for improvement than if they had had no involvement in the study design and implementation
 - TI will understand the implications of the report better than if they had no involvement in the study design, analysis and reporting.

Problems

While the participatory approach has many benefits, as identified in the literature and above in the current study, there were two outcomes that were problematic, both of which relate to the problem of needing sufficient flexibility and resources to incorporate genuinely the ideas of the participants.

First, there was a tendency for the evaluation to expand beyond the resources because the more people involved, the longer the wish list. While it is the role of project management to ensure the research plan does not exceed the budget, this was a difficult task because the budget was small relative to the research requirements. Consequently, the research team undertook a substantial amount of work that was not funded.

These changes did not happen just at the beginning of the project. There was a tendency to make changes to the research plan after ethics approval had been obtained. This meant repeated requests to the ethics committee for approval for the changes, which took a large amount of (unfunded) time. Again, it is the role of the project manager to ensure a project adheres to its plan. However, to have done so rigidly would have been to ignore the feedback from TI participants about the need for changes, which would have damaged relationships as well as the study quality.

While the problem of distance was addressed via frequent telephone and email contacts, it cannot be said that distance had no impact. In comparison with previous experience with a similar evaluation in which the Chief Investigator had a desk on-site (Spooner, Mattick & Noffs 2001), there was much less opportunity in this study to develop relationships with participants and staff and to observe program implementation. Further, monitoring of program staff in the collection of consent and data was hampered. An on-site evaluator could have easily checked that procedures were being implemented correctly. As off-site evaluators, we were reliant on telephone and email to monitor progress. However, program staff were busy with program implementation and often unavailable to talk with the research team. As noted above, distance and limited budget also prevented extensive involvement of the program participants and other stakeholders (in particular parents/guardians and people who referred boys to the program, e.g. school teachers and juvenile justice officers) in the study design.

Another potential problem related to probity. For budgetary reasons, it was impossible for the research team to recruit participants, explain the study and obtain consent or to collect the baseline and post-test data. These tasks were performed by the TI Case Manager and not supervised by the researchers. While data collection by TI staff was consistent with notions of ensuring sustainability of the data collection process, it does raise concerns about the probity of the study.

However, for a number of reasons, we argue that probity has not been sacrificed. First, the declared interest of the TI Manager, and the impression of the researchers, was that TI had a stake in ensuring probity as they wanted to know the truth about the effectiveness of their program and wanted to ensure that the evaluation was taken seriously by the funding body and others. Further, the evaluation instruments involved multiple-choice questions that allowed the participant himself to circle the answer that best described his feelings and/or situation. TI staff did not conduct all data collection. An independent observer was employed to observe program implementation for four days and follow-up interviews were conducted by independent researchers. Any discrepancy between data collected by TI and data collected by researchers would have suggested a potential problem with probity. Finally,

a representative of the funding body, who has a clear interest in probity, was one of the participants in the research process (attending meetings on research design). So, it is unlikely that the participatory approach has compromised the probity of this study.

Factors contributing to the feasibility of this participatory project

Given the challenges to participatory research outlined above, it was quite possible that the approach might not have been a productive one. Poor relationships could have developed with one side blaming the other for problems. In addition, miscommunication could have resulted in major mistakes, conflicting agenda might not have been resolved and program staff might have been unable to contribute. Yet, the approach worked well, as indicated by the successful achievement of tasks (research design and data collection). The factors that appear to have contributed to this success were:

- mutual respect
- willingness to work together
- support from the funding body for the participatory approach
- high capacity to collaborate within the organisation—the Manager and Case Manager already had well-developed skills relevant to designing, implementing and analysing research
- common concern for the plight of Indigenous youth and the necessity to review a model objectively, which might lead to breaking the cycle of involvement for Indigenous youth in the criminal justice system
- creation of a research consortium with one local person (who understood rural issues) and one Indigenous researcher (who understood cultural issues).

While the Chief Investigator was able to create a research consortium that facilitated a participatory approach, the researchers had no prior knowledge that the other facilitating factors existed. In other words, the approach was a risky one.

Conclusions

The success of the participatory process was not evaluated formally. Rather, this article represents the shared learnings from the process, from the combined perspectives of the researchers and the TI Manager. While the research literature suggested that the participatory approach is particularly difficult when resources and geographic distance are barriers to building relationships, our experience has been that these barriers need not be insurmountable. With an organisation willing and able to be active research partners, and researchers willing to go the extra mile, PR can be successful. However, while we managed in these difficult conditions, and many others have done so before us, this was the result of dedicated individuals rather than adequate funding.

In the current environment of government tendering for research projects in a competitive manner, researchers are under pressure to submit proposals that aim to achieve ambitious objectives with minimal budgets. The time frames for preparing tenders are generally short (weeks rather than months) and the research team often has no prior knowledge of, or relationship with, the organisation to be ‘researched’. Accordingly, the researcher often does not know the capacity or willingness of the organisation to participate. Our recommendations for researchers tendering for projects are to:

- conduct background research on the organisation or group to be researched in order to identify their willingness and capacity to collaborate
- ensure the budget enables travel and time for building relationships and working together
- ensure the budget and time frame have flexibility to incorporate changes, as suggested by research participants.

It is recognised that time and budgetary pressures make the implementation of these recommendations difficult. To support researchers and evaluators in these tasks, we recommend that funders:

- recognise the value of participatory research/evaluation
- allow funding and timelines that allow for genuine collaboration and participation
- participate—be part of the team.

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