

Bicultural issues in Research

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In undertaking cross-cultural research over the past few years with children and teenagers, particularly Maori and Samoans, I have learned a number of valuable lessons - points which I had not found in the literature on research method. Each of these points challenged some aspect of accepted research practice and in turn raises an issue of ethics, the common theme being the tendency to practice monoculturally without realising it. Due to limitations of space, I wish to focus here on just a few aspects of interview and questionnaire research with young people, and in particular on issues of informed consent and the validity, representativeness and "ownership" of research, especially as they affect Maori.

Representativeness

Typically samples of children and teenagers surveyed in Aotearoa, as elsewhere, have been drawn from schools, for entirely pragmatic reasons - schools provide "captive" populations. Aside from the consent issue (discussed later), sampling young people in schools means that, by default, the final sample is more likely to consist of those who do attend school regularly.

Because of higher rates of non-attendance amongst Maori than Pakeha, it is likely that the data obtained will be less representative not only of Maori but specifically of those Maori who do not "fit into the system" - people whose opinions, perhaps more than others', we need to be attending to if social science is to provide any challenge whatsoever to the mainstream.

Relevance

Where research is framed by Pakeha, there is a constant risk that the research will not generate information which is truly representative of what

Maori, or any other ethnocultural group, actually believe or even find relevant. This problem of relevance has been raised also in relation to the gender bias in "malestream" research (e.g. Wallston & Grady, 1985), and applies to any cultural or sub-cultural difference between researcher and researched.

Where the researcher is not a usual member of the culture being researched, there is a constant risk of both misinterpretation and "hypothesis-proving", not only because answers may be misunderstood, but also because of either asking inappropriate questions or failing to ask appropriate ones, through cultural ignorance.

More than once I have been alerted to my own failure to ask ethnoculturally relevant questions in my research, through some astute and assertive, but unsolicited, comment by a Maori or Samoan participant. I have found that these kinds of comments are more likely within interview research than in questionnaires, or where a free-response approach is used in a questionnaire rather than a checklist¹. The more prescribed the research format, the less welcome participants feel to make comments on the research instrument, even where they may be quite offended by it (Oliver, 1992).

Nonetheless, thanks to the graphic forthrightness of some teenagers, participants in my research have sometimes made it clear, through both solicited and unsolicited remarks on questionnaires, that they have been annoyed by what they identify as racism in the questioning. For example, one boy who responded to a questionnaire on nuclear issues wrote across the entire third page, "Why have you only asked about this nuclear shit? it's white man's stuff, and NOT our problem". Another Maori teenager in the same survey, responding to a question about his hopes

¹ Checklists designed by Pakeha researchers can also inadvertently and inaccurately perpetuate derogatory ethnic stereotypes (Oliver & Vaughan, 1991).

for the future, wrote, "That I don't have to answer any more of these stupid questionnaires". Both of these comments also raise the issue of participant consent.

It is vital that the process of research be empowering for participants and not coerce them into answering irrelevant questions. For these reasons, I believe the forced-choice or checklist questionnaire approach is not appropriate to investigating many social issues, especially with young people and ethnocultural minorities.

Participant consent

The danger of researcher bias through the framing of the research questions becomes greater where the research is carried out with people who are likely to feel obliged to participate, even though they do not want to. Although research ethics practices now typically require that research with "human subjects" must incorporate both informed consent and an offer to withdraw from the research at any time, in practice children and teenagers, particularly in the school setting where compliance is required and non-compliance punished, may feel obliged to participate. It may take an act of substantial courage to raise one's hand in front of a classroom of peers, plus the teacher and a clearly important visiting researcher, to ask to be exempt. Maori children, I believe, are much more likely than Pakeha to be whakama in that context.

Maori people, it seems, have been used for research too often without proper regard to their rights as participants (Jackson, 1988), simply because of their ready availability in institutions, including schools and prisons, and their unwillingness to refuse an apparent authority figure.

We need to recognize the potentially coercive power with accompanies our status as researchers, and Pakeha, and ensure that our approaches to potential participants incorporate **genuine** opportunities not to participate.

Preference for group interviews

In an interview study undertaken in 1987 I discovered some strong cultural (ethnic) and subcultural (teenage) preferences for group rather than individual interviews, a preference voiced by almost 20% of the teenage students who volunteered for

the study, and disproportionately by Maori. All of these students had already agreed to be interviewed when asked initially by their teacher. However when I spoke to them, they gave various reasons for not wanting to talk with me alone. One Maori boy said that he didn't think he could give the best answers without checking out his own ideas first with others. One Maori girl declined to be involved when I said that I preferred to talk with her just by herself, and another at the same school simply disappeared home rather than have to show up and explain that she would rather not be involved.

These students didn't want to be joined necessarily by other Maori, but just preferred to have some "mates" with them. One Samoan boy also explained to me that

...I don't feel safe in little groups. Like when you do things, you don't want to be the only one doing it in case it's not safe, so you want to be with a big group rather than a little one. [*Is that anything to do with your culture (Samoan)?*] Yes, it is. It's that the family is the main thing in your life. Everyone is your brother and sister and you're used to doing things as a big group. (Moses, 17)

Most of these students were persuaded, as was I at the time, with the reasoning that the individuality of their ideas might become biased by hearing those of another person. It is a gauge of my own development and experience as a feminist researcher that I now see more advantages than disadvantages to group interviews, and consider the issue of bias irrelevant.

However the request of some young people, and particularly Maori, to have friends present once again raises the issue of the implicit power relationship between researcher and researched, adult and child, Pakeha and Maori. Just as most organizations now recognize the right of an interviewee to whanau support, I believe this right should be recognised in research, along with the right to withdraw from the research.

"Data ownership" vs taonga

Repeatedly in my research I have met people who report participating in research previously and receiving no feedback about the outcomes. This experience frequently makes people reluctant to be involved in further research. While psychol-

ogy has recognized the question of data ownership as a property issue (Greenberg & Folger, 1988), for the most part it has not recognized the use and interpretation of research participants' knowledge and ideas as an ethical issue.

Ironically psychology recognizes that plagiarism amongst the professional and student communities is both unethical and illegal, yet it does not formally afford the same rights to research participants to retain ownership over their own ideas. Assurances of confidentiality are, in fact, guarantees of anonymity, and not a guarantee that the information gleaned will not be passed on to others, since publishing the information is a prime purpose of most social science research.

While this is an issue with all research, regardless of the ethnicity of researcher or researched, it becomes a bicultural issue when the researchers, and particularly those who are in control of the research as distinct from those carrying it out, are much more likely to be Pakeha, raising the potential for misinterpretation of data.

Some areas of psychology do recognize the right to retain one's ideas and knowledge. Feminist and Maori psychology, and to some extent community psychology, all see the researcher as an agent of the researched, undertaking research for them and ensuring that the outcomes remain with them.

Maori psychology sees people's knowledge and ideas as *taonga*, or treasures, which belong to the people and must not be removed or handed on to others without express approval. Feminist psychology builds into its method the necessary involvement of the researched in data interpretation and data use - the information remains with the researched (Mies, 1983). There are many ways in which research information can be shared to the benefit of both researcher and researched. In essence this is simply an issue of basic respect - respect for the value of participants' time and effort in assisting research (without which participation the research would not, of course, be possible), and recognition that people understand themselves better than any researcher can. Psychology needs to recognize that taking information from participants and not returning it to them is unethical, and that participants have a entitlement to be informed of the interpretations which are being placed on their willingly volunteered knowledge and ideas.

Conclusions

Although social scientists are becoming more careful in providing ethical protections (e.g. Sieber and Stanley's (1988) taxonomy of ethical issues in psychological research), we still have some way to go. A special standard of care is necessary in relation to research with young people, as with others who have a special vulnerability. Maori as a group fall into this category of especially vulnerable by virtue of the historical practice of Pakeha researchers drawing their own, monocultural conclusions about data drawn from Maori populations (Jackson, 1988).

The process of ethical approval of research needs to include a very thorough examination of the rights and vulnerabilities of the potential participants, examining issues and contexts relevant to the particular population. Ethical approval processes need to include people from the intended research population who can genuinely represent the perspectives of that group.

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