Engaging tensions: methodological reflections from Australia on Community-Based Participatory Housing Research

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Abstract

Increasingly, applied researchers and Indigenous communities are genuinely seeking common ground to undertake research projects that are particularly attentive to issues of ownership and outcomes. Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) has been embraced globally as a best practice methodological framework for engaging in research in Indigenous communities, especially at the cultural interface where different knowledge systems meet. This article reviews the authors' experiences of engaging with the challenging and enriching aspects of tensions encountered when using the CBPR approach during an Indigenous housing research project in regional Western Australia. Consistent with many CBPR processes, a number of tensions emerged in this cross- and intra-cultural research process. They related to multiple (and sometimes competing) expectations regarding what constitutes genuine partnership; the procurement and flows of research funding; data collection; and research translation mediums and activities. We conclude that engaging with the challenges of this methodological framework at the cultural interface opens up critical and dynamic spaces for shifting power relationships and asserting new models of ownership and outcomes in research with, and for, Australian Indigenous communities.

Introduction

Over the last decade, Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) has been increasingly embraced globally as a best practice methodological framework for engaging in research with Indigenous communities. An approach that emerged from research in the developing world during the 1970s (Fletcher 2003), CBPR emphasises genuine partnership between community and researchers in a process of knowledge co-production and dissemination that is mutually beneficial (Castleden et al. 2012a). In Australia, this approach represents a significant departure from what Martin (2003, 203) has termed 'terra nullius' research: where Aboriginal people are present only as 'objects of curiosity' and/or passive 'subjects of research' (see also Moreton-Robinson and Walters 2009). Indeed, western research paradigms, in their general application, have traditionally positioned knowledge as 'objective and disembodied' (Koster et al. 2012, 196), and generally marginalised or mythologised Indigenous knowledges in the process (Fletcher 2003; Johnson and Murton 2007).

CBPR recognises that knowledge construction is not a power-neutral activity. Rather, 'inquiry is political by definition' (Fletcher 2003, 32). The CBPR approach has been embraced as a productive framework for research in Indigenous contexts because it confronts the unequal power differentials that characterise conventional research paradigms (Castleden et al. 2012a). Ideally, it originates from community priorities rather than researcher interests, and addresses issues of social and/or environmental concern to communities (Castleden et al. 2012b)[3]. CBPR should also foreground the knowledge and perspectives of marginalised 'subjects' without romanticising these local knowledges (de Leeuw et al. 2012). It invests decision-making power and ownership equally between researchers and participants, building 'bi-directional research capacity' (Castleden et al. 2012b, 156) and supports a relationship-based approach, critical for research with Indigenous communities (Kovach 2005; Martin 2003). Since CBPR recognises multiple knowledge systems as legitimate, it creates space for non-western/Indigenous research practices and frameworks (Koster et al. 2012).

Over the past decade in particular, Indigenous scholars have articulated important challenges to the colonising research practices of the social science academy by developing, and asserting the criticality of, Indigenous standpoints, pedagogies, and methodologies (see e.g. Rigney 1997; Louis 2007; Martin 2003; Moreton-Robinson and Walter 2009; Nakata 2007; Nakata et al 2012; Tuhiwai Smith 1999; Walter, 2005). Moreton-Robinson and Walter (2009, 3) note that, although Indigenous methodologies are practiced and defined differently depending on geographical and disciplinary context, they generally share a common conceptual foundation that situates knowledge as 'experiential, holistic, and evolving' and privileges connectivity.

Louis (2007, 133) defines Indigenous methodologies as 'fluid and dynamic approaches that emphasise circular and cyclical perspectives'. She presents four principles that underpin Indigenous methodologies. The first is relational accountability. Here she describes privileging processes that recognise that all parts of the research are interrelated. The second is respectful representation: giving careful consideration to how each 'voice' and moment in the research process is presented. The third is reciprocal appropriation whereby appropriate benefits flow to each party that 'gives' in the research process. The fourth principle concerns rights and regulations. Here Louis (2007) argues that research protocols should be enacted that embrace Indigenous people's rights, socio-cultural worlds, and end-goals for the research.

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[3] Louis (2007) argues that all research involving Indigenous people should follow this approach. She suggests that if research will not have quality-of-life benefits for the community, it should not be undertaken.

Louis' framework shares many points of commonality with Martin's (2003) earlier identification of four similar guiding research principles in Australian contexts which speak to: the recognition of multiple worldviews, knowledges, and realities; honouring social mores; emphasising all contexts shaping Indigenous lives and experiences; and privileging Indigenous voices and experiences. In theory, CBPR creates space for the approaches outlined by these scholars and aligns with them both philosophically and practically.

Some scholars suggest that CBPR should be characterised by Indigenous involvement throughout the entire project. Others argue that CBPR does not necessarily have to involve mutual collaboration at each stage. For example, Koster et al. (2012) suggest it can also legitimately include research 'on' or 'for' communities. The marker of whether research adopts the CBPR approach relates to what the community wants and/or needs and their active role in establishing the terms and design of the research. They suggest, though, that good CBPR is always attentive to three considerations: time, honesty, and transparency (Koster et al. 2012). They argue that researchers must build time into their research processes for pre- and post-fieldwork trips that are largely about social connection. They also suggest that researchers need to remain committed and available to the community once the project reaches its official conclusion. They stress the importance of researchers being honest about the requirements of their funding bodies and universities, and how these requirements might constrain what the researchers can actually commit to within the partnerships. And in relation to transparency, they argue that researchers must be willing to journey through the research process in genuine partnership. This means being prepared to jointly determine research questions and methods, to share findings and data, and to be open to multiple interpretive lenses.

Though CBPR constitutes a helpful framework for 'decolonising' research processes, many researchers have found that the theory is often challenging to apply in practice (Castleden et al. 2012a). The literature identifies two key overarching tensions between the theory and practice of CBPR: time and funding. CBPR requires considerable time commitments of both communities and researchers and though they may be committed to the research project and its outcomes, both parties often face considerable constraints on their capacity to engage in the research (Castleden et al. 2012a; Koster et al. 2012). University-based researchers have teaching and administrative commitments and grant deadlines. Communities have jobs, families and other priorities. de Leeuw et al. (2012), in particular, express deep concern about the considerable burden that ethical and institutional guidelines (which now require significant levels of community consultation, engagement, and training) place on already-burdened Indigenous communities. They also argue that the productivity and accountability expectations placed on research academics can undercut the capacity of researchers to nurture genuine CBPR. Most researchers are forced to 'trade-off': either conforming to institutional output expectations, or privileging process and 'falling behind' academically. They note that many academics who engage in genuine CBPR often experience 'various forms of professional discipline' for not being sufficiently productive against a range of increasingly quantitative performance indicators (de Leeuw et al. 2012, 188).

Funding allocation and compensation are also often points of tension within the practice of CBPR. As Koster et al. (2012) have noted, in community contexts where resources are scarce, the way that funding is allocated has direct implications for how the research is perceived and received. Miscommunications about these allocations can seriously undermine partnerships.

This paper presents critical reflections on a CBPR project examining Aboriginal housing issues in the regional Western Australian city of Geraldton. Following Castleden et al. (2012a) who advocate for more story telling about research practices in order to decolonise the academy, we describe several key moments within the research

partnership that highlight both the strengths and potential pitfalls and tensions of working in this way. We explore how time constraints and funding allocations shaped the tenor of the research partnerships. We also discuss the tensions encountered with the balancing act of genuine partnerships and translation of research findings. Our approach is to recount these moments in a level of detail that surfaces the complexities. In so doing, we conceptualise these tensions not as nuisances to be quickly overcome. Rather, our experience is that they create possibilities for engaging productively with the multiple and intersecting trajectories that characterise the 'cultural interface' (Nakata 2007). They also create spaces for identifying and confronting the power imbalances and epistemological divergences that arguably exist in all cross-cultural research processes. Here, we argue, challenging possibilities emerge for moving beyond polemics of race and power. We see them as constructive, though not always unproblematic and equal, spaces for decolonising research practice.

We begin the narrative by locating ourselves within it. We are cognizant, as others before us have been (e.g. Cowlishaw 1999; Park and Lahman 2003) of how our positionings in cross-cultural research contexts influence the way we interpret and navigate both the pivotal and mundane moments in the research journey. Koster et al. (2012) also describe this step as a critical introductory element of any Indigenous meeting, and therefore a critical way to begin narrative accounts of research by and/or with Indigenous peoples.

Locating the Authors

Through individual and joint critical reflections on our research collaboration, it became clear that 'we' (the authors) had some meaningful insights to contribute to broader scholarly dialogues about CBPR in Indigenous contexts and from within the cultural interface. But determining how to represent our voices in written form was a challenge that reflected some of the broader complexities of CBPR. We, the authors, are representative of two broad groups: the university-based research team (Charmaine, Sarah, and Fiona), and the community-based Aboriginal Reference Group that gave direction and oversight to the project (Gordon, Jennifer, Ashley, Wayne, and Kevin). Out of necessity, we position much of the narrative below in relation to these respective groups. We acknowledge at the outset, though, that for two reasons, these distinctions are not unproblematic. First, our individual views do not always align with the 'group' perspective. Second, the distinction between the groups masks a more fluid and collaborative reality. Charmaine, for example, is a local Aboriginal community member who wears several 'hats' (as many of the Reference Group do), and has been part of Aboriginal alliance from which the Reference Group emerged, for several years. Similarly, several of the Reference Group members were more actively involved in the research process than others.

The Reference Group formed through a self-selection process from within a broader Aboriginal alliance (described in more detail later) due to their interest, knowledge, and experience in Aboriginal housing issues in the city of Geraldton and the Midwest region of Western Australia. Each brought to the project extensive local Aboriginal knowledge and expertise important for genuine community consultation, engagement, and participation. The Reference Group co-developed the research design, provided cultural advice, and authorised the research team to carry out the research within the community. All members were long-term Aboriginal residents of the region and regarded as central decision makers in localised Aboriginal affairs at the grassroots level.

The three university researchers had varying and complementary levels of research experience and skills, and prior relationships within the local Aboriginal community. All were based at a university research centre in Geraldton for the duration of the study. Fiona, a senior non-Aboriginal researcher, provided overall project coordination and had considerable experience in Participatory Action Research (PAR) projects both within

Australia with Aboriginal communities, and overseas in development contexts. Sarah, the lead non-Aboriginal researcher, had prior experience in applied Aboriginal social policy research, and had worked before in the midwest. Charmaine, the lead Aboriginal researcher, had extensive experience working within Aboriginal communities in public service, advocacy, and advisory roles. She belonged traditionally to the country and community, and had recently made a career change to the university environment. This teaming was particularly complementary and each researcher respected the skills and abilities that the others brought to the project and wanted to develop professionally in the areas the others were stronger in.

Study Origins and Oversight

In CBPR, the project is ideally initiated by the community. However, as Castleden et al. (2012a) note, community organisations are often busy or disengaged from university research endeavours. In reality, even most CBPR is still researcher-initiated. Their analysis of Canadian CBPR projects also found that where research is community-initiated it is usually as a result of pre-existing research partnership where trust has already been established through good process. They also describe a 'catch 22' in relation to project initiation: good CBPR begins prior to getting ethical approval or funding support in order to work with communities regarding what funding and ethical approval should be secured for. However, most research institutions require researchers to have funding (and sometimes ethical approval) to begin these discussions (Castleden et al. 2012a).

The housing project we describe in this paper had mixed origins with regard to both initiation and funding. The Midwest Aboriginal Organisation Alliance (MAOA), who commissioned the research, is an alliance of 16 Aboriginal organisations working collectively to address priority issues of concern to Aboriginal people in the midwest region of Western Australia. These organisations range in scale and focus and include a regional Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service, a housing service, an Aboriginal art centre, media network, services for youth, sports associations, a family violence service, resource agency and employment support services. MAOA was formed in 2008 in response to sweeping government reforms and shifts in program delivery and funding for Aboriginal community organisations over the last decade. This reform included the abolishment of the peak national representative body: the Aboriginal Torres Strait Island Commission (ATSIC). In Geraldton during this period of change, smaller Aboriginal corporations disappeared, existing corporations struggled with the new way of doing business, and the Geraldton Aboriginal services industry became overwhelmed by the loss of a regional representative voice and major funding body to tackle local Aboriginal community issues. The identity of the Geraldton Aboriginal community was being transformed in a way that resulted in many Aboriginal people feeling a sense of powerlessness and alienation surrounding the policy decisions being made about their lives. MAOA, established by concerned local Aboriginal organisations, became a forum for reasserting Aboriginal voice in policy, planning and local coordination efforts.

As MAOA developed, it grew increasingly convinced of the importance of having an 'evidence base' to support its planning and advocacy work. Gordon, in particular, had noted that Aboriginal groups in other parts of the country had effectively commissioned and leveraged quality research to dialogue with governments and industry about pathways to fulfil Aboriginal needs and aspirations. MAOA was wary of conventional research models that invested knowledge back into government or the research community but continued to exclude Aboriginal people from the process. MAOA began to view research partnerships as a critical mechanism for establishing similar, productive dialogues and achieving real outcomes and in early 2010 raised research partnership possibilities with Fiona.

Concurrently, the City of Greater Geraldton (CGG) began a broad consultation process aiming to solicit community proposals for making Geraldton a great place to live in by 2029. Following consultation with Aboriginal leaders, Fiona facilitated five focus groups with 54 Aboriginal community members. Common themes emerged and these were presented to MAOA for their consideration. MAOA was entering a strategic planning phase and after consideration agreed on five community priorities: housing, health, education, justice, and culture. Action on employment and training issues was underway. Issues of youth and Elder representation were seen as distributed across all priority areas. A research partnership was negotiated with the Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health (CUCRH), where Charmaine, Fiona, and Sarah were working, and in early 2011 MAOA identified housing as the first of the priority issues to be addressed.

Fiona also spent time with MAOA discussing the possibility of CBPR as a framework for the project. Though many Aboriginal community members had been previously unaware of ways of researching outside of Western positivist frameworks, MAOA was adamant that ownership and control was important to them throughout the research process. They wanted to determine the way research was to be done in their community. The research partnership therefore developed with an intentional focus on departing from 'terra nullius' (Martin 2003) approaches. On a local level this saw a significant shift in the Aboriginal community's awareness of alternative ways of doing research and understanding that they had a powerful voice and place within research besides being the researched, as in the past.

The first key tension of the project emerged in relation to funding. Most Indigenous housing research in Australia is funded by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI). As a government-funded body, the annually-released AHURI research funding agenda reflects government priorities and interests, including areas related to Indigenous housing initiatives and outcomes. Most AHURI grants are modest in size (up to $200,000), have relatively short durations (12-18 months), and must involve research collaborations across multiple national case-study sites. They are not, therefore, designed to support prolonged and genuinely collaborative research partnerships. However, in late 2010, one federal government agency flagged the possibility of using an internal grant scheme to support MAOA project research including the development of strategic action plans. This agency developed a successful proposal under one of their community grant schemes. The CGG also offered a supplementary grant to support the research as an outcome from the 2029 community consultation process. Both grants were awarded to CUCRH to undertake and manage the research.

These processes catalysed a key tension. Several MAOA members expressed concern and disappointment that funding contracts had been awarded to CUCRH rather than an Aboriginal organisation. One local Aboriginal organisation had applied for coordination funding for MAOA under the same federal grant scheme. The decision was made internally within that agency to support the Alliance through funding the housing research to produce an evidence-based strategic action plan. However, certain Aboriginal stakeholders were concerned that CUCRH would be given (or take) all the credit for the research project and MAOA would have no real voice in the process. Despite these concerns, the partnership was not completely derailed. This was probably partly due to the considerable time and energy invested by both parties into adopting a CBPR focus, and largely due to concerned parties trust in the Aboriginal Reference Group and Charmaine to ensure MAOA was not sidelined in the research process. This first tension surfaced underlying and legitimate concerns regarding power imbalances and voice in the research. It opened up a space for various stakeholders to reflect on and challenge particular assumptions and expectations regarding these issues.

Research Design and Data Collection

With these funding tensions in various states of resolution, MAOA, through a self-selection process, formed a Reference Group that began working with the researchers to develop the research design. 'Housing' we all agreed, was too broad a focus for the research so we met together to jointly narrow down a specific research focus. We had a wide-ranging discussion about a host of housing-related concerns and issues of interest to particular researchers in the team. Ultimately, the Reference Group settled upon a sense of urgency regarding what they felt was a chronic shortage of affordable housing in Geraldton. They wanted to develop better understandings of what was causing it, and how the trajectory could be changed.

In this first meeting, Sarah learned two valuable lessons about working in true collaboration with community. First, urgent realities will likely trump lines of inquiry that are perhaps more intellectually stimulating than they are useful. Second, sometimes when faced with both options, communities will, with good reason, opt for research that focuses more on 'pathology and dysfunction' (Castleden et al. 2012b, 162) than on strength-based approaches to inquiry. The latter conclusion was a point of some initial discomfort for the researchers. Ultimately, however, this was the informed choice of the Reference Group.

With the research focus established, we worked together to develop a shared understanding of the ultimate goals and outputs for the project and to formulate a plan for data collection that would enable us to achieve these agreed expectations. The Reference Group were clear from the outset that their expectations of the research was that it would produce evidence regarding the nature of, and reasons for, the shortage of affordable housing for Aboriginal people in Geraldton. Knowledge was power and they were sick and tired of governments holding all the knowledge. They wanted a robust evidence base that they could use to inform their policies and practices but also leverage with governments and industry to improve local outcomes. We then discussed the power of 'evidence' asking ourselves a number of questions. What constituted 'evidence' and was it really sufficient to compel governments to increase their local investment in housing and infrastructure? Was increased government investment really the most strategic end goal? Should the horizons be broadened? Would building more houses really solve the problems that had been described, or simply magnify them through population influx? None of these questions were entirely resolved at the conclusion of the meeting. Rather, they would be continuing points of discussion and renegotiation throughout the research process.

We also discussed various forms of data that could be collected and analysed to constitute the evidence-base that wanted to have produced at the conclusion of the research. This discussion covered statistical and administrative data, a survey and what information would be desirable from it, and qualitative data about local Aboriginal people's experiences and perspectives of access to housing. We mapped out all of these data sources, giving the research team a blueprint for developing the research design and seeking ethical approval. We also established a communication protocol to determine how often we would meet together and what our various roles in the collaboration would be. Sarah and Charmaine would drive the data collection process with guidance and oversight from the Reference Group.

Data Challenges

With this blueprint established, the research team began to progress the plan. Once ethical approval had been granted, data collection began and they encountered two key challenges. First, the process of seeking and sourcing administrative data, where available, was an extremely resource-intensive, and sometimes unfruitful, exercise. Some services were very accommodating and quick to release data for the project. Others, however, were reluctant to release data. Sometimes data acquisition required lengthy

communication processes through numerous channels to secure release. Sometimes requests were declined altogether after lengthy communications. The resistance encountered in certain instances was somewhat surprising given that no sensitive or individually-identifying information was being sought for inclusion in the study. It also engendered anger amongst some MAOA members who felt this was typical of that particular agency. One of our secondary goals for the project was that the process would open up a new and more collaborative dialogue between the Aboriginal community and particular agencies. It therefore concerned us that this hurdle seemed to be having the opposite effect. Sometimes the data simply didn't exist. For example, many local service providers in Geraldton indicated that there were not enough emergency and temporary accommodation options in Geraldton and those that did exist were full of semi-permanent and permanent residents who could not secure any other housing for themselves. However, there were no local data available regarding the number of people who were being turned away from these services because they were full.

The second major challenge related to resourcing for the household survey. To begin with, the research team was unable to obtain certain de-identified data from a local administrative authority that would enable them to target the survey to Aboriginal households only. However, the greater challenge was that, within the limited timeframe they had to undertake and complete the research once ethical approval was granted, they were unable to attract a sufficient number of local Aboriginal research assistants to actually conduct the survey. Though we had originally discussed the necessity of this resource as a collective group, the window for conducting the survey arose at a very busy time for the local Aboriginal community and personnel were simply not available. We met together at this point and agreed that the survey was no longer a viable option despite a shared feeling that it was perhaps the most effective way to gauge the true level of crowding in local Aboriginal households. The survey is one of the key recommendations to emerge from our collaboration in relation to future research.

The Balancing Act of Genuine Partnership

Ultimately the survey challenge reflected a broader tension that surfaced with varying veracity throughout the project: vision verses capacity. MAOA and the Reference Group were unquestioningly committed to the research project but as individual member organisations, and as an alliance, they were constantly faced with other pressing matters - both personal and professional - that rightly impinged upon their capacity to participate and/or provide oversight and direction with the project. The researchers also faced other pressures and obligations in relation to their academic appointments. As researchers and Reference Group we met together intermittently: less so in the initial phases when the finer details of the research design and ethical approval were being processed (probably once every two months), and more regularly once data collection and analysis were taking place (probably once per month). The research team reported each month to the full MAOA meeting on the progress of the research and sought full group input on key issues. Being residents of the local community, research team members also caught up informally and regularly at other meetings and events with various community/MAOA members about the research.

The Reference Group and Charmaine regularly traverse the multiple and intersecting trajectories of the cultural interface in the course of their day-to-day lives and work. These traversings were particularly heightened through the CBPR processes. For example, Charmaine was both a researcher and respected member of the local Aboriginal community, having regular contact with MAOA members in both personal and professional settings. She was privy to intra-MAOA conversations due to her community membership status of being 'one of us'. Consequently, she held a critical position in the research process by having additional access to 'inside' community knowledge that strengthened meaningful community participation. She was also able to provide advice that ensured the

research team was aware of events/issues occurring in community life such as funerals, celebrations, community violence that may influence the level and type of engagement, and communication that was appropriate. However, she also received feedback from within the community that some MAOA members were struggling with the time commitment associated with the research and a limited understanding of alternative research frameworks such as CBPR. Despite a number of discussions between CUCRH and MAOA at the outset of (and throughout) the partnership describing and explaining the participatory process, several MAOA members had assumed that the research would follow a more conventional trajectory: researchers collect the data required, analyse it and present the findings. Over time, it became apparent to the MAOA members, especially the Reference Group that the time required from them for genuine engagement in the research process was considerable.

Being locally-based, having strong links into the local community, and participating in regular full or partial meetings with MAOA members, the researchers understood and appreciated the intense personal and professional pressures and challenges that each member of the Reference Group faced. Nevertheless, they often wished for a greater level of engagement than the Reference Group was able to provide. Sometimes, this tension of 'vision versus capacity' manifested in low numbers at an important planning or dissemination meeting. On one occasion, during an intensely busy but critical point in the project and the partnership, we arranged a Reference Group meeting to discuss an action-planning workshop. Sarah sent a 22 page pre-reading document to each Reference Group member. On Charmaine's advice she had also included a 'truncated' version of the document, though not as truncated as Charmaine had tried to explain. None of the Reference Group came to the meeting having done the pre-reading. Consequently a series of hasty decisions were made about a key project outcome. Sarah would later reflect, with wisdom from Aboriginal colleagues, on how her expectation had been deeply unrealistic for the Reference Group who were almost all engaged in other fulltime employment and had numerous community responsibilities.

This tension, of vision verses capacity, highlighted the colonising limitations of any research, regardless of the methodological approach, that must be executed within rigid budgetary and time constraints. It also forced the non-Indigenous to grapple with the nature of participation in CBPR and how it can be either decolonising or neo-colonial in application. This tension also highlighted the considerable challenges faced by Indigenous researchers who engage deeply with the cultural interface within this research framework. And finally, it opened up a space for Aboriginal Reference Group members to reflect critically on what it means, and what it takes, to maintain an active stance in CBPR.

Translation

There is widespread agreement within the literature that knowledge translation activities relating to CBPR must be context specific. Partners in each research project must jointly negotiate what will work and be effective in their community and in relation to their project. Castleden et al. (2012a) describe a wide range of research dissemination and translation strategies including interactive blogs, radio announcements, public dialogues, posters, photos, short films, curriculum development, lectures, and key messages printed on various paraphernalia. Nevertheless, Christensen (2012) argues that the modes of dissemination in CBPR commonly default to policy reports and journal papers. She suggests that although researchers are storytellers, our dissemination strategies often lose the important emotive edge which embodies the stories that are collected. They don't leave an immediate or engaging impression. These forms of translation and dissemination also rarely generate widespread community interest and engagement. In their interviews with CBPR researchers, Castleden et al. (2012a) found that in most of these researchers' experience, communities weren't interested in, or did not have time to review, academic manuscripts or reports. They found that the best way of generating meaningful feedback on research findings was through community meetings**.**

Bearing in mind MAOA's initial imperative that the ultimate outcome of the research should be an evidence base regarding housing availability, the key outputs of the project were a series of research reports. In developing these, we engaged in a range of smaller translation activities that spanned the life of the project and targeted a wide range of stakeholders and audiences. These activities included progress seminars and circulation of reports and manuscripts prior to dissemination/submission. Consistent with the experience of many of the researchers that participated in the Castelden et al. (2012) study, a number of our translation activities, such as manuscript circulation, were not widely 'taken up' by the broader MAOA and Aboriginal communities. This gave the researchers pause to question whether feedback through this process was adequate. Were they asking too much of the MAOA community to expect attendance at occasional seminars and reading of documents? They were assured by Gordon (the MAOA Chairperson as well as Reference Group member) that the research process must continue and that community or MAOA dynamics was not their responsibility. In some of the MAOA meeting there seemed to be a sense that many MAOA members had had enough of the 'talking' and wanted to see practical results.

In June 2012 a small delegation from the team (Jennifer, Ashley, Sarah, and Charmaine) were invited to present on the findings and process of our collaboration at the inaugural World Indigenous Housing Conference in Vancouver, Canada. The proposed study trip generated mixed reactions from MAOA members and the wider Aboriginal community. On one hand it generated enthusiasm and engagement in the research process: and particularly for 'putting the Midwest on the map' of international Indigenous housing policy and practice dialogues. For some, though, it was seen as 'a drain on already tight resources,' and in extreme cases as a 'junket tour'. The latter views impacted on securing much-needed funds from Aboriginal organisations and government agencies for nominated delegates to attend. In the end, funding was scrapped together from the contributions of two local Aboriginal organisations, two mining companies, and CUCRH. The process of securing these funds was long and resource-intensive for the researchers. The payoffs, however, were considerable. The trip provided an opportunity for the delegation to collectively develop common language around the research and findings. Each member of the delegation communicated our shared story to an international audience of experts and had opportunities to learn from experiences in other global settings. They met with similar alliances to learn lessons on stakeholder engagement and strategic planning and action. The trip also provided rich opportunities for us to build relationship within our collaborative team.

As a precursor to the final output - a housing action plan - and after the study trip, we held an action-planning workshop in Geraldton in July 2012. Here, we collectively presented research findings and developed the content for an Aboriginal Housing Action Plan with a range of local, state, and national housing experts and stakeholders. The Geraldton Aboriginal Housing Action Plan was developed as a result of ideas generated through the research and refined at the workshop. Aboriginal voices telling their housing stories and experiences were interwoven, and featured heavily, in all of the dissemination and translation activities.

At the conclusion of the project we held a 'handover' ceremony at which the three key reports were presented to MAOA. This ceremony, held outdoors beside a warm fire on the grounds of one of the Aboriginal organisation's properties, presented an opportunity for us to jointly celebrate the achievements of the project, to honour the respective contributions made to it, and to acknowledge the shift that would now take place: MAOA would take over 'driving' the implementation of the Action Plan with the researchers providing advice and input if and when requested to do so.

In each of these activities we encountered levels of indifference and sometimes opposition from different stakeholders. However, our shared reflection is that each of these activities was fundamental to the success of the project as each served to strengthen both the partnership and the sense of community ownership of the outputs.

Conclusion

The sole use of traditional western research frameworks in Aboriginal communities is a known contributor to many research difficulties and stigmas between these communities and researchers (Tuhiwai Smith 1999; Nakata 2007). The partnership described above demonstrates that contemporary research projects can be strengthened through genuine partnerships and collaborations, especially those that place Aboriginal knowledge and voices at the centre of the research process (Rigney 1997; Martin 2003). It also shows how the CBPR approach can go some way toward avoiding some of the harmful practices that have been perpetrated through conventional research approaches (Koster et.al 2012). As collaborators, the project reinforced for us that community engagement needs to be a privileged process for meaningful research with Aboriginal communities. For us, this engagement took the form of community leadership in project initiation, oversight of the research process, and as the central agent for social change.

The project was jointly designed to privilege the voices of members of the Geraldton Aboriginal community: to provide opportunities for community members to share their lived housing realities by tell their housing stories, and sharing their experiences and future aspirations. This not only gave the Aboriginal community a voice but also respected the right and power of the Aboriginal community in owning the research and translation processes. The strength of CBPR is, as Pyett (2002) suggests, in the recognition that power is directly related to knowledge, which lies at the very heart of collaborative participatory research projects.

However, our experiences of CBPR aligns with those of other researchers who have found that though it can enable important departures from colonising research practices, is not an easy framework to work within. Indeed we would argue that navigating the complex realities of partnership are hallmarks of CBPR. The community engagement process is not one-sided and this may engender many challenges for those who work within tight research timeframes and for researchers who are rigid in their approach or not receptive to alternative research frameworks or models. A 'smooth' process may be indicative that the process is in fact not CBPR at all. However, if researchers and communities are genuinely seeking common ground to undertake research projects within their communities, we would argue that the strengths of CBPR outweigh the challenges. Engaging with the challenges of this methodological framework opens up dynamics spaces for shifting power relationships and asserting new models of ownership and outcomes in research with, and for, Australian Indigenous communities.

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