

**THE RIGHT RESEARCH
IN THE RIGHT WAY:
IS IT POSSIBLE?
LESSONS LEARNED
FROM UNDERTAKING
SENSITIVE RESEARCH
IN A MULTICULTURAL
ENVIRONMENT**

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Introduction

My presentation today will attempt to inform methodological theory within a number of complexities.

- The research focus: sensitive, perceptual and gendered;
- The context: cross-cultural, cross-generational, multidisciplinary, and collaborative;
- The methodology: action research within a feminist framework;
- The Ethic: Towards Empowerment, Change and Democratic Input into policy and programs affecting ethnic and migrant families experiencing family/domestic violence;
- The multicultural setting: The migrant/ethnic experience within an urban Australian, Anglo-Celtic predominant cultural assumptive base.

The vehicle for informing theory across these complexities is a well-devised, ethics approved, social action research project that did not succeed in getting implemented. In fact, it was after the methodology had been developed and approved by the human services ethics committee, that it was determined the research project would not precede. The unresolved debate underpinning the decision to terminate the research poses questions to action research principles and methods, particularly in dealing with sensitive research such as domestic or family violence in the cross-cultural or migrant community context. I would like to offer our experience in the context of a case study, to assist in furthering our knowledge in methodological theory and technique. In

using this experience, I hope to realise the efforts of all who worked on this research project by providing another avenue for meaningful contribution. In no way, do I wish to imply that any of those who participated in the research were solely responsible for its failure to go forward. It is my strongly held conviction, as the researcher of this project, that the participants appointed to this project have much of the credit for the development of a principled ethos and a sensitive methodology. I would also like to state that the analysis I present herein is drawn from my own experience, field notes, interviews and meeting notes. I have tried to position it objectively by drawing from the experience of others as presented in the literature. I would not, however, wish to project the view that my analysis of the experience is the sole and shared point of view.

Action Research, since its naming and formal development by Kurt Lewin in 1946, has been taken up exponentially across all disciplines and fields of inquiry. Feminist social theory and research method has played a role in founding and furthering the development of a more egalitarian dynamic between the researcher and the researched – particularly in empowering individuals to influence, undertake and evaluate change. In every field, particularly the arts, health, education, management and social sciences, the action research method has undergone a process of differentiation and development. In turn, each field of inquiry have developed its own set of terms to describe its own experience and contribution to the development of the methodology. Many of the same methodological challenges and motivating principles are held in common. Broken down to its most basic and unifying elements, the motivating principles underpinning all fields developing action research are the concepts of Participation, Empowerment and Change. The methodological challenges common to all arise in developing a process to realise these motivating principles. As the features and focus of a given research study multiply – such as demonstrated by our own failed research project – then too, do the number of challenges compound to make the problem solving multiply along all levels of the research's planning, development, implementation and analysis.

Our Experience: The Case Study

But let's get into the Case Study. As I mentioned in my introduction, the research project was intended to gather perceptions of domestic/family violence in ethnic migrant communities living in metropolitan Victoria. In September of 2000, a well-respected Domestic/Family Violence service contracted the research project to me using very limited and renegotiated monies provided by the state health department. For the sake of anonymity, I will call this service the Women's Collective. The Women's Collective has established itself as a support and resource to ethnic/migrant women experiencing DV in Melbourne. Over its 15 year history, the Women's Collective observed through its experience that:

Despite the development of a domestic violence service system and infrastructure in Victoria to assist women experiencing violence, ethnic communities are not fully able to respond or interface with it comfortably. Strategies to enhance cultural relevancy in the framework of "access and equity" has increased NESB (Non-English Speaking Background) women's capacity to do so, however, it is still a service system that demand of its NESB clients a synchronicity with the values that underpin this service system... For genuine interface with the service system to occur, policy makers and service providers require an understanding and insight into how "family violence" is perceived in the various communities and the ways in which these communities deal with it, whether covertly or overtly.

When I was awarded the contract, as an independent researcher, the project proposal spelled out the delivery of a research project grounded in a feminist theoretical framework and a focus group approach. The findings were to:

- (i) Shape responsive strategies for early intervention and prevention as these strategies would be informed by the value system of culturally diverse communities;
- (ii) Assist service providers in developing improved "client focused" strategies for NESB service users; and,
- (iii) Have an input into the recovery project to be carried out by the department of human services.

The Executive Officer also expressed a number of organisational aspirations and expectations for the research. First, the IWDVS hoped to strengthen its position in the service community, particularly in influencing a more culturally-sensitive approach in the intervention and support to women experiencing domestic violence. It was hoped that through the appointment of a Reference Group for the research, greater networking and cooperation could be persuaded from the effort of producing a cooperative outcome. Through the research, the Women's Collective hoped to be gain greater empowerment to bring about change in the underpinning values of the service providers and their service delivery. The researcher, therefore, was to be a clandestine agent of change for the Women's Collective in assisting it in the realisation of these aspirations. As a result, the *force of change* built into the action research model would in fact be imposed into the dynamic between the researcher and Reference Group membership in the office of carrying out the research itself.

The Women's Collective drew from its own established networks to select the membership for the Reference Group, each member a representative from one of the more prominent agencies involved in providing advocacy, services or policy addressing domestic violence in Victoria. On paper, the Reference Group was expected to "have an input on the direction and the shape of the project" and a "critical role in helping to shape the recommendations as informed by the findings of the research". The role conferred a participatory status to the members of the Reference Group. However, the Reference Group members were to also have a "role in facilitating access to key informants and respective networks" which conveyed the status of gate-keeper to each of the Reference Group members, with power to govern the researcher's access to the communities through their networks. Added to the organisational aspirations of the Women's Collective, these stated and implied roles placed conflicting parameters around the power of the Reference Group in relation to the researcher, at once making it both egalitarian participant and regulatory authority. The EO of the Women's Collective became the Chair of the Reference Group. The Reference Group, the researcher and the Chair made up what I will term the Research Team.

From the beginning the Research Team believed its charge would be most usefully carried out through the development of an ethical framework to govern the focus groups development of the methodology. Over the course

of 6 months, the group met 10 times to rigorously develop the ethical framework and focus group methodology. The Research Team at held central to their approach, the principles, theory of feminist sociology and feminist 'action' research, but were at odds with the practical application of some of its central tenets. Early on, one member tendered a concern about the inclusion of men as focus group participants. The view expressed was centred on a need to mitigate any risk that might arise in articulating perceptions that might compromise the safety of women partners and children of male focus group participants. Members whose professional experience was at the intervention level of community services provision took up this concern, and worked to control the range of interpersonal inquiry within the male focus groups, by imbuing it with a 'value-driven' environment in which the existing attitudes and behaviours supporting family violence, as well as the values and beliefs underpinning them, might be actively challenged. Those of us who came at the problem from the research point of view, worried the mitigation of that risk might overreach its objective, and begin to compromise our ability to collect objective, authentic data. Further, it was feared that efforts to script and control focus group participation would work in contradiction to the 'Empowering' feminist action research ethos, ultimately denying the ethnic communities a contributing voice to the policies and programs that affected them.

At issue also, was the principle of Change. Change is the outcome of action in action research, but change to whom, and what direction does it take? Very few of us entertained the idea that the change intended in the research we were undertaking was in part for the services and ourselves and organisations we represented. Though it was broadly understood that the data collected would work to affect change to policy, as the methodology developed it also evidenced an expectation that the value-driven focus group environment would affect change to the participant communities. This was not an overt expectation but a covert one – even to members around the table, who saw the methodological precautions as means to protect and acculturate. By acting in an official and professional capacity as counsellors and interventionists, we could repel the ramifications of any change action brought to bear upon our own perceptions and biases – or those of our respective services and organisations.

However, the Research Team worked hard to reconcile these contradictions through the development of sensitive methodology that both empowered and protected participants. Ultimately, we divided and subdivided each focus group by community, gender, age and experience. We chose 4 ethnic/migrant communities whose migration experience and settlement time varied from the very recent refugee to the well-established ethnic community of 40 years or more. In each of these communities save the most recent, focus groups were differentiated into groups consisting of participants who were the migrating generation and groups consisting of Australian-born young adult of migrants. For the most recent arrivals, migrants arriving as middle age adults with families were distinguished from migrants that had arrived to Australia before their 18th birthday. Each of these eight focus group categories were further split into single gender groups, so that in every instance, the participants would find themselves in a focus group with others of the same gender, approximate age and experience, as well as the same cultural and linguistic background. We took careful precautions to ensure that community leaders who understood the diversity and complexity informed the selection of participants existent within each community, particularly in communities where that diversity had led to conflict and division. The focus group would be conducted in the language of preference, in an informal interviewing format to provide a level of comfort and spontaneity. In each of these groups we placed the principle researcher and two assistant researchers who would facilitate and transcribe the process.

We developed a plan to manage, monitor and report adverse and unforeseen events, including a debriefing on-duty counsellors with appropriate language skills during and after the focus group had convened. We developed a focus group environment where potential or actual harm were addressed through a controlled interview dynamic. We worked to ensure over-disclosure of sensitive information or illegal behaviour. We developed a double check on the analysis of each transcript as well, in order to ensure that cross-cultural interpretations were true in fact and meaning. We put considerable effort into the submission of an application for Ethics approval with the Human Research Ethics Committee, and in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans set forward by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NH&MRC). However, it was clear that in making this application that the process was geared more toward

biomedical research than to research in the socio-cultural domain. Thus, when approval was attained, some members of the Reference Group were sceptical of the value of the approval, given the expertise within the Ethics Committee was not perceived to meet the test of Authority within our given research domain.

Weeks after approval was granted, a special workshop was constituted on the direction of the Reference Group, to provide the members with expert advice regarding the men's focus groups. By this time the Reference Group was without a chair, as the EO had resigned and an Acting EO had been appointed from the Women's Collective Board membership until a new EO could be sought and appointed. In the aftermath of the concerted commitment the Research Team had put into the development of the methodology, the membership had lost momentum. Less than a third of the Reference Group attended the 2 half-day sessions. By the end of the second session, a decision had been reached that the men participating in the research should not be interviewed in a focus group environment.

The Women's Collective was placed in a difficult position. Having undergone a seven-month investment into a research methodology that had not yet yielded the expected outcome, it was now under escalated pressure to account by its funding body. Without the expected outcome, it was difficult to justify an increase in funds to support a revision of a methodology that had already been approved by the recognised ethics body. To go ahead with the research in its approved form would jeopardise the cooperative network it had cultivated within the service community and Reference Group membership. The choice became a choice between its political and organisational aspirations and the preservation of the research project. The end result was a re-negotiated research outcome; the delivery of a scoping study and 'lessons learned' manual for community researchers following on from our experience. This presentation, in fact, is an outcropping of that re-negotiated outcome.

The Analysis: Lessons Learned

The failures of the research project all arise from the same source, and are therefore relational. The source is a failure to provide the right vehicle to progress the participatory dynamic, given the construction of the membership

and the environmental constraints contextualising that dynamic. Elemental to this mismatch of method to participant environment, is the failure to recognise that the environmental context governing the participatory dynamic was not that of the ethnic migrant community, but that of the professional providing a service to the ethnic migrant community. The contextual shift between the two is significant, as the latter is paid by the government to provide a service to community. Over the past two decades, the government has devolved a system of service delivery that devolves blame, but not authority. Government now contracts service delivery through competitive tender, which configures a service environment where providers are saddled with a conflict of interest between being complicit in affirming the government's policy by constructing the appearance of effective service delivery, and in advocating the needs of their service population and by doing so expose the deficits of the current system. Either way, the government can foist the blame for mishandling public funds upon the service provider for failing to meet the requirements of its contract, or the community itself, for not demonstrating itself to be a civil society. The environment creates a dynamic in which no provider can risk exposure by engaging in honest inquiry, but neither can they be seen as uncooperative in any endeavour endorsed and funded by the government who in turn, funds their own services. In the context of a research project, participants such as these would be termed as 'defended subjects'. The contextual constraints of such an environment would narrow the field of inquiry in such a manner that the outcome would seek to inform policy rather than criticise services, and to provide a selected array of cultural perspectives that will neither identify participant communities or nor fuel prejudicial reaction. The participants could not risk the possibility of any other outcome, and thus the elements that would govern that outcome were imposed upon the methodological development itself.

LESSON ONE: Failure to recognise the Research Team and its objectives as discrete from the research project itself.

Any work demanding the full participation and consultation of the community is time consuming. Add a cross-cultural dimension and it becomes more so. Add a degree of sensitivity in the topic of focus and it becomes ever more important to allow sufficient time for a trusting environment in which naturalistic inquiry can occur. The situation is no different when the

participants are professionals from different organisations with a duty of care to the populace in which they are working together to undertake research, such as is the case with the Reference Group. The same complexity exists across organisational cultures, as well as across professional and disciplinary perspectives. These complexities in differing politics, founding assumptions, practice perspectives; responsibilities and biases take a considerable amount of time to work across. Thus, it is important to recognise the installation of a Reference or steering group imposes an additional level or tier to the action research process, one subject to the same forces of change-action through participation and empowerment. It is, in fact, an action research project within an action research project, or at least a two tiered research project. As such, it needed to be accorded a sufficient timeframe, as well as aims and objectives independent of those that had been determined for the community focus group portion of the research. A discrete set of aims and objectives would have made apparent all of the expectations the Women's Collective had in mind in appointing a Reference Group of its sister organisations to the research. It further might have revealed the conflict between the action research methodological theory and the roles assigned to its participants.

LESSON TWO: Failure to apply the right method to the participant environment

The extent to which action research principles can be actualised is limited, when applied to a group of research participants who are organisational and professional representatives. The Management Learning, Health and Education fields have experience in using action research in such environments, and thus provide some understanding as to why these limitations exist (Levin, 1999; Park, 1999; Meyer, 2000).

Going back to those three basic principles, we find that each is 'activated' through a founding premise, and through that activation the outcome of the action research is realised.

- The participation principle is activated through a democratic, or egalitarian premise: the idea that participants are seen as equals in the validity, authority and power of their contribution. But professional distinctions in status and position threaten democratic practice, particularly in healthcare and community service, where status and insular codes can dictate the degree to which one is accorded validity in a participatory process. The

contribution of those with lesser validity is often discounted as 'external', and thus the dynamic amongst participants becomes privileged rather than democratic. The result is a consensus-making process that is constrained to those participants whose views and experience hold greatest validity. The risk in this instance is that one politic and underpinning ethic will hold sway at the expense of all the others. Often that politic is a moral rectitude built upon a set of enshrined values within a given profession that none might question without losing validity and recognition as a member.

- The empowerment principle is activated by an emancipatory premise: the idea that participants can work together to free themselves from whatever boundaries or conventions have limited them. Feminist researchers (Bowes 1996) (Ramazanoglu, 1989a; Oppie, 1992) have long documented a need to problematise the empowerment principle, as it denotes the assumption that power can be conferred upon participants. Whether the researcher assumes the participant community has no power beforehand, or rather that the researcher believes herself able to confer power to the participants through the research intervention, this assumption presumes an unequal relationship between the researcher and the researched that does not fully resolve in action research methodology. Where the participants are organisational and professional representatives of a common service populace, the problem of empowerment becomes all the more complex. Participants' professional roles convey an unequal distribution of power between themselves and their clients, which the action-research seeks to rectify. Placed in the position of an advisory, each professional in turn advocates and disempowers the client voice, as the power of authority replaces the voice of experience. Further, as representatives of organisations whose *raison d'être* is the service they provide, fully emancipatory outcomes cannot be realised without violating the organisational purpose itself. Knowledge sharing is difficult in an environment that is as adversarial as it is cooperative, and as interdependent as it is independent.
- The change principle is activated by principle of introspection; the ability to investigate and challenge the perceptions and motives underpinning set conventions – thus resistance and prejudice can be overcome through the communal exploration and knowledge-building. This is much easier

when the participants are unified through their efforts to defeat an external foe; such as the racist underpinnings of a policy or programs. But where the participants are organisational and professional representatives of the policy or services under scrutiny, the foe becomes and internal exploration through the organisational, professional and personal strata that together underpin and support set convention. Without the full recognition and understanding of that fact, participants will lack the fortitude to navigate themselves through the change process. Further, as representatives of organisations competing for scarce public funding in the same service niche, any exercise of introspection that carried any risk of exposure for the organisation's bottom line would be strictly forbidden.

LESSON THREE: Failure to accommodate the Research Team's need to focus on underpinning motive, rather than methods development

Throughout the participatory dynamic there were clues that the focus of the team on the development of the methodology and ethical framework were not sufficient to address the underlying concerns of the members. Upon analysis, it seems possible that the degree of effort devoted in articulating a progressively constrained field of inquiry was perhaps a substitute for ameliorating the concerns the members could not address openly. It is certain the participatory dynamic that evolved was not one in which respect and trust was fully cultivated, or where members felt safe to confidently express their views. To be fair, a good portion of the responsibility for this problem was my own. As the researcher, I failed to understand that the parameters set forward in the terms of contract supported the view by members that the role of the Reference Group was to advise me. Given that relationship between Reference Group and researcher, it is probable that an expectation was formed that the only views under scrutiny in the dynamic were those of the researcher. When I reciprocated the challenge by subjecting member's views to a thorough challenge, I undoubtedly inflamed a defensive and aggressive postures, as very few were familiar with the rigorous investigatory techniques so inherent to academic research. The result forced an 'us-and-you' alignment which I was never able to overcome, although I did make a considerable effort to do so once I realised my failing.

However, it is also fair to question the extent to which was ever possible to cultivate such a dynamic, given the pre-existing political environment contextualising the dynamic within the community service domain. Regardless of its origin, the adversarial and shielded climate made it difficult for members to introspectively query the motive underpinning the concerns that influenced the methodology's development.

- It was not possible, for instance, to engage in an exploration as to what degree, if any at all, the fears regarding the men's participation in focus groups was due to a unexamined notion that ethnic men, or their underpinning believe systems, were inherently violent.
- It was not possible to seriously address the possibility that our enshrined value systems were shielded from question through the development of methods that constrained the field of inquiry and reversed the direction and expectation of change – from one in which policy and services were informed, to one in which communities were educated and acculturated.
- It was not possible to explore the conflict of interest each participant encountered, given the current political environment, in realising the aims of the research whilst still protecting professional and organisational interests.

As a result, the strength of authority conveyed through the granting of ethics approval was not sufficient to allay the concern that the methodology would effectively ameliorate the perception of risk. In the end, it was these residual questions regarding motive, not method, which led to the termination of the research project. Regardless of the reasons why, the ultimate outcome of the decision to terminate the research project has been to deny the ethnic migrant communities an opportunity to influence greater cultural sensitivity and inclusion in the shaping of policy and services delivery.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, I can only proffer a few questions, that we ourselves, as professionals and service providers must rigorously subject to introspection, if we are to properly engage in the formation of a true action research methodology. Otherwise, we need to understand how the principles of action

research might be limited in their actualising capacity, and seek to utilise a research method that better accommodates those constraints.

Are we advocating the interests of the community, or simply replacing the voice of the community with our own?

Are we protecting the community through the exercise of professional privilege, or simply furthering its disempowerment by preventing its participation?

Are we exercising a duty of care, or a paternalistic, dogmatic, and prescriptive oversight?

What are our assumptions about the community's own empowering structures?

- Are we looking to confer power where we assume none exists? or,
- Do we hope to use the research process as a vehicle for placing community power in context where it can serve to influence change?

Have we developed a methodological framework that protects the community against anticipated risk, or rather to protect our own conventions from a risk of exposure through challenge by a more diverse cultural input?

Are we creating a value-driven environment in which to inform a culturally-competent policy, or are we commandeering the process to educate and acculturate the community, as well as dictate its participation?

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