

Qualitative Social Work

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Qualitative Social Work Research in the Asia-Pacific Region

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In articulating our ideas for a special issue on qualitative research in the Asia-Pacific region we were mindful of the diversity of research and practice in this region. Geography, social, economic and political history, culture and religion have all played their part in determining the nature of social work practice and research in this vast region. We were interested to discover how cultural frameworks and the context in which the research was carried out influenced research design and practice. Each of the four articles speak to these issues and demonstrate through a range of perspectives how research practice is embedded within the cultural context of the populations being studied and how this impacts both on the topics to be studied and on research protocols and processes.

Two themes are fundamental to our understanding of research in the Asia-Pacific region and have relevance for researchers in other regions who wish to authentically engage with knowledge production and dialogue with other qualitative researchers about the issues that contribute to the construction of research practice. The first concerns the universality of qualitative research and the challenges inherent in building understanding of research practice across cultures and the second is focused on the emerging presence of indigenous social work and the challenge to indigenization which is perceived as importing social work practice from the west to the rest without little consideration of the cultural and local contexts of practice (Gray et al., 2008b: 8). Indigenous social work involves indigenous peoples identifying culturally relevant responses to diverse local contexts including their leadership in developing

culturally appropriate social work (Gray et al., 2008a: xx). Indigenous populations challenge universal frameworks of social work knowledge that adopt a one size fits all approach that undermines local knowledge and that disregards the diversity of the contexts of social work practice and how these contribute to achieving effective social work interventions (Gray et al., 2008a: xxv).

Taking the first, in recognizing the universality of qualitative research we accept that many of the methodological concepts and techniques developed by researchers in western cultures are applicable to research in the Asia-Pacific region. The problems confronting researchers in this region can be considered as issues of geographical and linguistic marginality. Geographical marginality is a serious issue for researchers in this region who may not have the resources to travel to meetings and conferences in North America and Europe. Qualitative research events are also relatively rare which means that there are few opportunities for researchers and practitioners to debate and advance qualitative practice in the region. While events may be held in Australia and New Zealand it is still extremely difficult for Asian and Pacific researchers to find the resources to travel to these events which means their voices can remain isolated and marginalized and absent from the debates on the nature of qualitative research and its development across contexts.

While geographical marginality can be overcome by the widespread use of the Internet linguistic marginality is a much more difficult proposition. Many rely on translated texts that are often outdated and some of the concepts become 'lost in translation'. Accurate translations are difficult to achieve because of the differences between languages especially in the Asia-Pacific region where many of the languages spoken do not belong to the Indo-European language family. Researchers and practitioners who are do not have English as their first language can have difficulty in writing in English and expend considerable time and resources in producing academic papers that will meet peer review guidelines. Moreover, papers can look unduly complicated or confusing as detailed translations and cultural explanations may be required so that the reader can understand the research milieu. Researchers in the Asia-Pacific region are continually seeking mechanisms for mentoring and peer review of research including finding ways to connect with research networks that will provide them with the focused support required to enhance their participation in international qualitative research debates.

The second theme concerns the emergence of indigenous social work and the challenge to the cultural bias of qualitative research methods that are derived from western knowledge and that give scant attention to crucial cultural differences. Central to this understanding is the difference between individualism and collectivism. Many of the cultures in the Asia-Pacific region embrace strongly the notion of the collective and this value impacts on the way research is to be constructed including who gives permission for research to be

conducted, the processes to be used in this research and who owns the research findings and determines how the findings are to be disseminated. Similarly, beliefs and values about relationships and how one engages with researchers also need to be considered including understanding that for some participants the primary goal is to maintain a respectful relationship with the researcher who they see as having important status. This may make it difficult for them to converse about sensitive issues and to tell the 'truth' about certain matters as they are concerned to present information that they think the researcher wants to hear (Mulder, 1997). Associated with this orientation to relationships and interaction is the concept of low and high context cultures. While individualistic cultures use low-context communication that relies on clear, concrete and explicit language, the Asia-Pacific cultures are collectivistic cultures that use high-context communication which relies heavily on attention to contextual details and less on explicit language to transmit its message (Hamilton, 2007). The interactional context in low-context cultures may have little impact on the meaning of what is being said whereas in high-context cultures interaction is central and meaning may be derived via the performance of the communication (Ryen, 2002). If the researcher does not understand the nuanced levels of interaction taking account of both verbal and non-verbal cues they may inadvertently misinterpret key information.

These examples are of interest to the qualitative researcher and remind us to take heed of the important influence of the cultural context on research practice. Taking the time to generate understanding of this context can contribute significantly to the building of respectful and genuine research relationships that enable researchers to develop an authentic understanding of everyday lived experiences. Indigenous social workers and researchers alert us to the discourses that determine knowledge construction including challenging the domination of western paradigms in research. They advocate for research practice that incorporates cultural knowledge into research processes, which involves working with cultural protocols that determine the ownership of research processes including research design, methods and knowledge dissemination. This can include using alternative strategies for gaining consent for research and for recruiting participants. Here approval for participation in research may need to be sought from others in an individual's network as the information being provided by an individual may be perceived as being owned by the collective.

Indigenous researchers have challenged research practice that has historically ignored the contribution of cultural protocols to the development of robust and ethical research practice and has subjugated the knowledge of participants by discounting what it is they can bring to the research process not only as participants but with regard to their contribution to research methodology and methods (Denzin et al., 2008; Hartman, 1992). These ideas go right to the

heart of qualitative research practice and exhort all researchers to be mindful of their research practice and the protocols they are adopting to ensure that their practices are not only culturally relevant but that the research is not yet another tool for undermining the local and cultural knowledge of indigenous populations so that they have little authority of how their voices are to be heard and their stories are to be told.

In this issue the four papers by researchers in the Asia-Pacific region address issues of culture and document how cultural frameworks inform research practice and contribute to data analysis. The themes that emerge are embedded within cultural norms and beliefs and enable the researcher to find deeper meaning and understanding of the data. The article by Izumi Sakamoto, Jane Ku and Yi Wei explores the experiences of skilled immigrants from mainland China in Toronto, Canada and provides insights into the challenges that immigrants are confronted with as they attempt to settle into new cultural contexts. The authors used a grounded theory approach and worked collaboratively with a community-based agency and through this relationship were able to ensure that cultural protocols were negotiated and adhered to throughout the research. In the article they focus on a key theme that emerged from the data, that of Luocha. This means to fall down from a great height and captures in a deep and profound way the settlement experiences of these immigrants. This theme is located within a cultural framework and provides a more nuanced understanding of the challenges facing these skilled immigrants and the feelings they experienced of being out of control and spiralling down. It describes the enormous gap between their current life in Canada and their pre-immigration life in China and the feelings they experienced as they fell from the peak of their career and had to negotiate new identities. This cultural frame contextualizes the many challenges associated with their sociocultural adaptation as they settled into a new country and mediated new experiences in many and sometimes competing dimensions including employment, education, family life and health and wellbeing issues. While the research captured the challenges it also revealed the resiliency of this population as they learned to seek out new opportunities that arose from the settlement experience. This study, by working with cultural interpretations of the settlement experience, provides a perspective that enhances our understanding of the challenges that may arise for Chinese immigrants and may better equip those providing support to understand more deeply the meaning of settlement experiences.

Lynne Pere and Alex Barnes from New Zealand articulate some important themes in research with the indigenous population (Maori). They challenge researchers to give due consideration to how cultural protocols impact upon the research process and how ignoring these can disrupt research processes and restrict research outcomes. Using the example of research with mental health consumers they carefully detail the processes used to mediate the diverse

perspectives of those involved, including the agency that commissioned the research, the facilitators of the research processes and the participants. The title captures the essence of a challenge to researchers to take note of tikanga (customs), to learn from the past and to know how these customs have been developed over time and for what purpose. In researching with Maori these will have a central role in determining how respectful and meaning research relationships can be formed and will also provide a foundation for managing key research processes such as ethical protocols including obtaining consent from research participants. The article adds to the literature that is emerging from indigenous populations who challenge research practices that have defined them as the objects of research rather than as the facilitators of research. Embodied in this critique is the challenge to researchers to ask themselves what it is that their research projects contribute to enhancing the lives of indigenous populations and advancing their knowledge and their position in the world. This article speaks to this critique by providing a rich account of the strategies that can be adopted to ensure that indigenous protocols are integral to robust research practice and enable researchers to understand the broader context of working alongside indigenous populations.

The next article takes us to the Pacific nation of Papua New Guinea (PNG). Tracie Mafile'o and Unia Kaise Api document a research study on youth resilience and articulate the research learning that emerged from this study. Using a life story method the researchers aligned their research processes with the cultural norms and values of the population. Life story approaches strongly connect with the traditions of story telling and the passing down of stories between generations. Using the example of one life story, the authors demonstrate how story telling is a powerful research tool. In this community individuals are familiar with using story telling to pass on information and to learn the history and experiences of their people. It is a process that is imbued with respect for the 'other' and focuses on listening to the story through a natural process of conversation where the story teller determines the rhythm of the story telling. This process hooks into indigenous ways of knowing and is consequently more likely to reveal a fuller appreciation of the lived experiences of the participants as the detailing of the context of these experiences becomes part of the telling and provides deeper understanding about the research question. Through the life story approach the researchers developed a rich analysis of how this young person negotiated his way to wellbeing and resilience through a communal cultural context. Ethical protocols were negotiated and agreed to within the cultural norms of the collective. By working with the complexity of research relationships and the imperative to work with cultural processes for obtaining consent the participant's interests were protected and harm would not be done to either the participant or the collective. Taking the time to work through the multiple layers of the research process generated

research that was culturally relevant and was embedded within the experience of young people in this community.

Jennifer Boddy reports on a group mentoring programme for women from disadvantaged communities. While this article does not explore the experiences of an Asian or Pacific population it makes an important contribution to this issue in that it explores how social workers can enhance their understanding of culture and more effectively work with new settlers to strengthen their personal support networks. The focus of the research was to examine how a mentoring programme enhanced the experiences of women from disadvantaged communities and helped them mediate the cultural expectation that women work within the home. The research explored the meaning of this cultural expectation and the belief that caregiving is to be valued over education and employment. A social intervention research approach was utilized and this involved the development of a systematic framework for designing, implementing, and evaluating the mentoring programme. This approach enabled the group to have input into how the programme was to be designed and implemented. The research process reflected the cultural context of the participants and was able to be adapted so that it aligned with their needs and experiences. This was informed by a feminist-strengths perspective that moved away from focusing only on the problems and the deficits in women's lives to identifying their strengths and capacities to mediate adverse and difficult situations to develop a more positive focused future for themselves and their families. The research demonstrated how qualitative research offers possibilities for researchers to adapt traditional methods to ensure that the research is relevant to the community group and takes account of their worldviews in the design and implementation of the research. Moreover an understanding of how key identity positions intersect, such as gender and culture, and building this understanding into research design can enhance participation in the research so that this engagement can be sustained over time and have beneficial outcomes for the participants and others involved in programme development.

To conclude our description of the Asia-Pacific articles, we would like to acknowledge the key role this journal has in presenting the qualitative research of those researchers who are working with new ideas and are at the forefront of bringing new methods into qualitative research and presenting the experiences of populations that may have been ignored or misinterpreted. The Asian Pacific articles in this issue represent an opportunity to think differently about qualitative research and to develop research practices that are embedded in local and cultural contexts where research presents an authentic account of experience so that research findings are responsive and relevant and contribute to enhancing social work knowledge and practice.

This last issue of QSW in 2009 also includes one other manuscript, three reviews with an introduction by our Reviews Editor and our annual thanks to our reviewers. The concluding manuscript is 'Lifting the Lid on Sexuality and

Ageing: The Experiences of Volunteer Researchers' by Lee-Ann Fenge, Ann Fannin, Andrew Armstrong, Tina Hicks, and Val Taylor, reporting on the Gay and Grey Project in the UK. The article is based on the reflective narratives of older volunteers engaged in a Participatory Action Research (PAR) study of ageing lesbian women and gay men. The narratives of these volunteers, who themselves are aging lesbian and gays, focus on the meanings, tensions and sometimes competing agendas of these grassroots researchers. Thanks in large part to the efforts of these volunteers, the project did succeed in helping local service providers better understand the needs of the older lesbian and gay community.

The three reviews are introduced by Karen Staller, QSW Reviews Editor. The underlying theme of the reviews is the relationship between the arts and science and more specifically the ties between forms of art and what arguably constitutes scientific method. The review by Sandra Momper of Indigenous Social Work Around the World: Towards Culturally Relevant Education and Practice by Mel Gray, John Coates, and Michael Yellow Bird (Eds.) (2008) connects nicely to the themes of the four Asia-Pacific articles.. Patricia Leavy's Method Mets Art: Arts-based Research Practice reviewed by David J. Tucker and Pam Schweitzer's Reminiscence Theatre: Making Theatre from Memories reviewed by Clay T. Graybeal pick up on the issues and implications of the newer arts and performance based approaches to qualitative social work research.

In the final section of this issue we list and thank all those who did the vital work of reviewing manuscripts submitted to QSW in 2009. We are indebted to their extensive and conscious service to the journal.

And of course we thank you the readers of QSW for your support of QSW. Enjoy the issue!

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