Chapter 4
Respecting Culture: Research with Rural Aboriginal Community

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Abstract  Cultural sensitivity: easy to say, difficult to do! This chapter explores the process of doing cross-cultural research in the context of working with Aboriginal people. It follows our journey in search of methods to collect meaningful data and reveals the successes and struggles encountered. We address the question: “How do we maximize cultural sensitivity as white women doing research with Aboriginal people?” We share our experience in finding ways to do culturally sensitive research. The many ways that participants tell their stories, how to achieve a degree of trust and rapport with the communities, the elders, the individuals, their families and the service providers is examined.

Many Aboriginal people have good reason to be sceptical about research and doubt whether it is really useful to their communities. Aboriginal communities are often the focus of research but are rarely the recipients of tangible benefits of this intense interest. Given the history of research being “done to” Aboriginal people the importance of building relationships, showing respect and a willingness to learn is foremost in our minds when we embark on research. Researchers need to be cognisant of the history of exploitation within communities and the associated ongoing cultural dyslexia that characterises our society. We argue that cultural dyslexia is a result of dissonance, institutional racism and positivist research and management approaches that are preoccupied with “evidence”, data quality and outcomes and too often lead to the objectification of participants.

The need for research to be grounded in participatory methodologies such as action research and community-based ethnography is well documented. A reflexive approach is essential because it promotes community inclusion and confronts the traditional exclusivity in academic culture of research expertise. By sharing experiences and fostering a collaborative culture through research, we can learn from communities and we can undertake more meaningful research.

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4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we will discuss our experiences in conducting cross-cultural research in rural and remote Aboriginal communities of South Australia. We present this as a case study through our reflections following a challenging external evaluation which was able to bridge cultural boundaries. This project is useful as a case study as it tells a story about overcoming adversity in rural communities as they marshalled their local resources to develop locally owned suicide prevention strategies with support from other services and government.

Rural South Australia is extremely geographically and culturally diverse. We were engaged to conduct an external evaluation of the Suicide Prevention Initiative for Country South Australia Department of Health. There were seven regions involved in the project. Each region developed their own action plans with their main target group being young men, in particular young Aboriginal men.

As researchers, we were conscious of the history of research being “done to” Indigenous peoples and the importance of building relationships, showing respect and a willingness to learn was foremost in our minds. Our challenge was to find ways to achieve this as “outsiders” when asked to research such a psychologically and socially complex issue as suicide prevention. The ability to achieve a degree of trust and rapport with the communities, the elders, the individuals, their families and the service providers in short time frames was vital.

The people and systems operating at the local level in rural communities presented powerful messages relating to service delivery with particular reference to Aboriginality. The importance of inclusivity, relationships, connections, credibility, building trust, networking and holistic approaches that are intrinsic to Aboriginal culture were identified as essential to project success.

By sharing our research experience, the challenges and successes, we hope to assist other researchers by providing valuable knowledge that can inform policy on youth mental health and primary prevention. The lessons also provide insights into primary health care practice with Aboriginal communities.

4.2 Contextualising Research on Suicide Prevention

In an attempt to tackle this significant public health concern, the South Australian government provided funding for a Suicide Prevention Initiative that targeted young males, in particular young Aboriginal males in rural and remote communities. The experiences of seven rural communities in developing and implementing local