

‘Researching ourselves back to life’: new ways of conducting Aboriginal alcohol research

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Abstract

*This paper highlights the importance—and provides an example—of Aboriginal control over research. It describes how Aboriginal people from Tangentyere Council conducted a survey of the attitudes of people who reside in Town Camps to a trial of liquor licensing restrictions in Alice Springs; how the results of the survey were used; and how the project led to the establishment of a permanent ‘Research Hub’ within Tangentyere Council. The paper provides a model of conducting research for other Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and can inform non-Aboriginal researchers about ways of working with Aboriginal community organisations to address substance misuse and other health problems. [Foster D, Williams R, Campbell D, Davis V, Pepperill L. ‘Researching ourselves back to life’: new ways of conducting Aboriginal alcohol research. *Drug Alcohol Rev* 2006;25:213–217]*

Key words: Aboriginal, alcohol, Alice Springs, research method.

Introduction

The objective of this paper is to describe how Aboriginal people from Tangentyere Council and the Alice Springs Town Camps (leasehold title areas) have taken control over research conducted in our communities; how we (Aboriginal researchers) have gone about conducting research and why we conduct it more effectively; and how we have used the results in our struggle to improve life for people in the Alice Springs Town Camps.

Tangentyere Council and the Town Camps

Alice Springs has a population of approximately 28 000 people—approximately 20% Aboriginal. Alice Springs belongs to the Mbantua people from the Central Arrente language-speaking group. Many other Aboriginal people migrated to Alice Springs after the closure of the Bungalow (originally the old Telegraph Station, but later used as a welfare settlement) and the beginning of equal pay for Aboriginal people who lived and worked on the stations throughout Central Australia in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Aboriginal

people then moved to sites around Alice Springs and lived in humpies (makeshift dwellings). Tangentyere Council was formed in 1974 to fight for the citizenship rights for Aboriginal people—including the rights to live in houses, to have power and water and to gain employment.

Today Tangentyere Council provides service to 18 Town Camps with a resident population of approximately 2000 people and a total service population of approximately 3000. The Town Camps cater for different language groups from the Central Australian region, including Arrente (Central, Eastern and Western), Anmatjere, Warlpiri and Luritja. Every camp has its own president and committee members, who are the voices of their communities. Representatives for the 18 Town Camps make up the Tangentyere Council Executive Committee, where they decide any programmes or projects to be conducted in the Camps and provide support and advocacy for residents [1].

Aboriginal people living in Central Australia and the Town Camps are badly affected by ‘grog’. It causes a great deal of sickness, death, violence and ‘sorry’ (funerals and mourning). It is a problem for all women

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and children and is very difficult to deal with when there are so many outlets and it is so easy to obtain. Many people do not have meaningful jobs and many young people do not have a good education, so people are sad, sorry and bored. Many drinkers think that grog will help, but it simply makes it worse.

Liquor restrictions

In April 2002, the Northern Territory Liquor Commission brought in a 12-month liquor restriction trial to lessen the problems caused by high drinking levels in Alice Springs. The restrictions were:

- only light beer to be sold in bars between 10.00 a.m. and 11.30 a.m.;
- no sales of alcohol in containers of more than 2 litres; and
- takeaway sales restricted to the hours of 2.00 p.m. and 9.00 p.m. on weekdays.

To complement the restrictions a day patrol was established and the dry-out shelter opened every day except Sundays [2].

The trial was to be evaluated by the Northern Territory Government's Department of Health and Community Services. As part of the evaluation, they were to run a survey of the attitudes of people in Alice Springs to these grog rules. Tangentyere Council was concerned that the voices of Town Campers would not be heard in the proposed survey. These concerns were well-founded. The Department planned a telephone survey: more than 90% of Town Camp residents do not own a telephone. In practice, this would mean that the Town Campers would not be able to participate in the survey.

The Town Camp survey

We did not think it fair that the Town Campers would not be included in the survey, especially when many people believe that Town Campers do not care about the grog problems, and they misjudge our opinions, our appearance and our way of living. Therefore, Tangentyere Council made the decision to conduct its own survey to ensure that Town Campers' feelings about the grog trials were heard.

In the past it was not possible for us to conduct our own research and we had to ask others to do it for us. Sometimes this worked, but mainly they took the information away and we could not use it to improve life for Town Campers. Tangentyere Council believes that Aboriginal people have to step up and take control of research on our people, and has aimed to develop a research process that ensures Aboriginal direction, ownership, participation and accountability is restored to Aboriginal people [3].

Tangentyere Council had worked with staff from the National Drug Research Institute (NDRI, Curtin University) and the Centre for Remote Health [CRH, a joint Centre of Flinders and Northern Territory (now Charles Darwin) Universities] before. We knew they were sympathetic to our aims, so we asked them to help us. They supported the project by offering their knowledge of research (external expertise) and resources. Tangentyere Council staff and Town Campers provided their knowledge of the context in which people live, their family and kinship relationships, their language and cultural skills and the trust people had in those individuals. We also provided vehicles and office space where people felt comfortable, and administered the entire project (internal expertise). Tangentyere Council gathered all the resources because it meant we had control from the beginning.

The research team

To form a research team we gathered Tangentyere Council employees and Town Camp residents to participate in researching our own people. With the majority of us living in the Town Camps and dealing with day-to-day issues there we have understanding and respect for each other, and it was an honour and great experience to be chosen to be part of the team.

We may not have university qualifications to be researchers, but we have resources that no other researchers have. We have the language skills, the knowledge and understanding of our culture, we speak and write in English and can communicate it back in our languages to our people.

Research training

Training for the researchers was conducted in a week-long workshop held at the Centre for Remote Health. The workshop was conducted by Dennis Gray from NDRI and Juanita Sherwood from CRH. They taught us how to conduct good research, how many people are needed to provide good results and how to ensure that other researchers would respect our work. We taught them about how to work in Town Camps and how to make sure that the researchers were safe and confident.

Survey questions

During the training, we sat down as a group and decided the best way to explain the purpose of the survey in language people could understand. Because the telephone survey would ask specific questions, we used those questions as a guide to help us develop our survey form so that we could compare our results, but we decided on the right questions to ask the people. We have respect for local culture and we did not ask

questions that made people feel ashamed or offended. We are internal experts and know how to word the questions appropriately.

We kept the questions short and simple and designed the survey form so that it was easy to use in the Camps, and so that there was little writing in front of people. We were also very careful about confidentiality and were sensitive to the Camp setting in which the questions were to be asked, and spent time talking about different ways of ensuring that people understood. This method of obtaining consent meant that the responsibility for consent was with the researchers; they would be the ones to answer if people felt later that they had not given consent. Informed consent is very important for us, because we are answerable to our community. We talked a great deal about how people would interpret the questions and we tried different ways of asking them—on each other and other Aboriginal people—until everyone was happy that Town Camp residents would understand. Ethical clearance for the project was given by the Central Australian Human Research Ethics Committee.

Who did we ask?

Before we conducted the survey we had to map the camps to ensure that we would give everyone the opportunity to have their say. We surveyed people from almost all the 270 households in the Camps. It took a large amount of planning but we learnt about random selection and about the numbers we would need to provide a good representation of the views of the Town Campers. We wanted both sides of the story so we had to be sure to survey enough people. We wanted everybody's story, but could not ask them all. We surveyed people only 18 years or over, different age groups, men and women, drinkers and non-drinkers on all camps. We used two-way expertise, university skills and Aboriginal skills; the outside experts worked out the numbers needed and the inside experts knew where to find the people, how to ask the questions and record answers.

Conducting the survey

As with the development of the questions, knowledge of the culture and way of life of Town Campers was essential for all aspects of the survey—including organisation of the research teams and their safety, when and how to visit the Camps and encouraging people to take part in the survey.

We prepared well. We organised vehicles, copying of survey forms, internal staffing arrangements, food and water, name badges, ensuring that social security payments were not affected by short-term employment, staff pick-ups, organised research teams and appointed

team leaders. The teams were organised so that the members had family connections on the Camps on which they were to work, they had both male and female members and had (Aboriginal) language speakers, so that they were acceptable to the residents and could communicate with them. In each team the researchers worked in pairs, and in each pair there was at least one partner who spoke an Aboriginal language.

We were concerned about the safety of the researchers and we were aware of the community and life-style. We know when to steer clear of trouble and when people are drinking, and when it might not be safe to visit. Each pair of researchers had telephones and vehicles available.

To ensure good participation, we had to let everyone know that the survey was being conducted. We explained to the Tangentyere Executive and staff what we were planning to do, and asked them to pass on the information to people in the Camps. One week before the survey was due to start, we also asked Tangentyere Council housing property management officers to distribute flyers in the Camps advertising the survey, and we went to each camp and explained to people when we were coming and why. This is very important for Town Campers, because they have had negative experiences with research before and we needed to explain that we were going to do the work.

As members of the community, we are responsive to diversity of people being interviewed—language, gender, age, family (kinship/skin) relationships, people's health and well-being. We know the context in which the interview is being conducted—who else is there, the cultural rules and verbal and non-verbal cues. We know how to dress, respect the elders and use appropriate behaviour that is respectful of our culture. We also know when 'sorry business' (funerals and mourning) or Aboriginal Law business is being held, so that we acknowledge people's loss appropriately and do not conduct the survey work in Camps at that time. We know when people are at home, the days of the week that are best to visit, the time of the week when people would be around and not feel pressured to participate. We also made sure that our staff were entering only those camps that they had permission to enter, and that no one was put into a situation that was unsafe for them.

Once we had ensured that the boss of the Camp was aware of us coming, we then entered the camps and approached individual houses. The first thing to do is to wait quietly for someone to see that you are there and invite you to come inside the yard. We introduced ourselves, explained what we were doing, and why, in a way that the person we were talking to understood, and then asked if they wanted to be a part of it. We then encouraged and answered any questions to ensure that consent was informed. We knew that many people did

not like signing anything and that simply obtaining a signature on a piece of paper was not obtaining informed consent; so the researchers signed a form confirming that the explanation had been given and that consent had been received.

Our Executive Director—William Tilmouth—says that there should be ‘no survey without service’. Therefore, as well as asking the survey questions, we also listened to any problems people might be having—such as with housing maintenance or services—and, if we could not help immediately, made a note of them.

At the end of each day, the team leaders checked to see that the survey forms were completed correctly. The teams reported all repairs and maintenance or social issues to relevant areas within Tangentyere Council and organised themselves for the next day: planning any follow-ups, who would take which vehicle, what time to commence and which Camp to target first.

We achieved much more discussion and information from the Town Campers because they felt comfortable with us, and could talk and not feel embarrassed or ‘shamed’. Many people would not provide good answers to non-Aboriginal people, whereas we could talk about many other things to make people feel comfortable and could help them understand more about the questions, allowing people to feel proud to be involved. If research is conducted in this way—with Aboriginal people in control and recognising Aboriginal expertise—the results will be more valid.

Data management and analysis

All data collected were managed by the Tangentyere researchers. It was all kept on the premises and confidentiality was maintained. With the help of the university researchers, it was coded and entered into the computer on Excel spreadsheets. We then moved the data onto the SPSS program and printed out reports for the Aboriginal researchers to examine, discuss, analyse and interpret. This is important, because often the meaning of the statistical results needs to be qualified; and some of our data were misinterpreted by the government evaluation team [4, p. 27].

We then reported the information and the results back to the Tangentyere Council Executive, Town Campers themselves, and the Licensing Commission.

Research findings and reporting

We found that a majority of people in the Town Camps were concerned about the misuse of alcohol and believed that something should be done to address it. As well as supporting the trial restrictions, they suggested a number of other things that could be done. These included further restrictions on availability (particularly banning the sale of 2-litre casks of port,

which had increased during the trial), discouraging public drinking and taking measures to curb problems caused by visitors to the camps.

First, we reported these findings to the Tangentyere Council Executive Committee, to inform them and to give them the opportunity to make comments or suggestions. With their permission, we produced two reports—one for the community and one for the Northern Territory Licensing Commission to consider in its review of the trial restrictions. We wrote the report for the Town Campers in language that they could understand, and we returned to the Camps and held meetings so that the people could see for themselves how we had conducted the work and for them to ensure that we did what we said we would do. This also gave people the opportunity to contribute any more information or thoughts they had for the future. Because it was a technical report, we asked Dennis Gray to write our findings in the report for the Commission. In that report, Tangentyere Council made 11 recommendations to the Licensing Commission on how to reduce the problems caused by grog in Alice Springs [5].

Discussion

We presented our report to the Northern Territory Licensing Commission, but it did not appear to take a great deal of notice of our recommendations. Instead of strengthening the restrictions, it weakened them by lifting the ban on the sale of alcohol in containers of more than 2 litres [6,7].

While we had little success in influencing the Licensing Commission, the research process has been important for Tangentyere Council. The research was different from most research conducted in Aboriginal communities, because Aboriginal people planned and carried out the survey, analysed the results and decided what should be included in the written reports. Because we did this we achieved greater community participation throughout the research process and more valid results than research carried out, or controlled by, non-Aboriginal people.

An important part of the survey was the Town Camp residents seeing Aboriginal people conducting the survey in their own environment. We needed support from the university researchers to ensure that our research was of high quality, but Aboriginal people like to have their own people conduct the research. The project showed that we could indeed take charge of our own research.

As a result of this, we have established our own Research Hub and we have signed a memorandum of understanding with NDRI, CRH and the Centre for Social Research at Edith Cowan University, under which they will provide us with ongoing support. The Research Hub has now completed a survey of mobility

between Town Camps and remote communities with the CRH and is conducting a trial population survey for the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

We believe that our process of research is one that can be applied by other Aboriginal organisations and that it can improve the quality of research on Aboriginal substance misuse and other health problems. Aboriginal people can conduct their own research, and carry it out more effectively, because they know their communities; they know how to manage the research process, ensuring that the work is completed; can ensure that analysis is comprehensive and appropriate; and can make the results immediately available for the community. We also hope that knowledge of this process informs non-Aboriginal researchers about ways of working with Aboriginal community organisations to address the problems we face.

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