Aboriginal community researchers: promoting meaningful research outcomes in remote Aboriginal communities

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Employing and training local Aboriginal people to co-design and work on research projects in their communities provides genuine capacity development opportunities for community-based researchers, and also ensures the quality of the research and its impacts.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the Ninti One Aboriginal Community Researcher network and to explore the value that Aboriginal Community Researchers bring to research and other policy and programs in remote Australia. Ninti One staff – a Senior Research Officer and an Aboriginal Community Researcher – will present a firsthand description of their work and the benefits of the approach for communities, research projects and individual researchers.

Ninti One Ltd is a national not-for-profit company that creates opportunities for people in remote Australia through research, innovation and community development. We manage the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation, the intellectual property arising from the former Desert Knowledge CRC and a portfolio of other fee-for-service projects. Our Board is chaired by Professor Tom Calma, previously the Aboriginal Social Justice Commissioner.

Since July 2011, Ninti One Ltd has employed nearly 200 people as Aboriginal Community Researchers in participatory action research and community development projects in remote communities across Australia. Just over 20% have worked with us in two or more of those years.

Local people are trained and engaged to join our research teams, contributing their deep cultural knowledge at all stages of the research cycle: setting priorities and research questions; obtaining community approvals and participant informed consent; creating survey and other research instruments and supporting material; working with project leaders from academic, industry and government organisations; collecting and analysing data; presenting results and feeding back research findings to community members and organisations. Cairney and Abbott[1] note that inviting Aboriginal researchers to participate and be listened to in the early stage of developing research can be empowering. Such inclusive approaches are still relatively rare in remote Australia, despite over a decade of criticism and arguments aimed at 'decolonising' research [2,3,4].

The ongoing and enduring benefits of community control over priority setting and service delivery are well known, especially in relation to Aboriginal health services.[5,6] Allen and Clarke[7] cite Lavoie et al[8] and Carr and Lee[9] as examples where Indigenous controlled services have been shown to outperform other delivery mechanisms for marginalised communities.

As Biddle[10] observes "Indigenous communities are diverse and local conditions and aspirations matter. Policies designed to reduce disadvantage need to be …developed in genuine collaboration with affected communities". The *Empowered Communities* report[11] identifies that the authority to decide and act should rest at the closest level possible to the people or organisations that the decision or action is designed to serve – the same principle of subsidiarity as is enshrined in the European Union treaty. .

Our network of Aboriginal Community Researchers provides a practical way for Aboriginal communities to have much greater influence and control over research and the findings. Developing the capacity of Aboriginal Community researchers can enable them to "gain power in the academic discourse" [1].

By collaborating with Aboriginal Community Researchers, so-called "mainstream" researchers also gain a greater understanding of the community and cultural context in which they are operating, and the research project inevitably benefits from more meaningful and deeper engagement with participants.

For the individual, working as an Aboriginal Community Researcher is a source of meaningful work as people are valued for their local and cultural knowledge, it pays well, and commonly leads to other employment opportunities.

Abbott and Cairney [12] describe the evolution of the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation's Interplay project and the critical role that Aboriginal Community Researchers have played, and continue to play, in the project. The authors identify a 'shared space' where science, the community and government work on equal footings to develop research knowledge and communication tools. Elsewhere at this conference, Yashadhana and Stanley also describe the value that Aboriginal Community Researchers bring to the research collaboration aimed at understanding Aboriginal people's experiences of the patient journey through the eye care system.

In Ninti One's experience, the approach is scalable from small to large projects, providing sufficient support such as on-site training, advice, and communication and other necessary infrastructure can be provided to on-ground staff.

As it is essentially a participatory action approach, it can be implemented across a range of locations. At the time of writing (in April 2015), Ninti One had Aboriginal Community Researchers active in the Top End and Central Australia, in South Australia, in north-western NSW and in West Australia. It is also possible to service a raft of different roles and requirements – quantitative and qualitative research; community development activities; service delivery needs assessments and improvement; and program and project monitoring and evaluation. Again, at the time of writing, Ninti One's Aboriginal Community Researchers are engaged in all these types of activities.

What then are the implications of engaging Aboriginal Community Researchers in research and other projects for research funding and improved service delivery to remote communities? What are the take home lessons for policy advisors and program managers?

Firstly, engaging Aboriginal Community Researchers pays off for individual workers as well as for their communities. As the demand for local participation has increased, so has our capacity to employ people for longer and over more projects. Average and median annual incomes for working as an Aboriginal Community Researcher have risen significantly since July 2011 (increase in average income 295%; increase in median income 361%). A number of experienced researchers have moved on to more regular positions with other institutions; and local employment services report that working as Aboriginal Community Researchers greatly increases the confidence of young adults. In the current policy environment of 'kids in school, adults in work, and safer communities', jobs for Aboriginal Community Researchers are an easy win.

Secondly, engaging local Aboriginal people in co-designing and implementing research and other projects brings benefits to all of the collaborating parties. Local communities and individuals feel more powerful, and this directly relates to their feelings of wellbeing.[1] The research or other project is more likely to bring benefits to the community – the questions asked are more relevant, and the answers are more likely to be meaningful. As a result, researchers and service providers can have greater confidence in the information they have before them. An iterative, participatory approach can then be used to co-design service improvements, or to reach firm conclusions and recommendations arising from the research.

Thirdly, this return on investment from participatory approaches requires significant upfront investment in terms of time and funds. As with any collaboration, parties must be flexible and make the time available to have meaningful interactions. Transaction costs of collaboration are inevitably higher than going it alone. Ninti One recognises the special skills and deep knowledge that Aboriginal Community Researchers contribute to projects and pays them accordingly. Together with the cost of good support and training, this can add up to a significant investment by our clients. What we, and our clients know, is that this investment, pays off in the additional value that is generated.

As Biddle[10] concludes "policy should aim to support those things that work and learn from those that don't". We know that engaging Aboriginal Community Researchers in participatory action approaches works – we invite you to share our experience.

Recommendations for policy and program makers:

- Ensure that policies and program guidelines require local Aboriginal people to be involved in co-designing and delivering research and other projects.

- Ensure that programs recognize the investment in time and funds required for local Aboriginal people to co-design and participate in delivering projects.

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Presenters

Tammy Abbott is from the Western Arrernte and Luritja/Pintipi tribes of Central Australia. She grew up in Alice Springs surrounded by family from remote communities such as Papunya and Ntaria (Hermannsburg). Tammy is a Senior Research Officer with Ninti One and works on projects across remote Australia including local community action planning, wellbeing, income management and rough sleeping. She specialises in community engagement and enjoys working with Aboriginal community researchers as part of her projects. In her experience employing community researchers who have expert knowledge of language, culture and community, helps to ensure the best possible outcomes for communities from research.

Lauren Taylor is a clinical psychologist (registrar) and research associate at the Autism Association of Western Australia and the University of Western Australia. She has 10 years' experience working with children, adolescents and adults with autism spectrum disorder, across early intervention, school and residential settings. Lauren is currently a project leader for a national project that is investigating diagnostic practices for autism spectrum disorder. She is also working to establish a graduate certificate in assessment and diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. Both of these projects are initiatives of the Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism Spectrum Disorders (Autism CRC). The overarching aim of these projects is to establish a national baseline for diagnostic practices and to improve national diagnostic standards for ASD.