Doing Whitefella’ Research in Blackfella’ Communities in Australia: Decolonizing Method in Sports Related Research

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Abstract

There is much for non-Indigenous researchers to consider when researching in Indigenous contexts. This paper is a story of discovery for two researchers working on a project with the Indigenous Sports Program section of the Australian Sports Commission. It documents the slow, meticulous and sometimes clumsy steps taken to gain access to communities and conduct research guided by a social justice ethic. The research was successful in that eventually it was possible to develop the trust of individuals and some of the Indigenous communities more broadly, so that information could be gathered and given within the context of shared understandings and mutual interest. However, it is the turbulent journey, filled as it is, with latent tendencies, privileged assumptions and eventually reflexive readings of the data, which remains the focus of this paper. Tentative recommendations are offered to those wishing to advance this politically and epistemologically challenging approach to culturally based research.

Keywords: Indigenous communities, sensitive research, reflexivity, colonialism
Our notions of race (and its use) are so complex that even when it fails to “make sense” we continue to employ and deploy it.

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009, p. 18)

In 2009, The Australian Sports Commission (ASC) was successful in securing funding from the Laureus Sport for Good Foundation, a major international charitable organization based in London, to conduct research on what happens (we are reluctant to use the word effectiveness) when sports programs are delivered to marginalized communities and groups. At the time, there was a section in the Sports Commission called the Indigenous Sport Program (ISP) and this was to be the organizing unit for the grant administration with the University of Queensland, in Brisbane, Australia acting as the research partner. The first responsibility of this section of the ASC was the design and delivery of sports programs specifically into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. In many respects these might be seen as ‘intervention’ programs. Hence the aim of the Indigenous Sport Program (ISP) was to increase the number of Indigenous Australians participating in structured sporting activities and provides pathways for longer-term retention. The ISP also worked to increase opportunities for Indigenous people to learn the skills needed to organize, deliver and manage community-based sport for the future. Readers will note the intentional use of
past tense here. In a neoliberal climate large government bureaucracies are inevitably vulnerable to restructuring (in search of so-called flatter organizational lines). This transpired to be the case for the ISP. In spite of this, the ongoing work of the ISP (in whatever manifestation) is to contribute to the “closing the gap” and “preventative” health agendas of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG).

The mission of the Laureus Sport for Good Foundation is to utilize the power of sport to address social challenges through a worldwide program of sports related community development initiatives, using sport as a tool for social change. It is a high profile organization that has leading advocates for social justice and social change within its management structure and on its international board many of whom have been very high profile international sports competitors or National Leaders in politics.

It was under these circumstances that two researchers (one of whom had been at the Sports Commission in a different role) from the University of Queensland assumed responsibility for the project. The excitement of both procuring the funding and embarking on what seemed to be an important project was quickly dulled as we realized we were about to put our toes into some politically turbulent water. Our non-Indigenous identities were not lost on us and we found ourselves in a situation of not knowing where to start.

This paper is a story of discovery for both field researchers and it documents the slow and meticulous and sometimes inadvertently clumsy steps taken to gain access to the communities and eventually develop their trust to gather and give information in a research project. Importantly, the very act of writing this story brings to the fore not just a certain essence of method but a coalescence of method and knowledge. The literary turn we take here is also an account of the “science” in which we engaged. As Clifford (1986) argues, to limit writing to method, field notes and writing up results simply belies its power. Such a stance, Clifford argues, is no longer tenable and as he says “science is in, not above,
historical and linguistic processes” (p.2). We have also followed the words of Richardson (2000) and drawn upon analytical and creative techniques to tell this story to greatest effect. As she says, anyone who believes that these modalities are incompatible is “standing in the path of a meteor” (p.10). However we have tried to overcome the convention of self-suppression and therefore locate our identities squarely within the story. To do otherwise would simply be dishonest and do a great disservice to the tale we consider needs to be told. To this end, we draw on representations and accounts drawn from our time in the field as a way of “seeing through and beyond social scientific naturalisms” (Richardson, 2000, p.11). It is our contention that this process not only contributed to our reflexive processes detailed later but also greatly enhanced our ethical understanding of our research presence in the field.

Following Milner’s (2007) advice, we seek to actively engage with the tensions that can surface when conducting research where race and culture are concerned. We first talk about the complexities of conducting research as non-Indigenous researchers and in doing so come to terms with our own internal processes as we attempted to “deal with difference” and overcome latent racism and colonialism. We then describe some of the pragmatics of conducting research across multiple Indigenous sites along the eastern seaboard of Australia (a linear distance of well over 3000 kilometers - over 1800 miles) and the dialectic this created between our own reflections and the experiences of being in the field. Whilst the tyranny of distance posed significant problems, gaining access to community was of far greater concern. However in the end, we realized that these two challenges were inextricably linked. We continue by theorizing reflexivity such that we could make sense of it methodologically and then we detail the prolonged and careful reflexive steps we took, in collaboration with the communities to develop a relationship of some trust that enabled us to gather narratives. We conclude with some tentative recommendations for research of this
kind. Throughout the paper we draw on other theoretical positions that guided us along the way and in fact continue to do so as the research progresses.

**Knowledge, Colonialism and Decisions About Process**

It is almost trite to say that colonization has had a profound effect on the original and traditional occupants of many countries of the world. However it is not just technology, material goods and disease that were brought to these lands by the colonizers; it was also the way the colonizers saw and made sense of the world that has had a lasting effect. It is not unreasonable to call this a supremacist view (see Chilisa, 2012; Smith, 1999). Hence local knowledge has been routinely ignored (or in some cases systematically eradicated) for up to 400 years depending on the landmass upon which one stands. Attempts to “decolonize” the research process, dominated as it tends to be by Enlightenment thinking, is fraught with challenges not least of which is the de-essentializing of Indigenous people (Smith 1999). For us, this was especially difficult as it is worth noting here that no Australian Indigenous community should be regarded as the same as another. Moreover, the diversity of Indigenous communities is more widely distributed across the Australian landmass than non-indigenous Australians (Nelson, 2009). The impact of the history of displacement is also significant and in this project many participants could identify as “Aboriginal” or “Indigenous” but could not identify as a member of a particular tribe, group, clan or mob (all of these English words are widely used). Sometimes regional terms such as Murri, Koori and Nunga are used for Aboriginal people. However, these terms are not especially helpful as they conceal family ties to land and tensions within and across groups related to historical tenure of country. Nelson, (2009) drawing on the work of Jonas and Langton (1994) indicates that an “Aboriginal person is a descendant of an Indigenous inhabitant of Australia, identifies as an Aboriginal, and is recognized as Aboriginal by members of the community in which he or she lives” (p.97). One can see that even this definition has the potential to be regarded as
politically charged. At a general level, the collective terms “Indigenous” (capitalized) and “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander” people (title capitalized) appear to be broadly acceptable terms.

To say this complicated our intentions to deal with difference would be an exercise in understatement. Therefore, our starting point in dealing with difference was that there was no difference between ourselves, as white people, and the people with whom we would be working. We took the view that other than skin color (and in some cases even this was not apparent), the members of the communities with whom we were about to work were more or less the same as us in terms of: interests, motivations, desires, needs and so on. We took this view on moral grounds attempting to overcome the extraordinary privilege by which we were advantaged. Our attempt to deny difference was a “non-racist strategy” rather than “anti-racist” (Hermes, 1999). In other words we chose to acknowledge the “gaps” between “us and them” (life expectancy, access to wealth and income, private housing, access to amenities and services) and to ignore them as irrelevant rather than seeking to work against such inequality (or at least be motivated to do so). The impact however of an early site visit was to have an enormous effect on how we read the first data set and this made us realize that we needed to start again. We came to understand how we had attempted to minimize what is sometimes called the structural features of racism (Bonilla-Silva & Baiocchi, 2001) such as overt perceptions of “deficit” within Aboriginal communities, simply by being (or at least trying to be) objective researchers of culture. Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992) refer to this deficit of others as symbolic violence. It is an unintentional act of perception (see also Butryn, 2002 for his critique of “color-blindness” within the context of sports sciences) and though we constantly checked ourselves throughout the study we more than once fell into such unintentional acts.
Perhaps as Razack (2000) suggested, we benignly and symbolically promoted the narratives of innocence so dominant in what she refers to as white nation states. So though we took what we assumed to be a careful guard against a deficit positioning of the Aboriginal communities – we found it hard not to talk in deficit terms. Butryn (2002) argued that in the practice of applied sports psychology such deficit perspectives, born largely out of white privilege and the Eurocentric process of “othering”, are difficult to overcome. Moreover he argues that special training in multicultural sports psychology is highly desirable. In particular, Butryn suggested that in attempting to overcome (2002) “questionable sensitivity”, a term borrowed from Andersen (1993), white consultants (we can insert the word researchers here) need to critically examine their white racial identity with a view to as he says “decenter whiteness as a dominant, yet invisible or taken-for-granted, perspective …” (p. 317). Even with our consciences fully primed by a clear recognition of the “myriad of social advantages, benefits and courtesies that come form being a member of the dominant race” (Delgado & Stefanie, 2001. p.40), in the beginning, our colonial morality was abundantly apparent.

In Search of a Reflexive Approach

The limits of science both epistemologically and methodologically are well rehearsed (Latour & Woolgar, 1979) and probably do not warrant analysis here. That said; disciplined inquiry particularly within the scientific genre appeals not least because it makes claims to certainty. Research problems then are eminently solvable. However we became aware that our understanding of the world, proceeding as it was from the position of white academics, was clearly shaped by Enlightenment logic. Moreover, as academics, that work in universities, our view of the world also proceeds from a position of privilege. We quickly learned we needed to be mindful to prosecute that privilege with adequate caution,
It is important to note that attempts to understand race reflexively is not new. The epistemological challenge to what might have been considered to be universal truths such as the concept of white supremacy, notions of the nimble savage, brain size and race (the list is almost endless) has a lengthy and controversial history. This is also the case in sport. Adair and Rowe (2010) indicated how, as long ago as 1963 West Indian (someone from the Caribbean Islands) writer C. L. R. James harnessed reflexive prose to critique the make-up of the West Indian cricket team that consisted predominantly of black players but with a white captain. His purpose was not to essentialize “blackness” but as Adair and Rowe noted, to challenge the political power game that stratified the society on the basis of race suggesting leadership resided with one particular race better than it did another. As Adair and Rowe indicated, James’ agenda was more about equity for all rather than affirmative action. For James it was just not conceivable that leadership talent was not spread across all elite level cricketers. In keeping with this, Woolgar (1988) suggested “we need continually to interrogate and find strange the process of representation as we engage in it” (pp.28-29). This was a major challenge for us as the project progressed. Clifford (1983) referred to ethnographic accounts as “specific inventions”. Believing they are neither partial nor distorted he suggests there is a reliance on improvisation and what he calls historically contingent fictions and in this sense he advocates an equal distribution of responsibility for and power within the construction of narratives between the researcher, the researched and the research. He suggested that in not doing so the researcher will fail to take advantage of the dialogical implications of the relationship. This is emphasized within the context of cultural sport psychology research by McGannon & Johnson (2009). Whilst they have argued predominantly from the perspective of self, identity and identity politics, they build a case to
suggest reflexivity is the epistemological challenge researchers need to set themselves through the research dialectics encountered and indeed generated. Encounters such as researcher and participant, researcher; researcher and context; participant and context play out amidst the power differentials between all the players. Reflexivity, McGannon and Johnson (2009) argued, draws researchers to questions such as “what do I know” and “how did I come to know it”, or “how did this knowledge come into being and what was my role in its construction”? These were our challenges and yet they appeared to be difficult to solve. The confluence of contexts (i.e. the different communities), the distance of the sites from our university and from each other, and our whitefella status seemingly conspired against us to make the project work. The limits of member checking (given distance, access and relatively low frequency of visits) almost seemed to us like lip service to a methodological accountability process and to the lofty ideals of power sharing. In reality there was no power sharing in any formal sense. Power distribution varied from site to site, from event to event (formal meetings with Elders or research site visits) and on some occasions, even by the hour and this reflected the ebb and flow of the conversations. It would be foolish to say power was not an issue, but neither was it unidirectional and at times power clearly shifted away from us as visiting academics regardless of our privilege and this was particularly the case on one visit where we were “grilled” on process, veracity, sharing knowledge, ownership of knowledge and how the community would be represented.

**Enacted Reflexivity and Researcher Vanity**

We were aware that we ran the risk of epitomizing what Maton (2003) called a “virtuous researcher”. We were initially convinced that we were conducting this research within the accepted principles of social justice and power sharing. However Maton (2003) described this kind of “enacted reflexivity” as something similar to an academic guilt trip or worse still reflexive vanity (Kenway & McLeod, 2004) that ends up being overly narcissistic and only
modestly informative for the audience or readership. Kenway and McLeod (2004) (and indeed Maton, 2003) suggested that although this individualized attention to reflexivity has merit it reaches its epistemological limits fairly quickly.

We have attempted to walk a line of self-reflection whilst recognizing that simultaneously, this focus on us potentially obscures the participants’ voices. As Haggis (2004) pointed out, focusing attention on whiteness can strengthen rather than displace privilege and even though this was not our intention, in hindsight it was clearly what we were doing. Similarly, Probyn (2004) argued that to “give up power” as a white person inevitably results in power being taken up in another form, for example, “taking responsibility or taking a good hard look at yourself” (p. 2). We recognize that our self-reflection is an exercise in power as whitefellas, our ability to opt out of engagement with complex issues of race; a privilege many Indigenous people do not have (Lampert, 2003; Wildman & Davis, 2000). Nonetheless our aim is to explicate our own wrestling with our position in this research and to make visible that which is so often invisible (Butryn, 2002; Young, 2004). These are not confessions of white guilt, but rather, attempts to grapple intellectually and affectively with privilege in order to see how it limits or gives insight to the research (Cowlishaw, 2004).

Of significant importance in the reflexive project is undermining what is referred to as the “scholastic point of view” (Schirato & Webb, 2003), acknowledging that texts are filtered through our own lenses for our own (academic) purposes. Following anti-racist research methods, we recognize that different people have different knowledge(s) based on their embodied histories and experiences (Wahab, 2005) and it is expected that the researcher will critically examine his or her own experience and knowledge as part of the research process (Dei, 2005). We do not claim to “know” the Indigenous people in the communities we visited other than through narratives that were being shared with us. With this in mind, we now share
some of what we have learned, positioning ourselves as “learners” in this research, rather than “knowers” (Daniel, 2005).

**Getting Started: Saying G’day and Telling Our Story**

Our first task was to visit the various research sites and introduce ourselves to the community leaders. The sports “intervention” had been set up with Surfing Australia who had presented a case to the ASC as a viable partner in Indigenous sport. It is important to note at this point that Australian Indigenous engagement in sport has a long association with colonialism and discriminatory practices to the point of essentializing Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders as being “good” at sport (Booth & Tatz, 2000) with participation in sports encouraged as a civilizing process. Notwithstanding this general ability ascribed to Indigenous Australians, they were also casually described as unreliable, ill disciplined and even lazy. One of the benefits of choosing surfing is that it is a sport not commonly associated with Indigenous Australians even though there is a growing Indigenous surf culture and many groups would identify as “saltwater” communities. Our role at this point was to try and show where we as researchers actually fitted in to the whole project. Hence our early visits to each site were for us to tell the research story, tell our story; in other words, who we were and where we were from (not just the university, but where we had lived, where we were born, what has been our life). Such stories were seemingly of far greater importance. With the exception of one case, our identities as academics were almost inconsequential or at least coincidental; they really wanted to know if we were “good fellas”. This was crucial since how we presented ourselves to the community would determine just how far this project went.

We were keen to create the *possibility* of a positive relationship with the participating communities but made no assumptions about this as certain to happen; we were conscious that we represented institutions that have in the past imposed other forms of colonial rule, particularly through early anthropological studies (Cowlishaw, 2003; Wolfe, 1994). However
without good relationships, the study was unlikely to progress. As Fitzgerald (2010) suggested:

Building a relationship provides an essential foundation for the respectful research that honours (sic) people’s cultural values and avoids misappropriating their knowledge. Relationships are particularly important when the researcher’s cultural background differs from those of the participants. (p.81)

Our early visits, which were always with the community leaders, were tentative, part to present a face that could become known within the community over time and part to describe the nature and scope of the project and what role the community might want, if any at all. In return we made all the customary gestures about returning text to communities for verification, capacity-building ventures related to skills training and control over the release of information and in what format. The project had full ethical approval through the University and the ASC and our paperwork, methods and assurances satisfied the demands not only of ethical research but also of research conducted in, with and indeed on (it is a nonsensical self-betrayal to leave this out) Indigenous groups and individuals. Each leadership group (as representatives of their communities) had the final say on whether the project would go ahead in the community. Of course this did not mean that it would. At the level of the individual there was complete autonomy, so whilst we eventually were granted permission to go ahead in all communities this did not guarantee the participation of individuals. For this we had to become known on a much wider scale. This is consistent with the experiences of Schinke et al (2008) in their work with Canadian Aboriginal elite athletes. In the Schinke et al study, as with this one, previous community experiences with university researchers had not been entirely agreeable. As a consequence, their entry to the community
was tentative, negotiated and framed by forging lasting relationships. Indeed relationship building is the hallmark of this study and a subsequent related study by Schinke and others (2009). An important feature of these studies (and others from the same team) is that it is a long-standing collaborative project where part of the aim was total inclusion of the community members in the research. The project and methods we report upon here involves multiple sites and communities and our first level of collaboration had to be through the Australian Sports Commission. At the community level, we were trying to get connected to several groups across a significant distance. The building of relationships was clearly identified as a key feature of this work.

We were also mindful of not trying to achieve “insider” status, a point Fitzpatrick (2010) emphasized. Trying to become insiders would have been foolish. Other than one of the sites, we lived nowhere near these communities and though we spent time in the community we were not of the community. Thus “being connected” was more important than being on the inside. In this regard we agree with Fitzpatrick (2010) in her challenge to the ideas of, for example, Hammersly (1992) that insider status is required for authenticity. We acknowledge that insider status may be useful, even essential in some cases. However we would have been deluding ourselves if we thought this was ever likely or that it was particularly important in terms of the nature of the data we might collect. Moreover, being an outsider required us at all times not to become complacent about the welcome that had been extended to us.

Despite this attention to preparatory detail, we were still uneasy. As Fine (1993) described, even the best intentioned research that follows directions replete with caveats about good and fair practice and in our case, objective inquiry consistent with the expectations of a research intense university, can represent the participants in the darkest conceivable light. Our projects, immersed in researcher subjectivities (like it or not) become
the victim of either over zealous methods of data collection or representation or worse still both, not because researchers are inherently bad people but more simply as Fine (1993) suggests, because of the expectations of academic life. And in the “audit age” of universities this is unlikely to change.

**Entering the Field**

*Just hanging out*

The first venture into the field for the formal purposes of data gathering was a trip to South Australia. To set the scene we should explain that this entailed a two and a half hour flight then a four-hour drive to the research site. The first author attended this first visit. It was a surf camp organized by local workers and coaches with Surfing South Australia. It was held in a remote part of the state and lasted the whole weekend. Armed with informed consent forms, participant information forms, project descriptions, digital voice recorders, and cameras the stage was set for a weekend of fieldwork. We need to refer back here to something we said earlier; we needed to be known on a much wider scale. As Fitzgerald (2010) describes, many of her visits were about establishing trust and “building ongoing relationships” (p.82). It was apparent very early on that the first weekend in the field was going to be spent in this way. The idea of sitting someone at a table, explaining the research protocols under which we were working, asking for signed consent and then getting this person to speak into a microphone was an unrealistic expectation. It has nothing to do with any individual capacity to understand or do such things. More simply, the researcher in attendance was a total stranger, a nobody, even an interloper. Important tasks this weekend were washing dishes after mealtimes, helping to carry surfboards to and from the beach, helping kids get fitted to wet suits, playing indoor five-a-side soccer in the hall with the children, getting all the rubbish away after a meal. Literally it was just “hanging out” with the community. On the beach, talking to the youth workers (all Indigenous), parents, senior
community members was more about “having a yarn” (a form of storytelling and sharing) rather than talking over the nuances of sustainable programs of sport and contributions to positive risk taking and health.

The researcher took field notes of observations on a casual basis. These were not systematic notes, more notes of reminder to either follow up afterwards or to help remember a particular facet of the day or evening. It is worth using a short verbal exchange here to demonstrate how this was received back at the university. This short interchange captures the essence of a conversation between the researcher and a Faculty colleague. AR represents the initials of the researcher and CW stands for co-worker:

CW: How was your weekend?
AR: Yeah great, conducted our first bit of fieldwork in the project
CW: Terrific – did you get some good stuff?
AR: Fantastic, spent the whole weekend with the community, hung out, talked to loads of people, got to know a few of the kids’ names … should be able to start collecting some data next time we go down if all goes well
CW: So what did you gather this time?
AR: Well nothing really, I wrote a few notes for myself, jotted down some ideas – but yeah it was terrific.
CW: So you went all the way to South Australia and you didn’t gather any data?
AR: Well not in any formal sense. Like I said, I wrote notes for most of the weekend but spent most of the time getting to know people, helping out at the camp and so on
CW: Bit of a waste of time then – bet it cost a bit too
AR: Well … it was more … (conversation ends with AR a bit lost for words)
We have taken a bit of poetic license here and though the conversation did not go exactly like this, it is a pretty close account. The purpose of sharing it here is that our colleague who works mostly in a laboratory couldn’t fathom how we could spend that amount of time and money on “just hanging out”. The idea of having to bridge equity and cultural divides as part of the research process (M. Fine, 2003) was simply something he had not encountered or had needed to account for. However, our moral superiority was misplaced (G. A. Fine, 1993), and as we read the data from the first field visit our colonial selves re-emerged.

**Deficit slip ups**

It is reasonable to suggest that the cultural politics surrounding Indigeneity in Australia is highly contested. For example Mitchell (1996) is unequivocal – Indigenous disadvantage is directly connected to contact with an invading Caucasian race and the systematic dispossession of pretty much anything important since that point. Sutton (2009) on the other hand believes disadvantage to be much more complex and is prepared to ascribe some of the reason to a sustained culture of dependency followed by what he perceives to be a misguided policy of laissez-faire self-determination. Pearson (2009b) a high profile Aboriginal leader, lawyer and activist is more strident; the culture of welfare dependency he argues, has led to a culture of deficit. Taking a position within these competing discourses is difficult, however one is compelled to particularly when dealing with an accumulating data set. This next section describes how we read the first fieldwork experience in a deficit manner.

**Making (non)sense of the first field notes**

After the first visit where observational notes were taken there was a period of contemplation about what had been witnessed; this process started almost immediately. Before we analyze the contemplations, we need to describe and explain how the surf weekend unfolded.
Primarily the camp was for a particular community but other communities and groups were invited if they were prepared to make the trip. Two additional groups attended making a journey of over five hours to get to the site. The two groups that had travelled furthest were waiting in the car park when the Surfing SA coaches and the researcher arrived. The group most local to the designated beach (and for whom the weekend was targeted) was an hour late. The first author recorded this as a field note, the language of which set a misconstrued tone for the rest of the weekend. The field note was captured as follows:

_The local community, on whose traditional country we now stand, arrived an hour late having had to travel less than half the time of the others. This meant that the lead coach who had commenced the session, had to come out of the water to suit the new arrivals and equip them with boards. This was very disruptive as it meant the session had to go on ‘hold’. The other children then started to get cold as they waited on the beach for the coach to return. Eventually everyone was on the beach and the session resumed, those who had been in the water could go back in but could only paddle in the white water, the coach had to bring the new arrivals up to speed with beach based exercises._

This may seem like an innocuous note. However, in it are the beginnings of deficit thinking already starting to emerge. There were supplementary notes attached to this entry – all in staccato note form, “why late?”, “who took responsibility?”, “do they know we are paying the coach for a certain time frame?”

The tenor of these notations, reveal thoughts of blame, suspicion and even stereotyping. Additional observations later in the weekend focused not on what was
happening in the water but more to do with who was on the beach and why. Other field notes reveal observations related to why there were so many adults and far fewer children, why there were mothers and babies, who were the men that had attended the weekend. These are not observations but rather assumptions based on interpretations shaped by latent colonialism. As a consequence the first author constructed an account of a community that came along for a free weekend away, paid, catered for, and serviced by taxpayers money and government employees. In other words, the event was framed by a culture of dependency and a deficit stereotype was perpetuated.

**Getting a better vision**

Despite a strong social justice value and a belief in critical thinking and self-reflection, the first researcher had been lulled into an analysis framed by conventional, but privatized racism. Significantly, some of this had come about as a consequence of a reading of Noel Pearson’s work the first author had undertaken on the trip to the research site. As indicated earlier, Pearson is an Indigenous lawyer and activist who had worked on the historic Mabo and Wik decisions related to Native Title in Australia in the early 1990s. His (2009a) searing attack of the culture of dependency created through what he calls “sit-down money” (welfare without responsibility) was highly influential – leading to an account of the surf event framed by a culture of dependency lens.

As Bourdieu (2004) suggests, to understand first requires one to understand the field against which one has been formed. As researchers within the context of universities each of us would reject the description racist. More generally, we work to eradicate such inhumanity within our teaching, professional activity and research. However, we are products of a system that privileges the whiteness of skin and the values of the dominant (white) culture of the settler state. No matter that we might regard ourselves to be from lower to middle working classes, each of us has a degree of privilege that shapes the way we see the world. In this
white world, being on time, being ready, being prepared are all expectations of our ontology. It is with this in mind, we took a more reflexive view and re-crafted our interpretations of the weekend’s events.

First, we went back to our original theoretical orientation. We sought to understand our research sites and the participating communities through the lens of social capital. Social capital is not without its critics and remains controversial in the extent of its uses and to some extent in Putnam’s (2000) rather romanticized view of idealized American life. Indeed its use in an Indigenous context might be seen as the imposition of yet more western knowledge on communities oppressed by the yoke of colonialism. However, it has been used before to bring understanding to research work with Indigenous communities (see for example, Brough, et al., 2006) and has been used widely in sport (see Skinner, Zakus, & Cowell, 2008; Vermeulen & Verweel, 2011). Consequently, we considered Putnam’s (2000) notion of bridging and bonding capital to have particular merit for this project. Bonding capital is concerned with the social networks formed within groups and bridging capital is about developing social networks across groups (or communities). We considered this to have value because we knew we were likely to be working within and across communities. We do not suggest the complexities of Indigenous communities can be reduced down to this somewhat prosaic level. However, it provided a mechanism by which we could make sense of the power of the sport of surfing within communities and what it might offer not just individual participants, but groups of participants and indeed whole communities. Inevitably, once we gathered more information, this cast an entirely different picture. First, the late arrival of the group on the Saturday morning was because of a death in the community, an all too salient reminder of the life-expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This had required most of the senior members of the community to take responsibility for the funeral arrangements but also for the support of younger community members for the loss of
an “uncle”. It was the same senior members who had also assumed responsibility to get the children to the surf camp by pooling cars and sharing drivers. Indeed, as many of the community came to the event so that they could enjoy the younger members of the group experiencing surfing in what we were later told was their country (land upon which this particular group claim an unbroken tenure). The community involvement started to make much clearer sense. In addition, the event enabled groups (mobs) from other areas to mingle and mix, and as it transpired to make family connections across groups. Analysis through a social capital lens presented us with a different and indeed clearer picture.

Had observational notes been less inscribed with our own virtues of punctuality and white ways of doing things, we might have got a picture less cluttered with colonial assumptions. Admittedly, we did not have adequate information to make any reasonable analysis. However this is all the more reason to hold back. Using social capital as a theoretical lens enabled us to come from more of a strengths-based rather than deficit focused starting point, where cultural assets of communities were highlighted rather than obscured (Brough et al, 2004). This was also in keeping with an anti-racist research methodology that acknowledges the need to deconstruct familiar ideological knowledge patterns that have resulted from a colonial history (Dei, 2005).

**Starting Again**

We did not so much start again as remain disciplined in our interpretations. By disciplined, we mean we did not start from the “white” line in our interpretations rather, we reserved judgment. Nakata’s (2002; 2007) description of the cultural interface became a useful lens with which to see this process. Nakata, a Japanese Torres Strait Islander describes the cultural interface as a productive theoretical space where Western and Indigenous knowledges can come together to create new visions and understandings where neither knowledge system is privileged but both are used to make sense of a world increasingly structured through multi
hybridity. As he noted “It is a space of many shifting and complex intersections between different people with different histories, experiences, languages, agendas, aspirations and responses” (Nakata, 2007, p.199)

Procedurally, we did little that was different. We continued to have first meetings with each community and then ‘hang out’ at subsequent visits. Slowly we became more widely known by the children and adult members of the communities. We introduced our idea of “research” to all the Elders and senior committee members but had to go through the necessary process of explaining ethics, informed consent, and signing participation agreements. There is a limit as to how this can be made more benign and even palatable. The very act of asking is an intrusion. However, we were compelled to do this under the University ethics approval. We did though decide to re-order the idea of approval. With the exception of one site, there was overall and immediate agreement that research information about the “usefulness” and “effectiveness” (admittedly Western concepts) of sports programs was worth knowing. We then talked about university approval but in all cases indicated that approval was only something that could be granted by Community council leaders. We described the ethics procedure as the university granting us permission to seek local approval. This may seem a simple step, but making a point that the university was at all times subservient to the community in this matter was an important emphasis to make. By the second and third visits we were talking to community members. For the site visits that were early in the re-commenced process, we chose not to voice record. Rather we asked if we could take notes on conversations to help with our memories, or often made notes afterwards. This was useful as it meant that the conversations were not interviews as such, they were chats or, to use Indigenous vernacular “yarns”. Moreover, the structure of these yarns was not predetermined either by content, arrangement or number of persons involved. The yarns tended to involve storytelling, which were used often to state a position, or describe a
situation. As this process evolved we were able to insert questions into the conversations and yarns that were related to key issues of the research. Invariably the response was a story of some kind. One often hears of the focus group interview as a key method in qualitative research. We cannot, however in all conscience call what we did focus group interviews. What we had were community and group yarns. What this means is that whoever is at the table or in the group is there to speak (or yarn). However, the expectation that whoever is sitting at the table at the beginning of a session will be the same people at the end should be dispelled. The ebb and flow of community yarns do not work in this way. A general feature of this type of group conversations in research is the convention of the researcher controlling the flow and pace of the communication. This is a rationalist mindset aimed at controlling the data collection process such that material able to contribute to a research report will be elicited. Group yarns are not about research reports they are about solving problems and coming to agreement. This relational approach is consistent with Chilsa’s (2012) description of the relational nature of knowing. By this she means that what comes to stand for knowledge and what is broadly accepted is less about notion of truth and more about what is agreed upon within the membership of a group. Western notions of rigor are difficult to control for in such circumstances and the importance of who was speaking, when and what about were important records to maintain through the group work. This was especially important as members often left the group but returned to the yarn at a later time.

As this process unfolded in the various communities, the idea of signed consent seemed not only pompous and intrusive, but also entirely inconsistent with the nature of the yarning taking place. However, our anxieties were misplaced, consent forms, based on the level of trust we were developing, were signed willingly. Few research methods books refer to this though Bagele Chilsa’s (2012) work is an important contribution. For us, the methods
of what we did seem much more meaningful when we use Indigenous Australian terms to describe them.

These methods progressively provided a rich and contextualized data set related to Aboriginality, sport, health, crime, children and so on. It was clear that our early fears of “whitening” the research findings though justified, were not so much unfounded as exaggerated. The older community members wanted every possible advantage for their children and this, it was widely agreed, meant the young Indigenous people have the tough job of learning to walk in both worlds. However, it is worth noting that Indigenous Australians have been negotiating traditional and Western ways of doing and being for generations (Nakata, 2002) and that perhaps “the very separation of the domains - cultural and Western – or traditional and formal – lead to simplifications that obscure the very complexities of cultural practices in both domains” (Nakata, 2002, p.8).

After two years in the field, we started to talk to children on a research basis. However, as a recommendation it is advisable to keep the ambition of such interviews (especially group work) modest. This applies to any young people but in the settings we were in, there were invariably many distractions including food, the opportunity to play, and the necessity to complete chores and contribute to family duties. As the research progressed to its later stages, we became privileged enough to be able to speak with and eventually audio-record some of the most senior Elders in the communities. Invariably they knew at least one of, sometimes both of the field researchers, by name. This was also the case with the children who when on the beach wanted us to be in the water, bury them under sand, play football (soccer), use our cameras and computers. We also made videos and photo shoots that we took back for subsequent visits that showed the children out on the water or just generally having fun. These were tangible returns we could make to the communities beyond the commitment to return transcripts and analysis material for scrutiny. Whilst we were no longer strangers, it
would be fallacious to suggest that such access was granted without the help of others and primarily these were local Indigenous sports workers.

**Significant Others**

Readers may have already noticed our heavy reliance on the contributions of “others” in pursuing this research, it is important to further highlight the crucial inclusion of varied perspectives and the very important assistance rendered within the context of this work. As noted earlier, we engaged the help of a critical friend. She is not an Indigenous Australian but has worked in Indigenous communities for over 15 years as an occupational therapist, and recently concluded a doctoral study in an Indigenous school. Her perspectives and counsel as a non-Indigenous researcher with extensive experiences in urban Indigenous health and education were highly valuable. At the same time we connected with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Unit at the University for further guidance regarding protocol and direction.

However, it was clear from the outset that no matter how sensitively we framed the research, meaningful data could not be collected without the support of key actors at local and national levels. The Indigenous Sport Program was largely responsible for the instigation of this project and provided access to their national network of highly skilled, locally respected and extremely well connected Indigenous Sport Development Officers (ISDOs). By accessing, gaining approval from, and travelling to sites with the ISDOs, we were better equipped to negotiate the potentially complicated social and political circumstances. ISDOs are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander workers who spend time developing relationships with communities to whom they deliver the services of the ASC. These workers do not simply deliver the well-intentioned programs of the ASC they both assess and attend to the sporting and physical recreation needs of the communities as they emerge through the types
of community conversations described earlier. They often have a direct line to the community leaders and often sit on community councils as an adviser.

Finally, it is also worth reiterating that the meaningful inclusion of youth workers, parents, and senior community members in the process was fundamental to this research. The seemingly casual nature of our interactions (e.g. just “having a yarn” and “hanging out”) belies their importance to the direction and conduct of the research.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

As “whitefella” researchers we are presented both with a problem and as a problem. The story of colonialism is not just one of geographical domination by way of invasion, sequestration of land and the establishment of military garrisons. The colonialists bring with them a way of “seeing” the world. So embedded are these ways of seeing the world across generations of colonial rule that they become natural (Stanfield, 1985). As a consequence white researchers working in Indigenous communities, no matter how hard they try not to, will see the world through dominant (western) epistemologies. This does not make them rampant racists. Rather it might suggest the they are caught up in what is referred to elsewhere as epistemological racism (Scheurich & Young, 1997). As Scheurich and Young suggested “Epistemological racism means that our current range of research epistemologies – positivism to postmodernisms/poststructuralisms – arise out of the social history and culture of the dominant race …” (p.8). Nakata’s (2002; 2007) notion of the cultural interface may be a useful tool for navigating the ways in which the dominant Enlightenment inspired ways of knowing and Indigenous was of knowing (and we can insert “other” for Indigenous in this sentence), can be understood so that they are not mutually exclusive but complementary in useful and progressive ways.

In this project we tended to rely on western systems of knowledge even to challenge our original thinking. However such reflexivity at least got us out of a conventional mindset
and forced us to stop thinking and to start listening. Nakata might at least approve of the interface of Bourdieu’s reflexive tools with Indigenous stories of how the world is seen, constructed and understood. As an evolutionary process it was a watershed in this project. With this in mind we believe we have taken some tentative yet useful steps about conducting “whitefella” research within Indigenous communities.
References


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Footnotes

* These terms are widely used by Indigenous Australians to refer to non-Indigenous persons and Indigenous persons. We had misgivings about appropriating such language but we consulted Indigenous scholars and community members who assured us the use of the words was in keeping with the importance of the message. Moreover, Cowlishaw (2004) indicated that these terms are common vernacular that have generic use (though principally by Indigenous Australians). Such language appears highly gendered but is commonly used slang referring to black people (or folk) and white/non-black people (or folk).

1 The Torres Strait is a body of water that separates the northern tip of the Australian state of Queensland from the Western Province of Papua New Guinea

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