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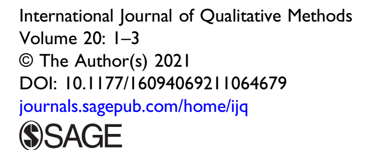
Learning Across the Chasm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There is a chasm between a speaker and a listener into which most communication falls. For relationships to work, relational threads must be woven that can carry the words across this chasm. To do this, speaker and listener must at some level share a commitment to effortful speaking and hearing. This calls for active recognition that what we say may be not be heard in the way intended, and that what we think we hear may not be what was in the speaker's mind. This doubly applies in situations where there is a sense of threat or fear, or where there is stress, anxiety or uncertainty. Research interviews or professional encounters are but two examples of these types of situations. Emotions can cloud the speaker and listener's capacities to be open to creating a shared understanding. Language, especially when combined with emotions, has the potential to shape understanding; it can bring us together or pull us apart (Ridanpää & Pasanen, 2009).

In qualitative research, language is a stock-in-trade, either on its own or in conjunction with visual communication. We try to bridge the etic and the emic with carefully curated images and language. We believe that when we are outsiders, our skills with language and the careful interpretation of the concepts and artefacts participants share with us will help create a bridge between our different worlds; with care and attention we can weave threads across the chasm. Indeed, a training technique we have often used with researchers new to qualitative interviewing is to get them to transcribe their own interviews. In listening to themselves they can stand inside and outside their words simultaneously. That is, in the interview itself they asked the questions as the speaker but as the transcriber they hear their requests as a listener. By learning to critically listen to themselves in interaction and attending to the spoken responses of participants as well as the silences and what these might mean, they learn how to weave the threads that will open up new worlds, new ways of understanding.

In Aotearoa, we benefit from a rich heritage of Māori oratory that covers the spectrum from the very formal to the informal. Language, stories, narrations of tradition and telling of the past; the use of speaking and listening to build relationships are all richly woven into social life. These language and image-based processes support the development and maintenance of relationships, the reconciliation of differences and the collective movement through time. The past sits alongside, and is woven into, understandings of the present. These processes work to reduce the chasm and to strengthen the threads that tie people together within relationships.

In all of these settings, metaphors, analogies and symbolism provide linguistic mechanisms that help build this shared understanding, create and sustain relationships, give expression to conflict and resolution, and shape the pathways we create through challenges. Across the chasm, we can use these mechanisms to try to walk alongside others and get a glimpse of what they might see, knowing all the while that we can never really walk in their shoes. What we see is only ever an approximation. The challenge we always face sits underneath this; how do we reconcile our desire to understand the view from the other side of the chasm with the knowledge that we cannot always do this fully? Indeed, this certainty sits behind the challenge to qualitative research to provide spaces where indigenous understandings are clearly seen and respected (Battiste & Henderson, 2000).

In our research project, we have been grappling with the challenge of working as a team of Māori and Pākehā

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researchers to develop resources that will support practitioners working with vulnerable youth. These resources need to respond to both world views. In our country, it is not always possible to have workers and youth matched on cultural grounds. Yet, given its centrality in identity, we know that culture is always critical to effective interventions. The ways young people come to understand themselves in relation to the world around them is fundamentally shaped by culture (Dolby, 2001; Faircloth et al., 2015). Speaking and listening occurs in a cultural context. The resources we develop need to be able to support practice in settings where large 'chasms' between worker and young person may exist. Importantly, many culturally anchored or taken for granted understandings about the meaning of particular words and symbols, interpretations of behaviours and the ways that past experiences can shape how each understands their own world and sees the other, can all easily fall into these chasms. The resources we develop need to assist practice where the chasm may be narrow or very large. They also need to take account of the reality of each person's (practitioner and young person) own individual journeys, and the knowledge and world views each has gathered as they pass through life.

Because of this work, we have looked to language for a metaphor or an analogy that reminds us of the dilemmas raised by our desire to build resources that will speak across the chasm, so that our resources will support growth in the capacity of diverse practitioners to sustain effective relationships with diverse youth.

Listening to an interview about the Aotearoa toroa (albatross) we stumbled across the useful analogy of the colour spectrum (https://podcast.radionz.co.nz/ntn/ntn-20210125-1006-understanding_albatross-02.ogg). It seems that the morphology of albatross eyes is different to that of humans. It is thought that the albatross sees in the blue part of the spectrum and possibly the ultraviolet as well. This helpfully makes it easier to spot fish deep in the ocean. They can, in effect, see 'through' the ocean and this adaptation makes their hunting more efficient. They do not waste time and energy diving and searching for prey that is not there. This is an evolutionary adaptation to the need to forage while covering vast distances across oceans where the surface gives little clue to the presence of prey beneath. As humans, our eyes do not function in these ways and so should we be flying over a body of water we will not be able to 'see into' the ocean to spot the fish. If we flew over the ocean in a similar way to the albatross, we would look at the same expanse of ocean, but see very different things to the toroa.

This opens up questions for us about how our thinking, our understanding of the world, is shaped by the way we grow and adapt to our cultural, social and physical environments. Perspective and understanding are shaped by these adaptations to our context. We 'see' some things with great clarity and, equally, there are other things that we may not see at all. The toroa eye analogy is not about one view being 'deeper' or 'richer' than the other. Rather, it reminds us that our experience and perspective shapes what we can know fully, what we might be able to perceive with effort, and crucially, it reminds us that there will be things we may not be able to 'see' no matter how hard we try; we might only be able to see ocean while others may be able to see all the fish.

Our project builds on two frameworks (PARTH and Tōu Ake Mana—see www.youthsay.co.nz) developed in previous research. This earlier project identified key intervention factors in supporting youth change (see for example, Munford & Sanders, 2019; Sanders et al., 2017; Sanders & Munford, 2017). It drew on a large database of survey and qualitative interviews where young people told us what worked best for them in encounters with service professionals. The two frameworks were created by applying a Pākehā and a Māori analytical perspective to the data. To return to the toroa analogy, they represented two different ways of looking at a youth 'ocean' of data. It is important to note here, that these two frameworks were but two ways of seeing meaning in the data; there are many other Pākehā and Māori lenses that could have been applied and the data also lends itself to multiple other cultural interpretations. We tested the two frameworks we developed with practitioners and the feedback indicated that they provided helpful ways of thinking about and approaching interventions with young people.

The goal of our current project is to create a kete (has a similar meaning to the English words bag or basket) of resources around these frameworks that assist practitioners to engage well with youth, Māori working with Māori youth, Māori working with Pākehā youth, Pākehā working with Māori youth and Pākehā working with Pākehā youth. We started out wanting to find a Māori and Pākehā equivalence for each resource we developed. We did not want either resource to be less than the other. Consequently, we initially approached the work with a kind of 'translation' approach so that every resource in one set would have a parallel version in the other. This would mean that a practitioner could be confident that if they looked at one set of conceptual summaries, for example, the same material would be reflected in the other set.

As an example, we wanted to develop the ideas embodied in attachment theory for each framework. The use of the phrase 'attachment theory' immediately suggests a western world view of child development and, if the early formulations of attachment are considered, there are echoes of family as a nuclear unit where the biological parents are the key attachment figures. But ideas of care and security for infants is not a peculiarly western concept. So, our explorations of the ideas contained within attachment theory took the form of a dialogue about Māori and western perspectives as we tried to find a way of achieving the equivalence we wanted.

We started with a writing framework that attempted to weave together the two strands; one of te ao Māori (Māori world view) and the other of western thought. As we did this, our discussion increasingly felt detached from our understandings of how the impact of care experiences in infancy

shape young people's lives. It was clear that attachment in both world views was not a single thing—it was multiple and nuanced. Just as it is unreasonable to suggest that there was a single Māori truth, so it was not useful for us to think that there was a singular western way of thinking about attachment and therefore how it might be applied in practice with young people. It seemed that attempting to present any concept that wove together a western world view and a te ao Māori worldview would become reductionist, raising concerns about the loss of a culturally grounded philosophical integration of ideas (Wilson, 2001). Rather than a careful equivalence that would help practitioners to locate themselves, we risked creating a least common denominators framework. Not only would this lose the subtleties and nuances we wanted to draw on from each world view, it also meant we would lose anything we could not find equivalence for. How, for instance, would we deal with a concept that was uniquely Māori with no western parallel or vice versa?

To return to the toroa analogy, each of us sees most clearly in our own part of the spectrum and less clearly, or not at all, in other bands. This reminds us that we only ever hear (or see) partial stories; we most easily recognise the pieces that our past experiences sensitise us to see. And this can appear to be the whole story (Charmaz, 2017). But from the toroa, we know that this is unlikely to be all there is to know. We may not necessarily have picked up the most salient or important aspects. We cannot translate everything; some things do not have parallels and so some things may remain not knowable or easily accessible to one or other of us. The internal integrity or coherence of our two different accounts becomes critical here; they must first be true to themselves and speak authentically to their own insider audiences. To do this we have embarked on a process of dialogue within our team and in diverse practice settings, to find places of convergence where world views may come together, and other places where they may not. This is possible only when each account is true to itself.

We know that practitioners do create meaningful and changeful relationships with young people from their own culture as well as with youth from cultures different to their own. They do this by building an acute awareness of what they do know and what they do not; they know what parts of the colour spectrum they can see in, and what parts are less clear. They then use this knowing to weave the threads of connection with the young people they support. In the best of circumstances, they bring knowledgeable others into the relationship to cover those areas where their vision is impaired or lacking.

This is also the essence of the qualitative research agenda. And as with excellent youth work practice, excellence in qualitative research requires us to know what we do not know and cannot adequately give voice to. In these situations, our responsibility is to ensure that knowledgeable insiders are well supported to do this work. This implicates all our research processes from conceptualisation right through to the dissemination phases of projects; not occupying insider spaces if we are an outsider.

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