

Difficult Research Conversations: Sharing Socially Sensitive Research in the Public Domain

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Social science research is complex and involves inquiry into the lived experiences of different groups of people in society. It often requires a consideration of complex issues, data and perspectives that may impact on the feelings, views, attitudes and values held by people involved in the research process. In many cases the research may be socially sensitive and has potential consequences or implications or threats to individuals, community groups, civil society, government, industry or other stakeholders.

There are many issues that, within specific cultural and social contexts, may be defined as 'sensitive' if they are private, stressful or sacred, and consequently discussion of them tends to generate an emotional response (McCosker et al., 2001). A response of this nature may be prompted because of a potential fear of stigmatisation or because the issue is of a politically sensitive nature. Sieber and Stanley (1988:49) identify that sensitive studies are those in "which there are potential consequences or implications, either directly for the participants in the research or for the class of individuals represented by the research." They may include difficult topics, including taboo subjects, which "are laden with emotion or which inspire feelings of awe or dread" (Lee, 1993:6).

Dissemination of knowledge and sharing research findings is an important part of the research process and can determine research impact (DIISR, 2005). Researchers are increasingly expected to share their research with others beyond the research community (Tisdall et al., 2009). The need for knowledge to be shared is manifest in the calls for evidence-based policy (Cabinet Office, 2003) and for evidence-based practice, where practitioners are expected to base their practice on "what works" (Tisdall et al., 2009). There are demands for knowledge transfer, where knowledge is used for commercial and other ends. As Sudsawad (2007) notes, knowledge transfer includes all steps between the creation of new knowledge and its application. The author argues that it involves multidirectional communications, is an interactive process, requires ongoing collaborations among relevant parties, includes multiple activities, is a nonlinear process, emphasizes the use of research-generated knowledge, involves diverse knowledge-user groups, is user and context specific, is impact-oriented and is an interdisciplinary process. Thus, sharing research findings is not a simple process. Research utilisation and reception of knowledge is often determined by players outside the research system, and the routes and mechanisms by which end-users utilise social science research is diverse and complex.

This paper examines what constitutes sensitive research and grapples with the challenges of difficult topic research. We argue that what may be considered sensitive is defined by the cultural, social, historical, economic and political factors. These factors determine what is acceptable to be discussed in public, the emotional responses by members of society and the perception of risk involved. The ease or difficulty of sharing research findings in with general factors is also determined by societal factors. The paper focuses on how research findings on difficult topics can be communicated to and shared with broader audiences. Using our knowledge from racism related research as a case study of sensitive research, we draw on our experiences and insights and challenges of communicating the sensitive research results and the responsibility of the researcher.

Sensitive Topics and Research

Dissemination of knowledge is an important element of undertaking research. As mentioned above, sensitive research encompasses research on a wide range of topics, undertaken in a range of different locations, using a variety of methods (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008). Some examples of sensitive topics are sexual behaviours, deviance, drug abuse, racism, death and other topics sometimes labelled as taboo subjects. Research belonging to the ‘private sphere’ is often seen as sensitive, although what is considered private is culturally and historically specific. Lee (1993:4) proposes that sensitive research can be seen as threatening in three areas: i) ‘intrusive threat,’ which deals with areas that are ‘private, stressful or sacred;’ ii) ‘threat of sanction,’ which relates to studies of deviance and involves the possibility that research may reveal information that is stigmatizing or incriminating in some way; and iii) threat that may be imposed by sensitive research is a ‘political threat.’ Similarly, Renzetti and Lee (1993:6) identify where research may be considered sensitive, and these dimensions include: a) where research intrudes into the private sphere or delves into some deeply personal experience; b) where the study is concerned with deviance or social control; c) where the study impinges on the vested interests of powerful persons or the exercise of coercion or domination; or d) where the research deals with things that are sacred to those being studied that they do not wish profaned. Renzetti and Lee’s work is important in highlighting the issues of power and vested interest that are highly critical in how research is funded, conducted and received.

Sensitive research often focuses on people or communities who are marginalised, discriminated and vulnerable. Researchers have often asked themselves questions about using vulnerable and disempowered people for their own research purposes (Liamputtong, 2007). The benefits of undertaking the research have to outweigh the risks of undertaking the research (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008). Avoiding research on sensitive topics could be seen by some researchers as evasion of responsibility. As Sieber and Stanley (1988:55) convincingly argue:

Sensitive research addresses some of society’s most pressing social issues and policy questions. Although ignoring the ethical issues in sensitive research is not a responsible approach to science, shying away from controversial topics, simply because they are controversial, is also an avoidance of responsibility.

Renzetti and Lee (1993:10) urge that social scientists do not shy away from undertaking research on sensitive topics; they “must confront seriously and thoroughly the problems and issues that these topics pose.” Nyamathi (1998:65) suggests that those who are

“impoverished, disenfranchised, and/or subject to discrimination, intolerance, subordination, and stigma,” including women, children, ethnic communities, immigrants, sex workers, the homeless, gay men and women, older adults, and the mentally ill are included in vulnerable populations. The authors of this paper have been researching immigrant and ethnic communities and have focused on research relating to racism for two decades. We consider racism as a sensitive research topic. It fits within the definitions and categories described above and it elicits diverse responses when discussed.

Racism is defined as:

A belief in the superiority of one particular racial or ethnic group and, flowing from this, the exclusion of other groups from some or many aspects of society. This exclusion (and often exploitation) is seen as legitimate simply because of the difference or supposed inferiority of the other group’s race, ethnicity or nationality (Zelinka, 1996:1).

Racism is complex and lends itself to being a ‘sensitive’ research topic for a range of reasons. It takes multiple forms and is historically specific, situationally variable and often contradictory. It is also gendered and interconnects with nationalist and religious identities in complex ways (Hollinsworth, 2006). Moreover, racism is a sensitive research topic due to issues of power and privilege. As Jacques (2003) notes, the dominant or powerful group has a huge vested interest in its own privilege. It will often be oblivious to its own prejudices. It will regard its racist attitudes as nothing more than common sense. According to Jacques (2003), only when challenged by those on the receiving end is racism outed and attitudes begin to change.

Contemporary discourses of racism suggest an abhorrence of racism and that it is an offence to modern sensibilities. However, racism has not disappeared and there is a body of growing literature that seeks to articulate how ‘new racism’ operates in subtle forms that are difficult to identify and are more palatable (Henry et al., 2000; Dunn et al., 2007; Babacan & Babacan, 2012). Racism is often entrenched in the social order and is often taken for granted and viewed as natural (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Discussion of racism is a confronting subject and there is a tendency to avoid it and curtail its discussion in some community, policy and academic settings (Babacan et al., 2009). Denial of racism is almost universal and the reasons are manifold (Babacan, 2008). Sue (2005:1) refers to it as “racism and the conspiracy of silence.” By racism denial, we refer to the widespread belief that racism is no longer a feature of modern social relations, which is articulated through commonly expressed views such as, ‘racism was in the past,’ ‘it only exists in a minority of the population’ or ‘we need to focus on what unites us and our commonalities’ (Babacan, 2008). Racism is often covered up or downplayed as something else less deliberate or oppressive, such as cultural misunderstanding, by those who are not subject to its violence and belittling (Hollinsworth 2006: 40-45).

An important component of difficult topic research is the perception of risk by the different stakeholders. Sensitive research poses methodological and conceptual challenges for researchers. These include: 1) conceptualisation of the topic, 2) defining and accessing the sample, 3) mistrust, concealment and dissimulation between the researcher and participants, and 4) safety (Lee, 1993). As Melrose (2002:338) contends, sensitive research may leave us, “feeling methodologically vulnerable, verging on the distressingly incapable, because of

emotional and anxiety challenges, and thus ill equipped to deal with some of the issues that may arise in this context.”

Sensitive research affects a broad range of stakeholders, not only participants. Those affected by sensitive research include the researchers, transcribers, supervisors and readers of publications - all may also be placed at risk. This risk may be physical and/or psychological. Commenting on the impact on researchers, Lee (1993:1) states that “sensitive research often also has potential effects on the personal life, and sometimes on the personal security, of the researcher.” In order to protect all participants' physical and psychological safety, protocols or guidelines need to be developed at the beginning of the research process to identify and minimise risk, or respond to risks as they arise during the research process (McCosker et al., 2001). Human Research Ethics Committees act to protect individuals and/or groups from harm, although this is mainly focused on research participants

Communicating Research Findings: Key issues to consider in dissemination of research findings

This section is a critical reflection on the challenges we encountered in disseminating findings from racism research and scholarship that we have conducted. Both authors have been researching and writing about racism for a long time. We draw upon past and more recent experiences of communicating about racism research. Due to considerations of scope and space, we will not dwell on the details of the research projects or the methodologies we engaged in undertaking racism research. We are aware of the literature on methodologies suggested for sensitive research, including appreciative inquiry, qualitative research, action research, interpretist research and other participatory methodologies (Tisdal et al., 2009; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008; Liamputtong, 2007; McCosker, 2007; Lee, 1993). In each of the research projects on racism, care was taken to ensure thoroughness and consideration of research approaches, methodologies and ethics for sensitive research, and appropriate ethics clearances were obtained. The focus in this section is about complexities and challenges of research communication, knowledge sharing and dissemination. We highlight some of the important dimensions of research communication from our work on racism.

Any form of communication is a process of *engagement* between people. Messages have to be sent and received with original intent. Key to these are relationships, channels of communication and time and format of the message (Ivey et al., 2009). The first challenge in any research is developing an engaged process of the relevant stakeholders and making it interactive and participatory. In racism research, these may include representatives of ethnic, multicultural and Indigenous organisations as well as community workers, service providers, private corporations and policy makers at different levels of government. We have found that the engagement process needs to begin before the research commences. There are different forms and levels of engagement. We have found that in sensitive research it is best to start with key individuals and build a network of people/agencies that will collaborate with the research. Initial effort needs to go into awareness and education about topics such as the nature of racism, the relevance of research and how people or agencies can be involved.

A research reference committee is a good engagement process. We have found that those who understand the importance of such research participate more readily. Sometimes there are designated people who have paid positions that relate to the topic area, such as policy

makers who can be invited to be a part of the reference committees. This is a double edged sword, as they may try to influence the research in a particular direction as per their own agendas; at other times, however, they make fantastic contributions. While involved in research projects with such committees, we have witnessed a range of discussions which challenge the research. Some of the discussions have queried why there should be a focus on racism and what is the purpose or use of this research bringing out such ‘stuff,’ because this type of research can be seen as undermining everyone uniting and blending into one society and challenging community relations. Thus the research can find itself dealing with tension and conflict at the outset. However, this can serve as a learning mechanism for strategies to disseminate information to the broader community. When thinking through the processes of dissemination about the research or research findings, initial engagement is important. There is a need for awareness by researchers about the levels of knowledge by participants about the topic, about the potential stance of participating agencies on such issues, and about the range of general prevailing views among broader audiences or readers. Researchers need to understand the diversity of communities that may have stakes in research planning and reporting (Reed, 2007).

Dissemination of research can be achieved through different *channels of communication*. Once the messages are determined, then communication can be shaped into a format suitable for different audiences (Desai & Potter, 2006:310) We have utilised a range of strategies including practitioner and academic networks, formal meetings and informal mechanisms, advocacy, academic papers and conferences, community newsletters, policy consultation submissions, media, internet and other visual channels. We relied equally on verbal and written dissemination and sharing of findings in workshops, seminars and other events. The channels of communication utilised were closely linked with who the audience was, what messages are being given and whether there were particular events which were relevant. We delivered anti-racism training in which we were able to share our research. We also took part in key events. For example, as 21 March is the United Nations international day for elimination of all forms of racism and discrimination (which in Australia is celebrated as Harmony Day) and 10 December is the International Human Rights Day, we took part in events held and presented our findings.

An important consideration in dissemination of research findings is *what message* you are going to communicate. It is important to note that messages for different audiences may have different emphases. A research audience, for example, might want to hear about methodological debates, while a practitioner audience might want to know more about the lessons for practice that the study offers (Reed, 2007:173). Dessai and Potter (2006:310) outline that a central message or a set of different messages may be relevant for different audiences. There is a presumption that if ‘good evidence’ were produced and effectively disseminated, then policy-makers and practitioners would engage with the findings and improve their activities accordingly. Nutley et al. express “some disillusionment about a lack of deep-rooted impact” of evidence-based practice (2003:126). They identify that while much emphasis has been placed on devising better methods for dissemination, these have had only limited success in their uptake. We did encounter an attitude of dismissal of research by different agencies as too academic, not needed and not the right kind of research. The non-neutral nature of knowledge production, and the dialogical nature of information and engagement, thus becomes critical factors (Nutley et al., 2003; Tisdall et al., 2009).

We were often confronted with challenges of ‘what is the message?’ In much of the research, we were uncovering experiences of individual and institutional racism and taking person-

centred approaches to research. The messages had implications for specific localities, communities and more broadly for society. The findings required service, program and policy responses such as anti-racism policies or support for survivors of racism (Babacan et al., 2009). The question of what to emphasise and what to leave out of communication was testing, particularly when one did not know the positions of some of the stakeholders. We were careful not to cause stigma for individuals, particular suburbs and agencies. The researchers received both positive and negative feedback about the existence of racism, who were perpetrating acts of racism and the policy solutions. In institutional settings there was resistance by policy makers or service providers to acknowledge that these were issues in their department or agency. In those circumstances, we undertook refinement of our messages and further engagement with such agencies, particularly for what we considered important findings due to our approach to research to serve as “inquiry for intervention” and the need to construct and re-imagine our society (Busch, 2011). We adopted a “possibility centric versus a problem centric” approach to change (Boyd & Bright, 2007). Boyd and Bright argue that problem- centric approaches assume that something is broken and needs fixing, which can make organizations be more defensive and resistant to the change processes. Focusing the dissemination on positive possibilities, they argue, builds relationships and trust, and identifies possibilities for shifting normative expectations. It was important for us to identify what contribution our research was making to the debates in different communities of interest and to develop appropriate messages and strategies to bring about the positive outcome.

In the development of the message, there are two key considerations. The first is *whose voice* is being heard (Reed, 2007:156), i.e. *representation*. We do not believe that knowledge creation takes place in a vacuum: we do acknowledge that it has a strong value base. Hence we adopted a stance that gives voice to the vulnerable (Liamputtong, 2007) and believe, as Hesse-Biber et al. (2004:16) state, “starting research from the standpoint of the oppressed is valid because it is often the lives and experiences of the oppressed people that provide significant insight and perspective. Complex human relations can become visible when research is started at the bottom of the social hierarchy.” What counts as knowledge or evidence is contestable (Ozga & Jones, 2006); knowledge is socially constructed (Nuttley et al., 2003) and often the voices of the disadvantaged are not heard (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008). As Kirby et al. (2006) point out, research and knowledge are produced in a manner that often represents the interests of the dominant or powerful groups. We ensured that there was a focus on uncovering the lived experiences of people who experienced racism and to give voice to the “everyday racisms” (Essed, 1991) that people encountered on a daily basis. In the delivery of key messages we also noted our role as researchers of ethnic-Australian backgrounds. As Chiseri-Strater (2003) points out, all researchers are positioned, regardless of the field of study. It is important to acknowledge positionality in research since, as Alcroff (1988) suggests, race, gender, ethnicity, class and other markers of identity are *relational positions* and not essential qualities. We worked in our research with researchers from the dominant cultural group to demonstrate that this is a relevant issue to all of us. In some instances, the voices of researchers from the dominant cultures were more effective in getting the message across to particular audiences. These are matters of strategy which were judged on a situation-by-situation basis.

The second consideration is how to convey complex messages without simplifying or narrowing them. Contemporary constructions of racism are historically contingent and are shaped by interrelated factors including identity, immigration, conquest, colonisation and nation building (Babacan et al., 2009). Simplifying research findings that require this level of contextualisation and complexity in analysis is highly difficult. In our communication efforts,

we tried to develop historical approaches, conceptual and theoretical components in simple language and always provided analysis and stories and voices of those affected. There was an attempt to present a holistic picture despite different emphasis on the message. Engagement in workshops, conferences and events enabled opportunities to explain and dialogue on these complexities. Linked with this is the inability to control how messages are received. In the virtual world of information your audience is often anonymous, and we have received abusive emails or letters from within such anonymous audiences over the years. An additional factor is the way media can use the information out of context, often focusing on sensational or particular headlines in relation to topics such as racism, multiculturalism and Indigenous affairs (Stratton, 1998). Attention to the messages, availability of data and findings which require basic research literacy in simple English, and appropriate timing and management of release of information, become critical factors in the avoidance of incorrect reception of messages and information. Timing can be critical. It is useful to make the research communication coincide with key times in decision-making (e.g. policy consultations) and to ensure the evidence is readily available to a range of stakeholders (Weiss, 1998; Tisdall et al., 2009).

While research communication imposes key responsibilities on the researchers, it also places responsibilities on the audience. The role of the researcher is to inform, put forward persuasive arguments, analysis and evidence, but not to tell the audience what to think (Reed, 2007:18). An important point to note is that, at the end of the day, audiences are active participants in using and applying research and this places some degree of responsibility on them to critically reflect on the research and make decisions about where and how this information could be applied (Tisdall et al., 2009). Tisdall et al. (2009:196) point out that it may be difficult to have direct and instrumental influence, but there are other kinds of possible influence that the research may generate including the identification and selection of policy alternatives, assistance in getting an issue onto the policy agenda, providing a framework for understanding, and interpreting information. Furthermore, findings might mobilize others to generate support for particular decisions or to persuade decision makers. We have found that we were able to create awareness of issues relating to racism and generate discussion. Although there was and is policy resistance to issues of racism, it is increasingly becoming evident that the research does have impact, as we are now seeing 'racism' as an issue being included in State and Federal policies of multiculturalism. There are now policies in place in Australia containing strategies for identifying and addressing racism for the first time in two decades. We are also witnessing the peak multicultural body engaging with this issue for the first time in its thirty-year history. While we do not claim that these changes are directly as part of our research only, what is indicated is the influence of discourse and narrative that can be built via dissemination of research about racism by us and other scholars.

Problems with Dissemination and Strategic Decisions

As can be gleaned from the above discussion, the research dissemination process, particularly for sensitive research, can be complicated and time consuming. Academic career structures often do not recognise or reward this phase of the research process (Desai & Potter, 2006). Alderson and Morrow (2011:129) identify nine difficulties which can obstruct research dissemination:

1. Funders or other authorities may stop reports from being published.

2. People may dismiss reports saying that they are weak or distorted.
3. Dissemination can involve months or years of working with policymakers and practitioners, at conferences and other meetings, on how to link research findings and conclusions into their work. Few researchers have the time or funding to do this.
4. Links between the research evidence, and the report, and what they mean for policy and practice are often not clear. Many researchers then prefer to leave practical experts to work out the links. Yet few of these experts have the time or interest to read long research reports and to do the often difficult connecting work. The reports then may remain unused.
5. People may misunderstand and misapply the findings of research or consultation.
6. The mass media can be very helpful with dissemination, but they may present over-simple, sensational or inaccurate reports.
7. Busy people have so much to read that they prefer short, clear reports, but it is often hard to report complex and detailed research in short, simple terms.
8. The research may not be worth disseminating. It may repeat other work, or be unfinished or unconvincing.
9. Editors may refuse to publish the research if it is unethical, such as by being conducted without consent, or if they think a report is poorly written or boring. The findings may be unpopular, or disbelieved, or attacked and dismissed.

These and other issues were confronted in our work in various degrees. For example, the funders of one research project attempted to remove the words ‘racism’ in the analysis and replace it with softer words, and they would not agree to the report being released until it was done. The researchers were faced with a critical dilemma at this point about the compromise they had to make. In that instance, it was decided that there was no point in releasing the research if the issue, i.e. racism, could not be identified and so no compromise was made. Consequently, the research report was not released. At other times, negotiations were possible and compromises reached.

We found that research communication is more readily accepted if the research is not controversial or sensitive, there was no conflicting interests, the policy or program change recommended or implied is small, and if the environment is stable (Weiss, 1998:23-24). Dunn and Nelson (2011) suggest that members of those groups who are the targets of racism will be more likely to acknowledge it, while pointing at the same time to other research which suggests that there are substantial penalties and personal costs associated with the acknowledgement of racism. They suggest that there are negative consequences for those who talk about racism, for those who expose it, critique it and especially for those who report experiencing it (p.597).

Influencing change and being heard are complex processes and Tisdall et al. (2009) make a distinction between insider and outsider groups. Insider groups are those ascribed legitimate status by governments/agencies/corporations, which involve the researchers in meaningful regular consultation. Outsider groups are not able to achieve such a position and thus do not become similarly engaged. Insiders will typically know and play by the rules of the game. These rules govern how participants should behave to gain and maintain access to a policy or practitioner networks. Outsiders themselves divide into two types: those who are outside because they are defined by policy-makers or corporations as having incompatible ideologies or goals, and/or those who choose to be outsiders (Maloney et al., 1994). Certainly at times we were insiders who were part of advisory bodies and other networks. During these times

our opinions were heard more readily although, at times, these also caused us to become outsiders when it was discovered that our research did not support the philosophies of the agency. So, in each research project we asked ourselves where we were to position ourselves - as an insider or outsider. This positioning determined what strategies of communication we used and whether to take 'soft' or 'hard' approaches. Sometimes we were not able to become insiders, even though we would have preferred that to be our position. In those instances, we adopted a range of strategies such as seeking out partnerships with agencies to exert greater pressure, finding sympathetic officers, or using broader communication approaches such as the media.

Sensitive research is often about challenging the status quo and unraveling hidden social issues. These messages are not always welcomed by certain interests. As noted in the barriers above, there can be an attempt to discredit the research, often via a criticism of the methodology. Our strategy for addressing this, prior to communicating research findings, is to anticipate what questions and criticisms may come up and have prepared responses. For example, in one instance a senior officer criticized the research - applying quantitative research methods criteria - when we had undertaken qualitative research. There are fundamental differences in these two research approaches, and if these are not acknowledged then the research can be dismissed. Of course, we felt able to defend our work and the strengths of our methodologies and analysis and were able to articulate this with authority. We also understood the hidden strategy to dismiss the research, as this was the same department that wanted to remove the words 'racism' from the report.

Finally, the research communication process is emotionally charged and draining. Researchers neglect to discuss their emotional experiences of doing research (Dunbar et al., 2002). The emotions of researching emotionally difficult topics and then communicating them are often overlooked in academic discourse. Yet the researcher bears witness to the pain, suffering, humiliation, and indignity of others over and over again (Campbell, 2002:150) and may endure ridicule, criticism and dismissal in the communication process. There is a lot of emotional labour involved in sensitive research and this is all hard work. Part of the strategy to avoid burnout is to take a long-term view about your research, engage with supportive researchers and networks and ensure a degree of emotional detachment.

Conclusion

Communicating your research beyond academia can be a rewarding way to see your ideas making a difference, even if that 'difference' is just a wider discussion and debate of the subject. But another advantage of research communication is that it makes your research better because you really have to think about the central thesis of your work, the focus it will take and ways of communicating the research results (Desai & Potter, 2006: 318). It is really important to engage in sensitive research communication and not to abrogate that responsibility.

Ultimately, research is about social change and improvement. As Joseph Stiglitz argues, "The information asymmetry between governments and the people whose interests they purport to serve aids the preservation of unjust and dishonest regimes" (Stiglitz, 2002: 27-44). Equipping people with relevant information or knowledge, opening up a debate itself and providing evidence with the voices of the marginalised and disadvantaged is a vital contribution to democratic reform and the struggle for a socially just society.

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