

Listening to, and engaging with the Aboriginal Community in Adelaide

I am going to begin this paper with a question that evolves out of one of the most basic and core processes of research and evaluation.

Why is it so difficult for many of us to listen?

Linda Alcoff, writer and academic, discusses the politics of listening:

“Who is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens is a result as well as an act, of political struggle. Simply put, the discursive context is a political arena... We certainly want to encourage a more receptive listening in the part of the discursively privileged and discourage oppressive practices of speaking for.” (1991: 17).

And now I will read this quote, also by Linda Alcoff, because I believe it has an erotic quality and makes listening sound like a form of sensual interplay between two bodies.

“We might imagine, for a moment, the dynamics of listening, a radically different relation for the management of authority and desire between the self and the other in the public sphere. Listening might be understood as an activity which maintains the difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’ whilst simultaneously opening between these a space for the movement of sound waves washing across and up onto the shores of the receiver’s ear. This ear, awaiting reception, is one desiring to become sensitive to the sensation of the waves as they break and run up upon its membrane. These waves, touching and soaking into the nerve endings in the process pass the reverberations through into the intricacies of the interstitial connections and onto the larger organizing system of the recipient’s body. This body is a desiring one, yearning to be touched by hearing from another and in that desire, yearning also to reciprocate the touch by taking on a form of responsibility to ‘remember’.” (Linda Alcoff)

I sat at a discussion table with a group of women workers, some of them non-Aboriginal workers and some of them Aboriginal. I watched the Aboriginal women speak to the others at the table and witnessed the facilitator, leading the dialogue, and the other white workers completely ignore the Aboriginal women’s ideas, experience and ultimately, their voices. At first I tried to reason that this denial of their contributions to the discussion was not intended, but as the day wore on, it became absolutely obvious that this was not the case. The Aboriginal women rolled their eyes at me as it happened again and again as if to say, “See, we told you, Cate?” Even when they became annoyed, exasperated and spoke out loud the denial they were experiencing, they were ignored. The facilitator and the non-Aboriginal workers turned their faces away from the table, as if no one had spoken. When I left, at the end of the day, I walked to my car completely mystified, stunned by the experience. This had been a planning day where Aboriginal specific services were being reviewed for new programs, yet the Aboriginal women at the table, who would be employed to deliver these ‘new and improved’ services were not even deemed marginal to the process, they were defined, irrelevant. Why were they invited if they’re contributions were to be ignored? Why had they been there?

I spoke to two of the women about a fortnight later at their office. They were very clear, “it happens all the time, Cate”. I suggested that perhaps they should be a little more forceful. They were very clear again. “You get assertive or really stand up for your rights, and you’re out. You play the game, be a good ‘Aborigine’, and you get to keep your job”. One of the women told me her cousin was currently involved in a court case for unfair dismissal because she had been found too ‘challenging’.

This experience embedded all the whiteness and race theory I have read, taught and hypothesized about, into a practical understanding of ‘the way it really works’. It also caused me to speculate on a long history of racism that has culturally stereo-typed Aboriginal people as a ‘gentle, non-aggressive, quiet race’. I can only interpret the quietness that, in the past, has been attributed to Aboriginal people, as a very rational strategy to adopt after being either persistently silenced or relentlessly ignored.

How is it possible to undertake research or evaluate a program if we can’t listen to the people who work for the program or the people who are in, actually experiencing, the program? If we are unable to listen, it is only possible to evaluate a program by conforming to someone else’s agenda or idea of how they would like the evaluation to materialize. The act of engaging in evaluation represents a political statement and it is imperative that the evaluator is clear where they locate themselves politically.

While, I think that compromise is healthy and rigidity unhealthy, too much compromise doesn't make for a reliable evaluation.

Talking to Research with Indigenous people:

It is well documented that Indigenous people are the most researched peoples in the world. In fact, so studied, researched and analysed that, for Indigenous people, the term research has negative connotations. Linda Tuhiwai Smith states, that "research is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary." (Smith, 1999: 1) Smith calls for non-Indigenous researchers to challenge Western research models by questioning the traditional "underlying assumptions, motivations and values that inform research practices." (Smith, 1999: 28)

Compounding this issue of Indigenous people being over-researched, is that Indigenous people have observed a multitude of policies, programs, research projects and evaluations, all supposedly designed to improve conditions for their people, come and then go. Programs that seem to be working well suddenly lose their funding and others take their place. Largely, decisions about these programs or services are made without consultation with the Aboriginal community or they are made in consultation with individuals who have related agenda's. It is not surprising that Indigenous people are mistrustful of new research, the 'newest' service and it is not in the least surprising that they don't believe they are listened to when it is claimed time and time again, that all of these initiatives have been developed 'in consultation'.

When I was first employed to evaluate the FHV program, I spent the first five months engaging with the Aboriginal women who work with the Aboriginal families involved in the program. I wanted to get to know them and I wanted to take the time it takes to get to know people. I visited them at their work places, we gossiped, talked about work, had countless cups of tea and I listened. When they had their monthly day long meetings, I attended and we had lunch together and I played the pokies with them after lunch. For me, it was pleasurable, enjoyable to spend time with these women, but I also understood that they would lead the recruitment strategy for my research and that they have extensive and intensely personal knowledge of their communities. It seemed to me, that if I was going to be asking for these women's help I had to let them know where I was coming from, what I was on about. It's called 'engaging' but my time with those women went far beyond that. It was a learning, understanding, meaningful experience but not simply because I was learning about Aboriginal ways of being, I was discovering a group of exceptional individuals whose dedication to their people is unfaltering - and I was learning about myself.

I have learned a lot about the multi-layered, complex nature of my white identity. And because I am a non-Aboriginal researcher, researching Aboriginal families experience of a program I know I am at risk of imposing my own cultural values, my white social reality without acknowledging how that Indigenous 'otherness', has shaped my white history. If whiteness is located only within the framework of it's opposite, how much of my present is informed by my white privilege or my invisible racial position? This was my dilemma undertaking a research evaluation with Aboriginal people. How do I trust what I see? Whose world view do I, can I represent when I am interpreting what I see, hear, and then write?

When I spoke to this group of women at our first meeting I made it clear that they were central to not only, the success of the project but its whole progress. I wanted them to know that it was their project, that if they felt that I wasn't going to do the right thing by the community or by them, or I was disrespectful in any way, the research would never get off the ground and that they're collaboration was pivotal to the implementation of the evaluation. At that first meeting just the mention of the word 'research' had them rolling their eyes and groaning. Comments like, 'not again' and 'how many times do we have to go through this, why don't they just listen to us', were voiced. But I kept on coming back, meeting, talking and listening and I must have broken through - perhaps simply because it was my job to 'engage' or if I'm more honest because I wanted their approval. I wanted them to believe I could be trusted.

We worked together to recruit families while they continued working in full-time jobs. We produced pretty flyers for participants with details of focus group times, dates and venues and they gave them to families. Two of these women spent a couple of days door knocking; giving information out to families. They were serious about the research and dedicated to recruiting families. They came to all of our focus groups, left the room when families were asked to talk about their performance and came

back in when these conversations were over. I would ring them asking for information, or they would ring me with more names of families who wanted to be a part of the research. They were a constant source of practical and sensible advice. They knew what would work and what wouldn't work. They knew who would prefer to talk one to one or who would rather be part of a focus group and why. They knew who had transport and who didn't, who would need a cabcharge, who would need to leave early and why. They were committed.

Through these women I have met remarkable Aboriginal people, families who allowed me into their homes and talked with me, offered extra support for the evaluation and trusted me enough to talk openly about their lives and their histories. I have learned about the quality of interaction. Good quality interaction grows from equal power relationships between interviewer and the interviewed. It grows when the interviewer is able to listen, is not there simply on a fact finding assignment and conversation can flow naturally. Empathy, kindness and warmth generate openness while being 'nice' generates pleasantness. Pleasantness can be a source of uneasiness, feel fake. After some time and some practice, I understood my role as a research 'interviewer'. I was not there to be helpful – I was there to listen. And I always felt that at the very moment we sat opposite each other to talk, our destinies were in some way, inter-connected.

I will end this paper with the words of Aboriginal woman and activist, Lilla Watson.

“If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, let's work together.” (1992)

Alcoff, Linda. (1992) The Problem of Speaking For Others. *Cultural Critique*. Winter 1991/92: www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-July-1999

Lilla Watson, "Untitled" in *Health for Women 3*. Brisbane: Department of Health, January 1992)