Adapting focus group methods to fit Aboriginal community-based research

Eileen Willis, Meryl Pearce and Tom Jenkin, School of Medicine, Flinders University, Adelaide, South Australia

ABSTRACT
Much social science research occurs between people of unequal power. This is especially so for Indigenous people living in the remote regions of Australia where contact is often characterised by short visits by research teams who may have a limited understanding of the complexity of individual community dynamics or cultural differences. To counter these problems a number of commentators have called for the development of culturally specific research methodologies and ethical protocols. This paper outlines a research project carried out in nine Aboriginal communities using a modified focus group approach whereby the agenda for discussion was determined by the participants. We argue that while the consequences of asking the participants to set the agenda resulted in a lack of standardisation, it allowed a number of critical issues to emerge of relevance to individual communities and is more appropriate as a methodology where the topic under investigation concerns individual community services.

INTRODUCTION: WORKING TOWARDS EFFECTIVE CROSS CULTURAL RESEARCH
Researchers hoping to work effectively and sensitively with Aboriginal Australians living in the remote regions of Australia are faced with a number of methodological and ethical dilemmas. Besides the obvious problems of distance and isolation from researcher's home institution, issues of cultural difference, the complexities of local politics and community life, language barriers and the cynicism of some Aboriginal groups towards those who make fleeting visits looking for answers, must be factored in to any claims of reliability and validity of findings. Alongside this, Aboriginal people have become increasingly cautious about giving knowledge to visiting scholars and extending hospitality and time, where it is clear that the results are not taken up by governments or fed back to the community. In an endeavour to counter these negative impacts and to ensure research results are put into practice, a number of Indigenous organisations met as early as 1986 in Alice Springs to develop a code of ethics and guidelines for the conduct of research with Aboriginal subjects (NHMRC 1991, 2002).

The current NHMRC guidelines for ethical research with Aboriginal people (2002) have their origins in this 1986 meeting. They include the requirement for research teams to establish Aboriginal reference groups to guide research processes, the
employment of Aboriginal research associates where possible, and increasingly, a
recommendation that partnerships be established in order that Indigenous groups are
able to shape the research question, be fundholders and monitor the interpretations.
Other principles include the employment of interpreters, interviewing men and women
separately where appropriate, and clear and equitable memoranda of understanding
on how the knowledge will be used. In many cases, publication of research findings
is subject to agreements on authorship, limitations on the use of sensitive, sacred or
political knowledge, and the requirement to publish research results beyond obscure
academic journals in a manner easily accessible to Aboriginal people. Behind these
guidelines is also the desire that research should influence policy action. A more
recent principle governing health related research requires the team to provide clinical
treatment at the point of data collection, or in the case of research on the status of
community infrastructure (such as housing), repairs must be made at the time the
data is gathered (Miller & Rainow 1997). Adhering to these principles requires
considerable communication between the parties as translations, transcripts and
interpretations are fed back to communities and individuals for vetting and agreement.

Besides the NHMRC guidelines outlined above, a number of commentators have
argued that more is required from researchers in order to achieve ethical outcomes
that produce reliable and valid findings. The issue is not simply that research should
be carried out using standard methods in a culturally and politically sensitive
way, but that there is a need to develop new models of research (Holmes, Stewart,
Garrow, Anderson & Thorpe, 2002). This is indeed a challenge and it is probably
more appropriate to argue that a number of the standard methods of research
are inappropriate in some Aboriginal contexts and that some methods should be
modified to fit the situation better. This latter point is particularly apt where it can be
achieved in partnership with Aboriginal groups. The principle of ‘no data without the
accompanying medical treatment or technical repairs’ is one example of an appropriate
adaptation of an existing research protocol.

This paper outlines an adaptation made to the focus group method used in a project
that sought information on water supply and use in Aboriginal communities in South
Australia (Willis, Pearce, Jenkin, Wurst and McCarthy 2004). While a number of
conventional quantitative and qualitative methodologies were employed, consistent
with the NHMRC guidelines and in what we hope was a culturally sensitive manner,
the focus group method was modified to allow the Aboriginal collective voice, rather
than that of the researchers, to dominate the discussion.

In outlining the advantages and disadvantages in relation to this adaptation in method
we have divided the paper into three sections. In the first section we provide some
background to the project indicating the standard protocols put in place to comply
with NHMRC guidelines, but also to assist us in building a professional research
relationship with each Aboriginal community. The second section provides a brief
overview of the focus group method and our adaptations. In the third section we report
our observations on the usefulness of this adaptation to the focus group methodology
and make comment on the nature of the knowledge gathered. Where participants
set the agenda the discussion can be summarised under six themes; (1) focus groups
enhance community control over the definition of the situation; (2) focus groups
provide the community with the capacity to speak strategically with one voice; (3)
focus groups allow for the public exploration of differences within acceptable social
norms; (4) focus groups highlight who has authority to speak; (5) focus groups allow
for the exploration of solutions to real community problems and finally; (6) focus groups allow for the exploration of sensitive ideas within acceptable social norms. These six headings are not unique; they are core qualities of focus groups. Our modifications merely enhance the probability of them occurring.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This project focused on the Aboriginal people's views about the provision of water infrastructure in the 18 communities serviced by the Department for State Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation (DAARE) in South Australia. There were two significant aims of the project. These were firstly, to monitor Aboriginal community views firstly, to the quality of their existing water supply, and secondly in relation to the mainstreaming of water infrastructure services as DAARE moved to outsource supply and maintenance to the state's major provider, SA Water. The selection of particular communities was based on the landowning authority; Aboriginal Lands Trust, the Anangu Pitjantjatjara and Maralinga Tjarutja as well as the type of water supply; and bore river or mains. In three instances interviews were conducted with individuals or communities living outside of areas serviced by DAARE or in towns in close proximity to Aboriginal communities, although in the majority of cases focus group sessions were conducted with community councils, rather than the wider community. While this limited the accounts to a small number of individuals, it did capture the views of key leaders in each community.

The usual NHMRC guidelines for research with Aboriginal people were adhered to. For example approval to conduct the research was gained from the South Australian Aboriginal Health Council Ethics Committee and the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Science Ethics Committee. The Flinders University requires all health-related research, or research conducted by staff within the Faculty of Health Sciences to be vetted by the Aboriginal Health Council. This ensures projects meet NHMRC guidelines, but more importantly provide the Aboriginal Health Council with the opportunity to meet with university staff and spell out expectations as well as be familiar with all Aboriginal health related research occurring within the state.

In all cases men and women were interviewed together, in groups of around 5 to 8 people, in English, with the age of participants ranging from late 20s to over 50. In some communities individuals discussed the issues in their first language and then provided English translations. In these cases we sought permission from the participants to translate the Yankunytjatjara or Pitjantjatjara accounts and compare them with the English versions for similarities and differences in content. Interviews were conducted in rooms frequently used by the participants such as the community office, recreation hall or on the verandah of the local store. Participants were asked to indicate whether or not they wished to be named in any reports or publications. Other strategies included producing a quarterly newsletter update on the project that was sent to all participants in the first year of the project. This newsletter alerted communities to problems experienced by other Aboriginal groups, but more importantly, from our perspective, signalled that the work was still in progress and that we wanted to keep communication open. All taped transcripts were sent back to individual community members for verification and the final report for each community was also returned for approval. We argued that it is more important for communities to verify the interpretations made by researchers than to validate the
accuracy of transcripts of interviews. Where communities asked for changes in the interpretations this occurred, and where no agreement could be reached we withdrew the account.

We also established an Indigenous reference group drawn from departments and agencies with an interest in the project outcomes. This reference group met four times over the life of the project and provided guidance on how to conduct the focus groups, the use of interpreters and background on previous research. Twelve months into the project the Indigenous reference group directed us to make an interim report to the Executive staff in DAARE. In this way DAARE became aware of the research findings well before the final report was published and had the opportunity to respond to its constituency.

THE FOCUS GROUPS AS A RESEARCH METHOD

The focus group interview is an approach to data gathering where the researcher interviews between 6 to 10 members of a specific ‘community of interest’ as a group. Devised in the early 1920s as a research strategy by social researchers from the Chicago based school of Symbolic Interactionism, the method provides a more complex and layered account of the variety and richness of community attitudes, values and beliefs than the one to one interview (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005). This is achieved through the process of conversation whereby the various participants outline their own ideas, but are also in a position to react and respond to the views of other community or group members. It is this latter factor that separates focus groups from one to one interviews and provides the various nuances of views. Individual one-to-one interviews build upon the intimacy created between the interviewer and interviewee; in such cases information exchanged may transgress social norms and mores. This is not the case for focus groups, where the presence of many others re-creates the social and political environment of the ‘community of interest’ (McGregor 2004). However, the opportunity for dialogue between group members on the issue under investigation also allows for both clarification and reflection on shared values and attitudes as well as providing evidence of divergence of views.

According to Straw and Smith (1995) the focus group method is ideal for needs assessment of community aspirations or the evaluation of essential service delivery. Unlike one to one interviews where participants respond to specific questions, giving their opinion in isolation from others in the research population, in focus groups, differences of opinion may emerge during the interviewing session and can provide opportunity for further clarification, resolution of the issue or confirmation of continuing conflict. However, we would agree with McGregor’s (2004) claim that marginal views gain little air space during focus group discussion. Despite this, while the information presented by focus group members may lack the depth of one-to-one interviews, the range of community views is more readily displayed and opportunity exists for these views to be explored by the group. In presenting the findings, researchers are not restricted to portrayals of opposing positions, but can capture more accurately the depth and range of views in the community under investigation as they are expressed in interaction.

The value of focus group interviews in the Aboriginal context can be supported on cultural and political grounds. Focus groups allow the gathering of information that
reflects a range of community attitudes and values going some way to overcoming the danger of presenting an Aboriginal viewpoint that assumes homogeneity. Conversely, from a cultural perspective it preserves the group focus and allows for the public control and display of knowledge, in many ways analogous to an open community council meeting where those who speak do so from positions of authority and ownership of knowledge.

In some situations focus group interviews may act as a catalyst for the mobilisation of community action, since it provides the venue that brings researchers and the community members together to discuss issues of importance. In such cases there is the possibility for transformative knowledge and group action to occur (Cameron 2001). The ‘change’ potential built into the focus group approach goes some way to overcoming the problem of time. Indigenous communities are not culturally static; values and beliefs change as a result of interactions with each other and the wider society. The focus group approach provides one venue for the exchange of ideas that is part of the processes of the ebb and flow of discussion that facilitates problem solving and change.

The usual process for focus groups is for one member of the research team, the facilitator or moderator, to direct the interview, while another team member may handle the microphones and tapes, take notes or make observations. Ordinarily the facilitator will have a set of questions related to the topic under discussion; such as ‘What do you all think about the quality of the water here?’ Much of the value of focus groups is captured in the ebb and flow as group members respond to these questions and the responses made by others. However, in situations where not all members have equal knowledge it may be difficult to avoid one person or segments of the group dominating the conversation, or conversely where the researchers are strangers, interviewees may be reticent about expressing their views in a public forum. To overcome these two dilemmas we instituted two modifications to the above process.

Firstly, on arriving at a community, we spent some time being shown over the water infrastructure or talking informally to the Essential Service Officer (ESO). This provided us with background knowledge of the water supply. Secondly, at the commencement of the focus group session we invited the community to set the agenda. This was done by the interviewer stating her name, how long she had been at this community (this was usually less than 2 hours) and what she thought was the major problem with the water supply. This acted as a guide to how the focus group would proceed, but also provided an amusing ice-breaker given the naïve knowledge of the facilitator. Participants were then invited to likewise introduce themselves, say how long they had lived in the community -thus establishing their credentials- and what they saw as the main issue. As each person identified their issues these were recorded on butcher’s paper by the third researcher and formed the agenda for the focus group session. This ensured that the topics for discussion were relevant, were determined by the group and proceeded in an order that reflected their importance to the community. Towards the end of the session we flagged any areas we felt had not been covered to gain community views, but our issues and concerns were not central to the discussion.
EXPLORING THE STRENGTH OF FOCUS GROUPS IN THE ABORIGINAL CONTEXT

It would be naive to suggest that there are no difficulties associated with focus groups. The issue of recruitment is one vexed area. In our study we had little control over who participated or what influence they had over other participants. As already alluded to, the responses of focus groups are characterised by breadth and richness of participant interaction, rather than depth, as is the claim of one to one interviews. Further to this, the consequences of this approach were that the agenda for all nine focus groups differed. Saturation was not achieved. While there were many similarities in the issues raised, the sequencing and attention given to these issues differed from community to community. Our approach did not allow for standardisation, in the questions asked, the order of questions, the phrasing of ideas or emphasis given to particular issues. Despite this, the focus groups exhibited a number of strengths which we believe were enhanced by ensuring that the participants determined the agenda topics and priority issues. Five of these are discussed below.

Focus groups enhance community control over the definition of the situation
As professionals we prided ourselves on doing sufficient background research on each community in order to understand some of the water-based issues. While this is commendable it had the disadvantage of leading us to assume we knew what the issues were for this community and risked interviews being determined by our ‘definition of the situation’. The value of allowing the agenda to be set by the focus group members was that they set the direction for the session, rather than our background assumptions determining the questions we asked. What surprised us at a number of communities was the way in which water supply was defined. For example at one community when participants were asked to introduce themselves and indicate what were the water issues for them, their initial comments related only to rainwater with no mention of their mains water supply. This was at a community where the mains water supply was within the recommended Australian Drinking Water Guideline, and it was a supply delivered to over 16000 other households in the region. A short excerpt of narrative illustrates this point.

Participant 1: Water, very poor
Participant 2: There is no water:
Participant 3: The water here is very, very poor. I’ve got to walk around with an empty container to somebody’s house just to go and get water.

These comments highlighted for us that many Aboriginal communities see rainwater as the ideal drinking water, preferring it to bore or mains water. It is probable that if we had approached the focus group interviews with predetermined questions we would not have captured this salient point about the preference for rainwater. The importance of this lies in the fact that in all but one of the nine communities visited, DAARE and SA Water do not have the authority to maintain rainwater tanks. Where rainwater tanks are not regularly checked the integrity of the supply can become susceptible from a microbiological point of view. By allowing the group to determine the agenda, a serious gap in service provision was identified.
Focus groups provide the capacity to speak with one voice and enhance consensus and the building on ideas.

Focus groups provide the opportunity for communities to discover their common interest or agreement in a topic. The contribution of some participants beyond their initial statement was often in the form of single words or short phrases of agreement with what others had said rather than adding any new or differing insight. The following comments illustrate the focus on consensus, rather than the need to articulate individual ideas:

Participant 1: *And that water, what everyone is saying—same. That's all I got to say.*
Participant 2: *And I think a lot of the words K spoke about are, taken out of my mouth now I think, yeah.*
Participant 3: *Well I reckon K pretty well summed it up.*
Participant 4: *Yeah he's probably said it all.*
Participant 5: *Yeah, I agree with K.*

Speaking with one voice is not a haphazard affair. In another community, the Council wished to use their authority to speak as one, rather than as individuals. This was a political act, arising out of current issues confronting the community and their understanding of the strategic need to present a united view. At the beginning of the focus group session the Community Development Officer stated 'we all drink the same water, we will have the same story'. The Officer indicated that participants wished to be referred to as 'the Council' and would speak with one voice and completed one ethics form as 'The Council'. Speaking with one voice carried over into the style of the focus group. Following a question from the research team, participants discussed the issue in Pitjantjatjara language, and then provided an answer in English. This finding is consistent with the view put forth by Power (2002) who suggests that focus groups shift the emphasis away from specific individuals. It is the collective nature of focus groups that is the key to its value as a research tool. New knowledge is generated from the dynamics of the interactions.

In other examples the discussion built on earlier ideas, with individuals able to clarify and correct each other. This is a common feature of focus groups whereby the ideas of one participant spark the imagination of others in the group, thus building up a reservoir of knowledge (Yelland & Gifford 1995). In the following example the Aboriginal Council discussed the usefulness of a desalination plant and a dam, but readily recognized the costs and the complexities of funding agencies.

Participant 1: *We talked about having...*
Participant 2: *Desalination.*
Participant 4: *Dam*
Participant 1: *We even talked about, talked about a dam, they reckon a dam would cost too much.*
Participant 3: *But they're spending heaps of money on repairs.*
Participant 2: *Yeah but that's from ATSIC (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Council).*
Focus groups allow for the public exploration of differences of view
The consensus outlined above should not be seen to have stifled debate or
differences of opinion. In this study differences of opinion were expressed that
allowed others in the group to counter, correct or add to the ideas. Contrary to
findings outlined by Twinn (1998) we did not find that this resulted in some
members withdrawing. We believe this was because the agenda was a group one
where the topics were clearly understood and shared by all. For example, in one
community when participants were asked whether they would start drinking the
mains water when the rainwater ran out differences of opinion were evident, as the
following excerpt illustrates:

Participant: I guess we'd start drinking the mains water.
Participant: I'd go buy it. I wouldn't give that to my baby.

Focus groups highlight who has authority to speak and who dominates
Despite the comments above, in many instances we found that one person dominated
the discussion suggesting that some are vested with more authority than others.
Yelland & Gifford (1995) suggest that this may be due to differences in power
and status within a community of interest that restrict the expression of opinions
of some junior or lower status members. In the focus groups we conducted, vocal
individuals tended to be persons with greater background knowledge on a topic, or
with authority to speak because of their position. This was observed particularly with
the Essential Services Officers and Bookkeepers, who have the authority that comes
from knowledge of technical services, or the Community Chairpersons or ATSC
representative, who tend to have positional authority. For example, in one community
where ten people took part in the focus group the Essential Service Officer contributed
over half of the narrative, with the remaining participants expressing their views, but
often deferring to him or listening to his opinion. Other participants in the group did
not appear to be uncomfortable and often offered words and gestures of agreement
with what was being said. In two other communities the Bookkeepers had detailed
knowledge on the difficulties of meeting the quarterly water costs, while in other
instances the Community Chairperson took control of much of the discussion. What
was clear in these discussions was that some of this knowledge was new to community
members as well as to us.

The focus group approach does not mean all have equal say, but it does presume that
all people in the focus group have an opportunity to agree or contradict what is said.
This idea is consistent with those outlined by McGregor (2004) who argues that focus
group 'knowledge' is socially situated. In effect if reflects existing hierarchies based
on place, environment and the particulars of the social and political situation in which
the interviews occur. For example in the following excerpt a vocal male leader draws
on his wider knowledge both to dominate and correct another participant:

Participant 1: I don't think people would drink it [recycled water], would they?
Participant 2: No just use it for gardening.
Participant 3: Might be right just for the gardens
Participant 4: Could be even like, like the we got a footy oval
Participant 2: Yeah.
Focus group discussions allow for the generation of solutions to problems of real concern
Focus groups also allow community-generated ideas and solutions to problems as demonstrated in the following except:

Participant 1: I reckon we realise that, that we got to do something because water is, it is on the news all the time that water’s precious.
Participant 2: I would like to have a big water catchment sort of thing.
Participant 3: I dare you.
Participant 2: That would cause all sorts of havocs wouldn’t it.
Participant 4: Yep.
Participant 2: You know I mean, you got a big hill up there, if you could build [a catchment]
Participant 1: Best one would be an underground kind of one.
Participant 2: If you had an underground thing where the, there’s a lot of runoff off the hills up here, you could have like a reservoir kind of thing.

Several months after this focus group session the community rang to push this idea further and have it clearly articulated in the final report and in the recommendations that would be sent on to the funding authority.

Allowing the agenda to be set by participants facilitates discussion of sensitive topics
Focus groups are not without their difficulties in cross-cultural contexts. Broaching sensitive topics is one such issue. As Donovan and Sparks (1997) note, direct questioning on sensitive matters can be intrusive to Aboriginal people, and runs counter to Aboriginal culture. In the context of Aboriginal communities, this can occur especially in situations where non-Aboriginal facilitators visit an Indigenous community for a brief period and are not aware of the dynamics of the community. In such situations the deeper cultural knowledge is too delicate for public discussion with strangers and in a public forum as the following exchange illustrates:

Facilitator: Do you see the importance of the traditional sources of water perhaps in terms of Aboriginal culture, maintaining those links to those resources?
Participant 1: mm.
Participant 2: Like the Aboriginal people still want to keep the traditional ways but you know if there is just no water there is no water hey.

In this project the reticence illustrated above usually occurred towards the end of the discussion when we raised questions on issues that the community had not put on the agenda. However, in those instances where cultural issues were raised usually by older members of the group as part of the agenda discussion, participants were forthcoming and elaborated on the issue. Invariably, this happened once the formal discussions had finished, or during a lunch break, suggesting to us that this material was outside the formal research process.

In these cases it may well be that the focus group members assumed our interest was purely in the technical issues of domestic water infrastructure supplied by a government department such as bores, tanks and taps, and not directly on cultural
relationships to water and land management. Allowing the participants to determine the agenda, does not overcome the problem of the group members selecting agenda items they think will be of interest to researchers. Where it is evident to them that governments make these distinctions they may not push for integrated water management plans that tie traditional understandings and water conservation methods and approaches together with new technologies. What is communicated are the socially accepted and understood truths (McGregor 2004).

SHORTCOMINGS TO THE FOCUS GROUP APPROACH IN THE ABORIGINAL CONTEXT

One shortcoming of our approach, and to focus groups in general, was that our approach did not overcome problems of dominance when non-Indigenous people were part of the group. In one community non-Indigenous people attended the focus group and only four of the participants were Indigenous. The non-Indigenous participants, who mostly held technical and professional positions within the community, tended to dominate the discussion and the Indigenous participants tended to withdraw from the conversation. While it could be argued that this difficulty is simply a matter of good meeting management, our attempts to draw the Indigenous participants into the discussion was frequently overridden by interjections from the non-Indigenous participants as the example illustrates below. In this case the non-Indigenous participants not only interjected, but also changed the topic of discussion.

Facilitator: Participant 5, have you got any other thoughts about the water?
Indigenous
Participant 5: The waters right. I don’t like the rainwater.
Facilitator: You don’t like the rainwater?
(Interjection by Non-Indigenous focus group member)
Participant 3: If we were to consider pumping water up we would sort of need a lot of money, for pipes, irrigation and that sort of thing wouldn’t we.
Non-Indigenous
Participant 4: Getting back to the swimming pool, there’s no shortage of water for a swimming pool.

Our observations at this point is that there is a need for focus groups to be real ‘communities of interest’. There are strong norms about what can be discussed and what is permissible even in ‘communities of interest’, but this differs from the situation outlined above where one community of interest is dominated by another. Our observation is that it is important to arrange the focus groups meetings with the ‘community of interest’. This is not always easy on Aboriginal communities where letters, telephone calls, reports, and requests may have to go through a central office where control is not necessarily in the hands of the Aboriginal Chairperson or council members.

Another intriguing aspect of this project was the advice given by the Aboriginal reference group that we did not need to use interpreters in those communities were it is standard practice. We were assured that the community participants would understand the processes and questions being explored. While we found that this was indeed the case, in two communities we were initially disconcerted when the focus group members discussed all the topics firstly in Pitjantjatjara or Yankunytjatjara and then
a spokesperson provided an answer in English. This clearly allowed participants the opportunity to establish a coherent and consensus position before providing the answer they wished to convey to us. People also used Pitjantjatjara to clarify what was being asked to check out with each other what the question was and how to answer it.

We were initially concerned with this process, but after processing the focus group material, and seeking permission from the community, both English and Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara dialogue were transcribed with the assistance of an interpreter. The translation enabled us to confirm whether the Aboriginal English dialogue conveyed the same message as the discussion and afforded us an opportunity to reflect on the appropriateness of the research process. In considering both the English and Pitjantjatjara material, it was clear that while there were some comprehension issues, the lack of an interpreter did not appear to overly influence the community views retold during the research process. In contrast, the lack of interpreters and the group process provided a relaxed atmosphere which was indicated by the various asides made by participants and also the lively discussions that were held in Pitjantjatjara. Results show that even though they had the privacy to discuss issues in their own language freely, the answers given in English were the same as the conversations in Pitjantjatjara. The fact that the group had determined the agenda and the order of importance for each item facilitated the processes of translation and interpretation.

We believe these findings go some way to overcoming some of the difficulties of cross-cultural research outlined by Small, Yelland, Lumley, Rice, Cotrone & Warren (1999), Miller and Rainow (1997) and Yelland and Gifford (1995). Small et al (1999) examined some of the problems involved in translating questionnaires in cross-cultural research. They compared taped interviews with the transcriptions of the interview and also with their English translations and found that even where the utmost caution is taken errors occur. They found it difficult to determine whether the differences were due to interviewer effects, or to language or cultural differences and advised the use of accredited translators. Furthermore, they advised that where 'unusual findings' arise, these should be treated with reserve as possible translation discrepancies. Furthermore, they recommended that published results should articulate the procedures followed where interviews have been translated so that readers can give due consideration of the level of accuracy in the study.

CONCLUSION

Despite the caveats above we believe that allowing the participants to set the agenda topics for discussion facilitates the communication of what McGregor (2004) refers to as 'socially acceptable truths'. Agenda setting provides evidence of the community priorities and, as we have demonstrated, these priorities may not be the same as those of the researcher. Agenda setting by the participants ensures that the knowledge produced has a distinctly local flavour to it. It allows the local community to give emphasis to their issues, rather than for the overall account to present a homogenized and standardized account of the field.

Acknowledgements

Veolia Water (Australia), Department for Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation (DAARE), and Flinders University are thanked for funding the research. Thanks are also due to the CRC for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health for funds to publish the report.
References
National Health and Medical Research Council. (2002). Draft values and ethics in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research: Consultation draft. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

EILEEN WILLIS’ research interest is in Aboriginal health, MERYL PEARCE’S research interest is water supply in remote regions and TOM JENKINS has a research interests in Indigenous land management.

Contact details:
Eileen Willis
Flinders University
School of Medicine
Sturt General
GPO Box 2100
Adelaide 5000
Phone: 82013110
Eileen.willis@flinders.edu.au