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Stronger Indigenous Families Project 2006

Introduction to Kummara Conceptual Framework
A Discourse on a Proposed Aboriginal Research Methodology

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The impetus and creative force for this paper came from the collaboration of Kummara staff through Action Research workshops and community group discussions that took place over many months. Discussion topics ranged from the resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and child rearing methods, the requirements of sustainable community development strategies and structures, what personal leadership qualities are necessary for strengthening communities to the preferred action research methodologies for Indigenous people and the analytical observations arising from considerations of theory and practice.

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Introduction to Kummara Conceptual Framework on Place A Discourse on a Proposed Aboriginal Research Methodology

Mary Graham 2007

Introduction

Over the past few decades, new community-based participatory research paradigms have evolved that include Aboriginal (Indigenous) research methods combined with Western research methods that offer benefits and equity to community members as well as Western researchers. These methods highlight the importance of community traditional knowledge processes, of the participation of community knowledge producers and of the social, cultural and spiritual dimensions regarding the centrality of land within social and political issues.

This paper, which came out of the work of an Aboriginal community organisation called Kummara, describes an Aboriginal understanding of the qualitative, and subjective aspects of place, of meaning (Being), and of the nature of how knowledge and understanding of change is constructed, especially about human agency, in patterns of family relationships, community organisation and relationship to land and the custodial ethic. Because Indigenous research methods stress the moral nature of physicality (especially land) and the need for relationality and interconnectedness with all life forces, the theoretical model that emerges or is identified from those methods will also have that ethical quality.

Approaches to Research

(a) Western Methods of Inquiry

For most Westerners, Inquiry precedes Place. Knowledge acquisition both defines and supersedes place.

Supporters of the Western modern scientific method reject these claims of non-Western knowledges. They believe, firstly, that reality is what it is irrespective of what humans think or know about it; secondly, that reality is ordered, that it has a structure that is universal and invariant across time and place. They claim that the structure and forces of the natural world remain the same in different times and in different contexts. They also believe that this structure is knowable and that Western science has provided the ability to explain, predict and control many natural phenomena and to invent technologies to solve human problems.

However, many other scientists do not believe we can truly detach ourselves from the reality we are observing to achieve objectivity; that we can never completely remove the observer from the interpretation; that the observer does not have total agency over passive matter as the world kicks back. "Our knowledge of the world is not innocent; it doesn't just come out that way by itself". (1) So there is always flux in the movement of matter even though it may manifest stable and discernable structures.

The present approach argues that the West needs to overcome the biases of "universalism" in Western methods of Inquiry and in the action of Inquiry itself to promote multiple knowledge systems.

(b) Protocols

Protocols are the codes of social behaviour that members of all cultures and communities use to deal and interact with each other, and are also the basic rules of engagement that communities and countries use for national and international relations. When working in research with Indigenous communities, the protocols and perspectives to be aware of are based on trust, respect, equity and empowerment and include related issues like intellectual property, capacity building and agreements.

Many Indigenous methodologies have protocols and cross cultural awareness as the main theme of their approach to research programs and knowledge studies. While these are very valuable for furthering understanding of Indigenous values and perspectives, they don't provide a clear focus for and a guide to Indigenous analysis of phenomena and agency itself. If Indigenous people were to have an analytical theory, then what would that theory consist of? How would it be applied to examine a proposition or problem?

(c) Therapies

Narration is one method of both therapy and research that segues well with the notion of Place. The recounting of stories, personal and collective, is premised on the idea that the lives and the relationships of persons are shaped by the knowledges and stories that communities of persons negotiate and engage in to give meaning to their experiences.

A narrative therapy assists persons to resolve problems by:

- Enabling them to separate their lives and relationships from those knowledges and stories that they judge to be impoverishing;
- Assisting them to challenge the ways of life that they find subjugating; and,
- Encouraging persons to re-author their own lives according to alternative and preferred stories of identity, and according to preferred ways of life.

Narrative therapy has particular links with Family Therapy and those therapies which have a common ethos of respect for the client, and an acknowledgement of the importance of context, interaction, and the social construction of meaning. (2)

By acknowledging the importance of context, interaction and social construction of meaning, it's assumed that Place has either a direct or indirect bearing on the stories of people, both in the sense of 'point of reference' and of impact or influence.

Every research project has several conventional features. There is a difficulty/dilemma to address/solve or further information to discover; a limit to resources; a work team of varying skills and abilities; a timeframe; a selected research method to follow. However, **the core value is that it is placed, or begins, somewhere.** Even though the same project may actually be in more than one site and/or have nothing to do with land/property at all but rather be involved with events in time, actual or metaphysical, still, agency has an origin.

Kummara

Kummara Association Inc. is an Aboriginal organisation in West End Brisbane whose policy is Stronger Indigenous Families. The work and activities that are engaged in by staff, and offered as a service to the local Aboriginal community of Brisbane, involves working closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, women and children in particular. Their underlying method of working takes as its premise the notion of the primacy of the family/community and local consensus style decision making.

A Community Mapping research project was being conducted which involved talking to many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community people, organisations and focus groups. At the same time within Kummara an informal program of discussions were taking place on the nature of Action Research methods, what its core parts are and how it is formulated. (3)

As time and the discussions went on both project and program merged with questions and issues being raised about:

- The efficacy and the ethics of acquiring knowledge from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples via research regardless of the method,
- The nature of Indigenous knowledge, the foundation, scope and validity,
- The limits of protocols and notions of equity in ethical research codes and activities,

Although there was no strict adherence to the linear style classic stages of action research, it was during the Illumination phase (Attachment 1) that a change in the direction of both projects occurred. While discussions and data collecting/collating of both project and program were proceeding, Kummara became aware of the need to explore the possibilities of an Indigenous theoretical model alternative to those which currently underpin most research methodologies.

Kummara is of the firm belief that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations are entities which have the ultimate responsibility to create/produce their own solutions starting with strategies for understanding their own situations outside of financial and skills needs. Community organisations are not learning fast enough, or being given enough support to develop skills or learnings based on Indigenous perspectives especially in the area of gleaning method or theory from practice. Other concerns are:

- Generally and historically, experts from outside the community provide the theoretical understanding to solving social problems, which can bring dissension between community, clients, practitioners and experts;
- Related to this notion, science looks at all phenomena objectively, thereby assesses the 'truth' of situations, which is often in contrast to how community, clients and practitioners view the same situations;
- Historically and intellectually, there has been a gap between theory and practice, which is really a knowledge production problem, that is, the language of theory and the language of practice is all too often far apart.

Kummara proposes a system of engaged scholarship in which researchers and practitioners co-produce knowledge that can advance theory as well as practice in any given domain, but especially in the area of Stronger Indigenous Families (SIF).

Aboriginal Terms of Reference (ATRs) (4)

Further action research/learning meetings with Kummara staff, focus groups and community groups took place, along with discussions on developing community based Indigenous methodologies and the sharing of ideas with other Indigenous bodies and with University academics in appropriate theoretical areas. This resulted in identifying the following collective values or Aboriginal Terms of Reference (ATR):

- Primacy of place
- Importance of family/kin and relationships
- Spiritual integrity
- Land as a moral entity
- Consensus decision making
- Non-competitiveness
- Positive group dynamics
- Age and gender recognition and respect
- Maintenance of harmonious relations
- Non-hierarchical structures
- Sharp observational abilities
- Aboriginal system of logic and time and space (different to Western systems)

These terms/qualities underpin the Aboriginal social praxis and ontological and epistemological basis of existence.

During this whole analytical process occurring at Kummara the notion of Place was constantly raised, if not as subject then as qualifier or identity, determinant or even as a sub-conscious, vague influence on people's lives.

Outcome of Discussions

A general agreement that dislocation and its accompanying pathologies, whether the outcome of colonialism or the predations of capitalism on poor countries and poor peoples, is a worldwide problem especially so for the millions of Indigenous people with their loss of land, economies and cultures plus the constant interventions into their social and cultural traditions. The importance of the loss of a sense of place to an individual or a people's sense of themselves cannot be over-estimated. The impact has a chain or domino effect - quite often with dislocation comes loss. It may not be physical – economy, goods, technologies or people themselves. It may be that responsibility and obligation is removed from people so that their lives, surroundings and environment are beyond their control. To regulate, manage and organise matters, make decisions and manage conflict becomes increasingly difficult.

The addressing of social ills, the resolution of contradictions in assumptions and analyses, the search for causes, clarity and information – all become urgent and overwhelming, chaotic and attenuated.

What made sense to Kummara and Focus group participants in discussions were themes and issues where Indigenous values were seen as a prism through which problematic first causes are made discernible and a method or range of methods selected to enable people to examine more thoroughly the scale, features, meaning of, and possible solutions to difficulties.

Indigenous stakeholders were presented with addressing, analysing and solving this social and theoretical dilemma (although it was not presented in a theoretical way) that assumed that the Aboriginal approach was not only applicable and valid but that it was also authoritative, constructive and compelling. In other words the idea of an Aboriginal method was never presented as needing assistance, too arcane, not scientific or professional enough.

Hence the raising of the notion of developing a method (or a theory) by which research, from the point of view of Place, could be used:

- To explain social phenomena;
- To inform a variety of therapies, particularly narrative therapy;
- To provide a theoretical basis for understanding Indigenous knowledges;
- To provide a strategy for arbitrage between competing therapies and competing methods and theories in the social sciences.

Kummara Concept of Place - Introduction to Place

Documentation highlighting outcomes of all of the discussion sessions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people included – an outline of the developmental aspects of the Kummara methodology, its content and its general theme which is:

The voice(s) emerging from Place (community/locality) is the authentic one, not the 'objective', scientific description.

From the Indigenous point of view local innovation is the implicit basis of scientific knowledge. True science has to include the metaphysical aspects of knowledges. (5)

The inclusion of Place in a story provides an authentic explanation of how and why something comes into the world that in turn provides a balance between agency (human and spiritual) and point of origin or Place. Balance and re-balance is achieved when Place is used like an ontological compass. The story of alcohol (in Europe) is one such instance.

Example: An Indigenous group of people undergoing de-tox therapies requested information about the story of alcohol, not the official health dangers, not the historical account of how it is made, but the Dreaming Story of alcohol, that is, the Place from where it originated, the Ancestral Beings who brought it into the world and the meaning associated with it. The counselling staff were challenged by this request and had to research this aspect which led them to stories of the gods Bacchus, Dionysius, Pan and others and their role in bringing alcohol into being. This approach made a lot more sense to the Aboriginal clients and in turn impacted positively on their recovery. (6)

Western contemporary techno-sciences, rather than being taken as definitional of knowledge, rationality, or objectivity, should be treated as varieties of knowledge systems. But even though knowledge systems may differ in their epistemologies, methodologies, logics, cognitive structures, or socioeconomic contexts, a characteristic they all share is localness.

Place and Change

For Aboriginal people, place is epistemologically and ontologically central to notions and discussions regarding action or intent. Not only history but meaning arises out of place, whether place is geographically located or an event in time. The saying "the past is another country" is, from Aboriginal logic, pertinent to multi-dimensional time, that is, all events that have occurred and are occurring within any of the range of senses of time occupy a place (in time).

In other words Place precedes Inquiry. Place defines and supersedes Inquiry. Place is a living thing again whether place is geographically located or an event in time. Place does not hamper, confuse or attenuate Inquiry, rather Place both enhances and clarifies Inquiry. Place underpins Inquiry but not ideologically so.

If change is the fundamental nature of reality or existence, as described by Heraclitus, (7) then Place is the fundamental existential quantifier, that is to say, Place is a measuring device that informs us of 'where' we are at any time, therefore, at the same time, it's also informing us 'who' we are.

Example:

A research project connected to development that was carried out in Manteo, North Carolina, United States, identified what the residents valued about their town. Initially the surveys and interviews found that qualities such as friendliness and informality, other people, certain events held regularly and certain areas – the waterfront and some shops - are important to their quality of life. The research team wanted to find more specific information so they tried "behaviour mapping" which involved observation of activities of townspeople over a period of time. This showed that place-based activity was of the utmost importance. Daily ritual was place-specific and cultural dependence on places seemed more widespread than people had reported in interviews.

As researchers noted, "these places are almost universally unappealing to the trained professional eyes of an architect, historian, real estate developer, or upper-middle-class tourist." For example, the 'sacred structure' (this is actually how the townspeople referred to the prioritised list of places to keep intact regardless of re-development) included the marshes surrounding the town, a park, the Duchess restaurant, locally made (unreadable) street signs, and a gravel parking lot where people gathered to watch the sun set and where the town's Christmas tree was set up. Of the 'sacred' places, only two were protected by historic preservation legislation, and a few more by zoning laws; that is, the existing planning and legal mechanisms that were intended to help preserve the character of places missed most of what the residents of Manteo actually valued.(8)

Time and space are in us. If time, in at least one of its forms, is like an arrow, then Place is like the calibrating mechanism or device of that trajectory.

For human experience Place looms large, providing, sometimes dominating the backdrop and sometimes the foreground as well. The backdrop of place informs and influences judgement and imagination.

People flee from and flee to Place both physically and psychologically. Place is a reference point to guide to and from. Place is a physical point in landscape, but also a point in time, an event, an imagining or even a landscape itself. This is demonstrated in the modern sayings "The past is another country", "We won't go there".

Place and Transformation (Logic)

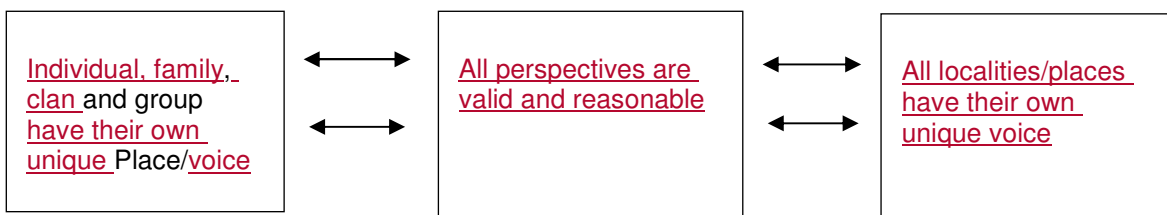
The notion of Place also determines the logic of Indigenous people.

Western Inquiry reduces the Custodial Ethic, indeed the Law, to cultural constructs - in the public sphere they become small, unimportant things. Place (Aboriginal logic) maintains that there is no division between the observing mind and anything else: there is no "external world" to inhabit. There are distinctions between the physical and the spiritual, but these aspects of existence continually inter-penetrate each other. There is never a barrier between the mind and the Creative; the whole repertoire of what is possible continually presents or is expressed as an infinite range of Dreamings. What is possible is the *transformative dynamic of growth*. (9) This view is further explicated by the following:

All localities/places have their own unique voice.
Individual, family, clan and group have their own unique Place/voice.
All perspectives are valid and reasonable.

This is further demonstrated in the equation:

Fig. 1



The equation may also be proposed as:

Place = Dreaming (Event and Story)

Multiple Places = Multiple Dreamings = Multiple Laws = Multiple Logics = Multiple Truths =

All Perspectives (truths) are Valid and Reasonable

To the Aboriginal mindset phenomena are received and if there is an observation it is to "behold" or "regardez". The Law is both creator, informer and guide – the world reveals itself to us and to itself - we don't "discover" anything.

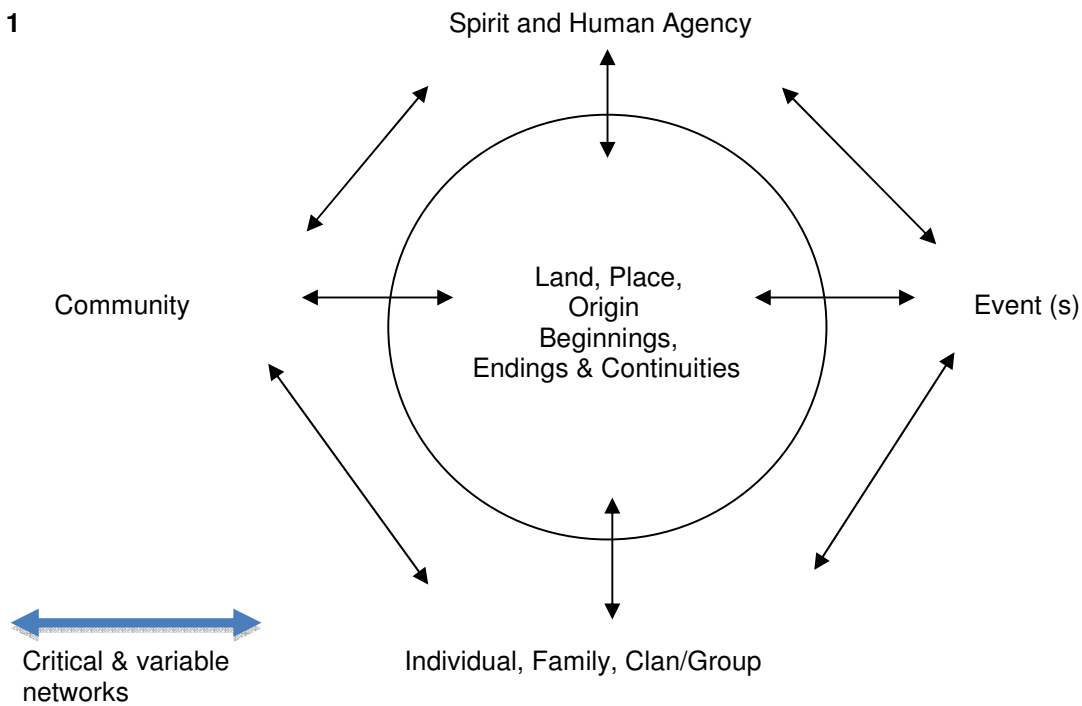
The same mindset perceives the Western method of Inquiry to lead to and, to be inextricably attached to discovery and therefore to ownership. That is why, to Indigenous peoples in many places, there is often a sense of something predatory about the process of Inquiry.

Law of Place

Aboriginal Australia's perspective on the nature of existence is that the Sacred Dreaming is the system of creation that brings the whole of existence into being and ensures its continuance. The Dreaming, with the Ancestral Beings as both Creators and intermediaries, brings into being Place, and, along with the emergence of Place, comes the Law for that Place. Law and Place come into the world at the same time. Identity, obligation, kinship and marriage rules, or the Law of Relationships (10) now comes into being, as has been said.

What also comes into being is the notion of Place as a determinant of Being in the world, that is, Place as the informative quality or essence of the Mode of Being in the world - what could be called the Law of Place.

Fig. 1



The notion of Place as a method of research, or as a possible theory, is a way of seeing and a form of knowing that employs historical knowledge, reflexive reasoning, and dialectic awareness to give people some tools to realize new potentials for the emancipation and understanding of dislocated individuals and collectives today. By refining people's thinking abilities and moral sensibilities, Place method hopes to equip individuals with a new consciousness of how to approach both a dilemma and/or a method of inquiry; to see what must be done about it and how to do it. But it could also help to restore the value and position of Place to the Indigenous mindset and ethical consideration. This consciousness might help them determine what their best interests should be and lessen the victimization that people impose on themselves from within or that is forced upon them from outside. (11)

Place method does not claim critical knowledge as a privileged form of "true science". Instead, it accepts its potential fallibility, as well as awareness of its own precarious and contingent relation to social change and the inherent difficulties of self-reflective mode of theorizing. Because self-reflection is itself historically situated and cannot make any claim to a transcendent quality. Second, although reflection may reveal an interest in liberating, it does not necessarily or automatically provide a linkage between this interest and actual emancipatory action. That is, even if one has developed consciousness-raising and unravelled ideological distortions, emancipation still requires active engagement (political), choice and commitment.

Conclusion

During the last few decades within the Indigenous communities there has been much talk of alliances, coalitions, and working together more than we ever have before. At the same time we also spoke (and still speak) of building our alliances for change on authentic voices through which people make choices, shape action, and create social movements. We have much to gain by exploring and critically engaging with the method (or theory) and practice of Place research as we face the many challenges ahead.

Kummara is committed to Research Action that involves pursuing a critical reflection over the roles, actions and content of all stakeholders in the research process and seeks to help create and maintain authentic, mutual and ongoing engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities towards this end.

Footnotes

- (1) Stanley, William, Brickhouse, Nancy 2001 *"Teaching Sciences - The Multicultural Question Revisited"*. 2001. pp 41-42
- (2) White, M., Chapter 5. *"Re-Authoring Lives: Interviews and Essays"*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications) 1995 pp 121-122.
- (3) Kemmis, S. and R. McTaggart *The Action Research Planner*, 3rd edn, Geelong: Deakin University. Action Research 1988 p 5.
- (4) Watson, L., "An Aboriginal Perspective: Developing an Indigenous Social Work" Australian Association of Social Work Education 5th National Conference. Published in book of listed papers edited by Professor Edna Chamberlain. 1986. pp 10-15.
- (5) Cajete, Gregory, *"Native Science"*, Clear Light Publishers, Santa Fe, NM 2000. p 69.
- (6) San Roque, Craig, mid-1990's, "Story of Alcohol-Sugarman Song Cycle" Documentary Video. Alice Springs.
- (7) Llewelyn, John, *"The Hypocritical Imagination: Between Kant and Levinas"*, Routledge. London. 2000, p. 115.
- (8) Hester, RT "Sacred Structures and Everyday Life: A Return to Manteo, *In Dwelling, Seeing, and Designing: Toward A Phenomenological Ecology*" (Ed SUNY Press (1993). pp. 277-278.
- (9) (Willis, Bob, 1990. "A Tale of Three Logics". Unpublished Paper.
- (10) Mowaljarlai, David, Malnic, Jutta, "Yorro Yorro" Publiksher Inner Traditions. Broome 1993. p 143.
- (11) Sohng, Sung Sil Lee, Ph.D. 1995 *"Participatory Research and Community Organising"* A working paper presented at The New Social Movement and Community Organizing Conference, University of Washington, Seattle, WA. November 1-3.

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Attachments

Attachment 1

Classic Action Research Methodology

Action Research methodology has clear, logical steps through which the research project proceeds such as:

1. Initial Engagement

The full and active participation of the community in the entire research process. All the various groups within the community (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) are encouraged to play their important roles – the Elders in particular, both men and women; the youth, male and female; women young and old, families. Participants are then cross referenced by clan and tribal/language groups. Historical Indigenous people, that is, non - Traditional Owners are also encouraged to become involved. Finally, Indigenous people who work in related areas other than the subject area in question, for example, if child care is the base subject then legal service and health workers will be included besides the primary child care workers.

2. Immersion

The subject of the research originates in the community itself and the problem is defined and analysed in a collective, collaborative, self-reflective and critical way. Solutions are selected carefully, then undertaken by the community. Examination and understanding of the research subject in a historical, cultural, social and, if necessary, psychological way is carried out, documented and discussed.

Immersion is the activity of seeking and understanding the true identity/story of the place, its history and its atmosphere, together with understanding the subject of the research in the way just described. If the subject is, for example, a health issue, a community development aim etc., then the people involved in the research have to have the opportunity to understand authentically the nature and origin of the subject/issue within its proper context and whether the selected method of addressing the need is the correct one.

3. Incubation

Appropriate terms of reference regarding the approach to the research are selected along with access to expertise and experience via advisory committees. The method of ongoing monitoring, testing, correcting and documenting of outcomes is arranged and undertaken. The pilot study approach is prepared for later modeling of the strategies, and appropriate coursework/study is carried out if required or requested by participants in order to fully understand the subject of research and related issues. A general impact study on place/environment is vital and should be a part of any incubation stage. The ultimate goal is the radical transformation of social reality and the improvement of the lives of the people themselves. The beneficiaries of the research are the members of the community.

4. Illumination

The process of Indigenous action research can create in the people a greater awareness of their own personal history, of the history of colonisation and of the country. People become aware of the path to the situation they find themselves in, and are then prepared with the tools to find the path to a new beginning. This process leads participants into the journey towards de-colonisation where they then are able to recognise their strengths and resources, and this awareness then mobilises them for genuine self-reliant development. Participants should be encouraged to document the growth in their own self-development and to discuss the process with other participants and have it documented. The importance of the illumination process and its own outcome taking place in a particular area or site should be discussed and documented as the notion of land as witness to all change outside of time signifies the importance and sacredness of the social dimension.

5. Explication

Indigenous action research is a more scientific, a more authentic method or research in that the participation of the community in the research process facilitates a more accurate and authentic analysis of social reality, in particular the social reality of place, including every aspect (past, present and future) and nuance, peaceful or volatile. The participants are well aware of their area or region because of their direct experience, identity, interrelatedness, relationship and of the holism, quality and value bound up with that place. The participants are also well aware of all aspects of the research study because they have been actively involved in every part of the process.

6. Culmination

The researcher is a committed participant and learner in the process of research rather than a detached observer. The experience of participating in Indigenous action research is a shared one which assists and encourages participants to establish positive relationships that will underpin future developments relating to

the research outcomes. The path from research outcomes to future developments is direct in Indigenous action research, since the same actors are involved in both activities. Often in action research, what is investigated is not a theory to be applied but rather the ways of implementing a practical idea, such as leadership development, starting a community cooperative, developing policy initiatives for inner city youths or starting a homeless persons union.

Kemmis, S. and R. McTaggart (1988)