Rising to the challenge of SEIQoL-DW... or not

Rachael McMahon

The quality of life measurement and factoid creating tool, known as SEIQoL-DW (schedule for the evaluation of individual quality of life, direct weighting) was generated by European psychologists (mainly) (O’Boyle, Browne, Hickey, McGee, & Joyce, 1993) as a non-prescribed individualised quality of life measurement tool. The tool generates a measure of quality of life totally from the perspective of the individual whose life is represented as they define it in their own words. The quality of life score comes to life as a number, a ‘factoid’. The instrument asks the individual test subject what are the five most important areas of their lives, how they are going in these areas represented on a bar graph, and how these areas are prioritised in relation to each other, using a coloured wheel where discs can be moved to show relative to importance (O’Boyle, et al 1993).

The task I have taken up in my doctoral studies is to work with others—including Indigenous Australians—to assess the efficacy of this tool to be used amongst Indigenous Australians.

Lea (2008) defines a factoid as a fact negotiated and influenced by the socio-cultural, economic and political context from which it was derived—definably subjective rather than objective. As a generator of factoids SEIQoL-DW is rather controversial, not least because people often treat factoids as if they are objective measures. Some advocates of the tool hold great hope for SEIQoL-DW as being a sensitive tool for representing individual Indigenous people’s stories, values, goals and aspiration. Psychologists who support the tool develop factoids which show the tool in a positive light. Those who do not support the tool produce results which show the tool in a negative light. SEIQoL-DW is supported by my supervisors, who proclaim it as the ultimate tool in Indigenous engagement. In the beginning I was wary and very sceptical but open to learning more about the tool’s possibilities, and in retrospect I see that in adopting this tool, we were perhaps over-zealous, projecting too much hope into ‘measurement’ falling in love (so to speak) with the numbers the tool produced and expecting far too much from the tool. So the quality of life factoid generating tool depicts a schism of (dis)empowerment between those who use the tool on the ‘other’, the ‘other’ and the ethnographer whose descriptions and perceptions can also be (dis)empowering for one or all.

A few months into my work with the quality of life factoid generating tool I was involved in a meeting in Alice Springs. I was a member of a team describing the tool to a group of lecturers who taught literacy skills to adult Indigenous people from remote settings. The room we were allocated for this exercise was an intimidating, large board room, with a large table. There was lot of distance
between the lecturers and ourselves (myself and two supervisors) both literally and metaphorically. We had hoped for a more intimate space, and the room layout we found ourselves in certainly did not favour the close informal discussion with the lecturers we had hoped for. Perhaps the literacy lecturers liked things that way. Preliminary discussions between the quality of life factoid research program managers and the literacy program team leaders had ascertained or presumed that the literacy lecturers’ teaching had a great effect on their students’ lives; the students, they assumed, gained more than just learning to read and write. Hence they passionately believed the quality of life measuring tool would be a boon for the literacy lecturers in showing how efficacious their work actually was. It was my task as the junior member of the team to suggest this to the lecturers. In my presentation I proposed that the literacy lecturers utilise the individualised quality of life measurement tool (SEIQoL-DW) that had been validated for Indigenous people (Chenhall, Senior, Cole, Cunningham, & O’Boyle, 2010) to measure their effectiveness as teachers. I suggested they would be able to capture the previously unmeasurable subjective effects of participating in the literacy course. The factoid as an object was given subjective qualities; the factoid was empowered and transformed beyond its objective qualities of measuring individual quality of life.

The response of the literacy lecturers to what we thought was the good news of our presentations was extremely disconcerting however. For one thing lecturers were very protective over any intervention with ‘their’ students, a title of ownership they stated, especially protecting ‘their’ students from research endeavours. They were not going to facilitate access of our factoid generating instrument to Indigenous Australian subjects! And in addition many of the lecturers were passionately against the factoid generating tool as such. They pronounced that it would disempower their students and their students’ views. They declared our research frivolous and as of no purpose. While, unlike my supervisors, I was not a passionate ‘believer’ in SEIQoL-DW I was curious in an experimental way. My own experience of the tool was that using it was informative, and I felt at least that the literacy lecturers might have been able to learn about issues influencing their students. I was shocked by the seeming wall of negativity towards both us as researchers and towards the factoid measurement tool.

A few months later I had my first experience with actually using the tool with a small group of Indigenous students in Gunbalanya. I was nervous about going to Gunbalanya. The students’ lecturer was suspicious, and I was wary of her. She had been a part of that unnerving meeting in Alice Springs, I was not sure why she had agreed to co-operate with us. Yet a lot was riding on the successful generation of factoids. A poor outcome either in terms of not producing valid scores, or producing very low scores could effectively end the research project then and there. I was both scared and eager to please. I desperately wanted to impress the literacy lecturer and my supervisors. But oddly I also felt the factoid generating tool needed to be protected too. The tool had developed a life of its own, not just the life given by the instigators or participants of the tool. The tool had developed an objective identity where its use portrayed relative truths. Pondering the idea of relative truths on the way to Gunbalanya, distracted me from my fear of driving long distances on rough roads, which was made worse by needing to cross a notorious crocodile infested river at Cahill’s Crossing.
We arrived at the Gunbalanya classroom—a donga which a variety of non-government organisations shared. There was a bit of a kerfuffle as it seemed the room was unavailable, although in the end we did get access. The room was small, approximately ten by five metres in size and in desperate need of a paint. The tables and chairs, quite rough and worn, were arranged in a U-shape, and the whiteboard was at the front. There was minimal decoration in the room, no posters, just the table, chairs and whiteboards. It was a hot day and the donga didn't have air-conditioning. My interviewing space was to be down the back in one of the corners. Class was due to start at 9am. The students muddled in between 9am and 10.30am. There were eight students all up.

The literacy lecturer introduced me as being a researcher from Menzies School of Health Research. (The students were familiar with Menzies, like many Indigenous Australians they had already been subjects of research—some good and some dubious, I guessed). I explained to the group that, with their consent, I would be talking about what is important to them, how they are going in those areas and how they related to each other in priority. I showed them the factoid tools—the bar graph and coloured disc. The group did not react in any way to my introduction, though I don't think they were despondent. The lecturer later told me that this was a common response to visiting researchers.

In the next few hours I assessed individual students up the back of the room in turns while the lecturer was teaching the rest of the group. Doing the assessments was not at all what I expected. I began with the assumption that the students would be so eager to tell their individual stories that I would have to ask them to slow down; that we would be running out of time.

I sat down with my first student. His behaviour and responses formed a pattern that was repeated by all the other 7 students I was to interview that day. He was 20 years of age, working with the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) Ranger Group, as most of the students did. He was required to do the literacy/numeracy course in order to be employed by the CDEP. He was happy to do his lessons in the classroom because it kept him out of the mid-day sun. He was very quiet and didn't make much eye contact. Going though the parts of the instrument, he needed prompting before he described five things that were important to him, prompting about how he was going in those areas by indicating on the bar graph, and prompting to be able to show how he prioritised those areas. All his answers were given in single words. While the design of the instrument makes it difficult to do this, I felt like that he was giving the answers he felt I wanted to hear, and that he was very aware that his classmates might be listening. Some students seemed to like doing the assessments, some didn't, but politely so. The factoids struggled to come to life on this day as I had imagined they would. However, perhaps the tool came to life to the Indigenous students as they imagined it would; the tool may have been an expression of the students’ as defined by them.

Then a few weeks later I had a vastly different experience with the tool and the factoids it generates. I interviewed a young non-Indigenous man with a speech impediment which was affecting his success in Vocational Education and Training (VET). He had communication difficulties which led to him requiring one on one support with a learner support program worker. He had researched
the tool and developed opinions about the factoid generating instrument before our interview, bringing it to life in his mind. This student saw the factoid his interview would produce as a means of empowering himself. It would be an expression of himself. He would be having his individual goals and aspirations heard for the first time; in his words. In the interview, the conversation between myself, the student and the factoid, went on for an hour and a half, compared to the ten minute interviews with the students at Gunbalanya. The student, male and 19 years of age, was so enthusiastic his rate of speech was high, which made it more difficult to understand him due to his speech impediment.

We had privacy during the interview, which perhaps made the student more comfortable. The interview was conducted in a small and very basic office, one table, two chairs, attached to a trade school practical work area that was empty at the time of the interview, giving us a silent space. He seemed to feel very at ease with me, in stark contrast to the Indigenous students I had interviewed in Gunbalanya a few weeks earlier. Through our conversation about the factoid and what it meant to him, the VET student commented on the richness, depth and strength which he experienced in the instrument. This VET student clearly had spent quite some time thinking deeply about what was important to him, and he was excited by the opportunity of having his voice heard.

What posited a challenge for me were the varied and conflicting responses I had with the factoid tool. Why were the reactions of the Indigenous students so different from the student with a speech impediment? The one word answers I received from the Indigenous students could very well have been the Indigenous students crafting their own way of using the tool. And was the student with a speech impediment empowered because of his own manipulation of the tool? Did the tool actually empower people via encouraging individual perception, as it had been assumed to do? Could the tool be used to measure group dynamics and program efficacy as it was assumed to do, for example in the remote adult literacy program? Were the Indigenous students as a group empowered by the factoid tool? I was conflicted in my thinking about how the tool could possibly be a means for empowerment: conflicted in thinking that the tool empowers individuals or even groups, and conflicted between empowering the factoid tool and its confinable and categorical measurement. It didn't seem like both was possible: empowerment and measurement.

It is less confusing when measurement is understood within the social scheme of knowledge production, and how the tool of measurement is socialised and has agency itself. In this social schema exists the space where the utilisation of the factoid tool is multifaceted and its use presents a challenging discourse of human agency in research. Not only that, the tool itself takes on a life of its own, its own agency. It does this by developing ‘facts’ that can be seemly and unpredictably (dis)connected to the presumptions of both those who measure with it, and those who are measured by it. The tool is an active participant in the conversation between the researched and the researchers. The factoid tool empowers and disempowers its users, bringing to life the disconcertment between the researchers, the researched and the ‘objective’ tools that precipitate the disconcertment.
The factoid tool was supposed to be apolitical, though its use gives it agency and a dynamic to define ‘facts’; facts that researchers and program workers fall in love with. For instance in the remote adult literacy program, the supervisors hope to measure the unmeasurable effects of the program in the lives of the Indigenous students. The dynamic of research turns what may be an objective ‘fact’ into varied subject(s) in its making. Again, Lea (2008) defines a factoid as a fact negotiated and influenced by the socio-cultural, economic and political context from which it was derived—definably subjective rather than objective. It is not only humans who contain power in the dynamic of research. Factoid measuring tools have their own capacity to engage in power relations, brought to life but not the control of the researchers and researched. Understanding the significance of this dynamic was and remains a challenge for me.

References

