An Introduction to Ethical Research Involving Indigenous Communities

This document is intended to be a starting point for students who are learning about engaging in research with Indigenous communities. It is by no means exhaustive.

Introduction

There is a long historical relationship between colonial oppression and research conducted with Indigenous people. According to Linda Smith, research is "inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism."[1] This history continues to shape the present and provides important context for current academic research involving Indigenous people and communities. Academic research involving Indigenous peoples in Canada has historically been defined and carried out by primarily non-Indigenous researchers. Consequently, approaches to Indigenous research frequently do not reflect Indigenous world views, and the research outcomes have not necessarily benefited Indigenous peoples or communities. As a result, there is a justifiable mistrust of academic research within some Indigenous communities.[2]

Ethical research practices require sensitivity to protocols that guide and govern how, why, and by whom research is conducted, and how knowledge is accessed, shared, and stored. In research programs involving Indigenous communities, "the advancement of Indigenous knowledge systems (both autonomously and in Indigenous-led research collaborations) must be a central part."[3] This commitment emphasizes the importance of Indigenous perspectives and knowledge systems to increase and expand knowledge and understanding about human thought and behaviour in the past and present, as well as the future.

Important Considerations for Ethical Research with Indigenous Communities:

Community engagement is an essential consideration in conducting ethical research with Indigenous communities. What this means, and who constitutes "the community" will be

grounded in the specific context of the particular research project. Community engagement should be considered throughout the research process:

1. Before a research project begins:
   - It is essential that researchers who are not from, or do not have an existing relationship with, a community establish this relationship before the commencement of a research project.[6]
   - Proposed research should align with the research needs of the community.[4]
   - Researchers proposing projects involving First Nations, Inuit, or Métis communities must advise the Huron REB on community engagement and alignment of research objectives with community research needs.[5]

2. During the conduct of the research:
   - Engagement with the community must continue during the research, and well after the research is completed.[4]
   - This engagement will be meaningful, including an ongoing understanding of how the research is being received, and clear communication around alterations to the research project.[4]

3. Within plans for data management and knowledge dissemination:
   - Engagement with the community is ongoing after the research is finished through the safeguarding and use of the data.[4]
   - Communities will have ownership of their data, access to their data, and decision-making authority on your access to data as the researcher.[4]
   - The community will decide how best to present the research, so you must engage community members in knowledge dissemination plans, what information is going to be included, etc.[4]
   - Small Indigenous communities are characterized by dense networks of relationships, and as a result, coding individual data is often not sufficient to mask identities, even when data are aggregated, therefore, research should be designed to include safeguards for participant privacy and measures to protect confidentiality of data.[5]
   - Communities should be informed of project results before they are published, especially where the results may be sensitive or controversial.[6]

Tri-Council Policy Statement 2 (2018) – Chapter 9: Research Involving the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples of Canada[5]

Chapter 9 of the TCPS 2, Research Involving the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples of Canada provides a framework for the ethical conduct of research involving Indigenous peoples to ensure this research is premised on respectful relationships. It also aims to promote collaboration and engagement between researchers and participants.

The obligation to uphold respectful relationships involves respecting a community's cultural traditions, knowledge systems, customs and codes of practice, Elders or knowledge holders, and often extends to relations with plant, animal and marine life. Collaborative approaches in research with Indigenous communities are a means of facilitating respectful relationships, through the inclusion of distinct expertise from colleagues. Often, collaboration involves one partner taking primary responsibility for certain aspects of the research, such as addressing sensitive issues in community relations, or scientific analysis and interpretation of data. Respectful relationships are also defined in part through community engagement, and while engagement is appropriate in any research that affects Indigenous communities, the nature of and degree of the collaboration between the researcher and community depends on both the nature of the research, and the particular community context.

While the framework provided in the TCPS 2 provides a foundation for research involving Indigenous peoples, the Tri-Council and other federal research policies offer only one perspective and should not be considered definitive or all encompassing. The TCPS "does not reflect the specific priorities and values of First Nations as a distinct ethnic and political group, with established governance structures and processes for community engagement" and "only First Nation communities are able to determine whether something is in their best interest."[9] Ethical guidance and policies offered by Indigenous peoples themselves must also be considered by researchers.

Interpreting the TCPS 2 Ethics Framework in Indigenous Contexts

The three principles that express the core ethical value of respect for human dignity at the heart of the TCPS 2 are: Respect for Persons, Concern for Welfare, and Justice.

Respect for Persons is expressed through the securing of free, informed and ongoing consent of participants. Indigenous codes of research practice in this context go beyond ethical

protections for just the individual, extending to the interconnection between humans and the natural world, and include the obligation to maintain knowledge received from ancestors and innovations devised in the present generation, and pass it on to future generations.

Concern for Welfare acknowledges the important role of Indigenous communities in promoting collective rights, interests and responsibilities that also serve the welfare of individuals. Concern for Welfare in First Nations, Inuit, and Métis contexts may place strong emphasis on collective welfare as a complement to individual well-being, as the concern is that research should enhance individual and community capacity to maintain cultures, languages, and identities.

Justice may be compromised when a serious imbalance of power prevails between the researcher and participants, and while it may be unintentional, the resulting harms are very real for participants. Potential harms that may come from research can include: misappropriation of sacred songs, stories and artefacts, devaluation of Indigenous peoples' knowledge as primitive or superstitious, failure to share data and resulting benefits, and dissemination of information that has misrepresented or stigmatized entire communities. When there are social, cultural or linguistic differences or disconnect between the community and researchers the potential for misunderstanding is significant, therefore, establishing and maintaining engagement and trust between the community and the researchers before recruiting participants can enhance ethical practice, as well as the quality of the research.

Ethical Guidance Developed by Indigenous Communities

While Chapter 9 of the TCPS 2 provides the minimum Canadian federal standards for academics conducting research with Indigenous communities, it is not intended to override or replace ethical guidance developed by Indigenous communities. The following list of resources can help researchers understand community concerns regarding research and how to address them, understand benefits as well as challenges of research involving Indigenous peoples, and provide help in formulating plans to establish community connections. Each of these should be considered in relation to the context in which the research will be situated. initiate community contact. The following brief summaries offer an introduction to each of these resources; the documents should be read in full by researchers considering working with Indigenous communities in research.

The First Nations Principles of OCAP[7, 9]

The First Nations Principles of OCAP were developed in 1998 and are one aspect of First Nations aspirations toward self-determination and self-governance. The OCAP Principles are the standard for the conduct of research and research data governance with Indigenous communities. OCAP stands for the principles of Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession, and asserts that First Nations have control over data collection processes in their communities, and that they own and control how this information can be used.

Ownership refers to the relationship of a First Nations community to its cultural knowledge/data/information. The principle states that a community or group owns information collectively in the same way that an individual owns their personal information.

Control refers to the aspirations and rights of First Nations to maintain and regain control of all aspects of their lives and institutions including research, information and data. The principle of control asserts that First Nations peoples, their communities and representative bodies are within their rights in seeking to control all aspects of research and information management processes which impact them. First Nations control of research can include all stages of a particular research project, from start to finish. The principle extends to the control of resources and review processes, planning processes, the formulation of conceptual frameworks, and management of the information including data collection, data use, disclosure, and the ultimate destruction of data.

Access states that a First Nation must have access to information and data about themselves, regardless of where it is currently held. The principle also refers to the right of First Nations communities and organizations to manage and make decisions regarding who else (if anyone) has access to their collective information. In practice this may be achieved through formal, binding protocols.

Possession refers to the physical control of data, in contrast to the broader relationship between a Nation and their data identified by the principle of ownership. Although not a condition of ownership per se, possession (of data) is a mechanism by which ownership can be asserted and protected. When data owned by one party is in the possession of another, there is a risk of breach or misuse. This is particularly important when trust is lacking between the owner and the possessor.

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK): National Inuit Strategy on Research[8] &

Negotiating Research Relationships with Inuit Communities[6]

The National Inuit Strategy on Research (ITK)[8] outlines five priority areas of action that are necessary to facilitate Inuit research that is efficacious, impactful, and meaningful to Inuit. These priority areas are: 1) advancing Inuit governance in research; 2) enhancing the ethical conduct of research; 3) aligning funding with Inuit research priorities; 4) ensuring Inuit access, ownership, and control over data and information; and 5) building capacity in Inuit research. Opportunities for partnership and action in each of these areas are also presented, in addition to expectations for research partnerships based on self-determination, respect, and transparency.

Also created in part by the ITK is the document *Negotiating Research Relationships with Inuit Communities: A Guide for Researchers.[6]* This guide was written to help researchers: understand community concerns and expectations regarding research projects, support means of addressing these concerns, understand benefits, opportunities and challenges associated with engaging Inuit communities in research, determine appropriate levels of community involvement, initiate community contact, and choose appropriate and effective methods of communicating research results. This guide also provides important suggestions for negotiating a research relationship with Inuit communities, such as being honest with community members about all aspects of the project, learning about the community before meeting with them, being patient, and maintaining communication with the community, among others.

Community concerns with research.

Specific concerns and expectations Inuit have regarding research are unique to each research project and community, however the ITK provides some of these community perspectives as a background when considering, or developing, a northern research project:[6]

Community Concerns:	To address these concerns Inuit communities are increasingly requiring that researchers:

- A lack of Inuit input/consultation in identifying research needs and questions and in designing studies _____ Inuit not being adequately involved in each research stage - Use of inappropriate research methodologies that is biased or destructive to the study population	- Inform, and consult directly with communities regarding proposed research projects, well in advance of proposed start dates - Address a community concern or problem wherever possible
- Insincere commitments by researchers to consider local expertise - The generalization/decontextualization of local knowledge	- Assign the same value, credibility and respect to local expertise (from recommended elders, or others) as that assigned to peer-reviewed scientific findings
- Appropriating Inuit expertise and knowledge as being the researcher's	- Ensure due credit to the expertise published from research
- Insufficient study length (i.e., one to two months) that results in information or conclusions to be drawn that are non-representative	- Request local feedback on field season timing, duration, and frequency -Promote field work during appropriate seasons, and long-term projects, wherever possible
- Lack of tangible benefits for communities near or involved in the research	- Provide fair and adequate compensation for those providing information for a research project, or hired to help with the research process
- Lack of funding for community-initiated projects as funding agencies prioritize academic or government institutions	- Assist community members in pursuing and securing research funding, wherever possible
- Lack of local data ownership, with communities being unable to access data they provided	- Address data storage and ownership issues
- Inadequate reporting by researchers back to the community	- Provide timely reports on research results

Additional Guides:

Urban Aboriginal Research Charter Template: A Guide to Building Research Relationships

USAI Research Framework

First Nations and Higher Education: The Four R's – Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, Responsibility

Setting New Directions to Support Indigenous Research and Research Training in Canada

Toolbox of Research Principles in an Aboriginal Context

Guiding Ethical Principles - Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network

RHS Cultural Framework

Resources for Data Management/Governance:

CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance

The First Nations Data Centre

Research Involving First Nations:

Ethics in First Nations Research - Assembly of First Nations

First Nations in Quebec and Labrador's Research Protocol 2014

Research Involving Inuit peoples of Canada:

Negotiating Research Relationships with Inuit Communities: A Guide for Researchers

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Research Involving Métis peoples of Canada:

Principles of Ethical Métis Research

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