

Enacting Indigenous Research Ethics Through Community-University Partnerships

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By blindly following research conventions, researchers have unwittingly and unilaterally constructed the 'other.'

Nathalie Piquemal (2000, 49)

Relevance, respect, relationships, and reciprocity are valued characteristics of ethical practice in all social research. In research involving Indigenous peoples, these qualities must be ensured as part of larger processes of decolonization and restorative social justice. Researchers engaged with Indigenous peoples are being challenged to rethink the ethics that guide practice, and to conduct research through partnerships with Indigenous individuals, communities, and organizations. Partnerships provide opportunities for developing relationships within which to negotiate the values, conceptual frameworks, methodologies, and control of research, as well as for deciding issues of ownership and dissemination of knowledge. “Nothing about us without us” expresses the principle of participation around which considerations of ethical practice involving Indigenous peoples in Canada now pivot.

There has been a groundswell of dialogue about principles and protocols to guide research involving Indigenous peoples. In Canada, new policies are being drafted by the three federal councils governing science and engineering research (NSERC), health research (CIHR), and social sciences and humanities research (SSHRC), and by Indigenous communities and agencies. To keep step with these national and community-level discourses, investigators and universities need to become more informed about why ‘research’ has become a profanity in many Indigenous communities, as a result of the historical experiences of Indigenous people as ‘research subjects.’ Non-Indigenous scholars and ethics review boards need to develop their capacity to listen and respond constructively to calls from Indigenous representatives to redress the balance of power in research relationships, and to develop bi- and multi-lateral agreements governing the conduct of research in Indigenous communities. At the University of Victoria, scholars in Indigenous Governance have drafted a set of Principles and Protocols for Conduct of Research Involving Indigenous Peoples. In the School of Child and Youth Care, research teams such as the Early Childhood Development Intercultural Partnerships are also working out new approaches to informed consent, protection of Indigenous knowledge, participatory methodologies, and dissemination of findings in ways that are relevant and accessible in Indigenous communities.

While the number of Indigenous researchers is growing, most research about Indigenous people continues to be done by non-Indigenous investigators and students. Supporting the development of Indigenous research capacity and the inclusion of Indigenous students and community members on research teams must be a priority in research involving Indigenous people. A primary objective of the Early Childhood Development Intercultural Partnerships program is to support the development of Indigenous research capacity by involving Indigenous students, advisors, and community members on teams for the conduct of its component projects.

A cross-cutting theme in most of the projects that are part of the Early Childhood Development Intercultural Partnerships program is the exploration of community-university partnerships. All of the projects are instigated by Indigenous students and/or community input and shaped through dialogue between university-based team members and community representatives. The projects are characterized by extensive commitments of time and funding to engender working relationships characterized by trust and reciprocity. Variations of formal memoranda of agreement have been explored as tools to increase transparency, to stimulate discussion, to ensure informed consent, and to serve as a written record for ongoing re-confirmation or re-negotiation of agreements.

These partnership processes are innovative, ambiguous, and arduous. Most often, they succeed in broadening channels of communication, causing new light to be cast on the way a research topic has been framed, what assumptions have been made by various parties, how the topic could fruitfully be explored, what is already known in the community about the topic, and the range of partners' viewpoints, concerns, and goals for the research. These community-university partnerships can be characterized as extreme adventures across uncharted territories, where exasperated calls of "Are we there yet?", exclamations of "You'll never believe what happened" and "Eureka" moments predictably punctuate each journey. Enacting new concepts of ethical praxis through community-university partnerships is always a learning experience. Reflections on these forays have been reported at conferences and in publications noted below.

Publications and Reports

Ball, J. (2010). Community-based research with vulnerable communities: *"Do it in a good way."* [PDF] (3.1 MB)

Ball, J. (2005). 'Nothing about us without us': Restorative research partnerships involving Indigenous children and communities in Canada. In A. Farrell (Ed.), *Ethical research with children* (pp. 81-96). Berkshire, UK: Open University Press/McGraw Hill Education. [PDF] (205 KB) [Click here to order a copy of the book.](#)

Ball, J. (2004). Principles and protocols for research about First Nations children and communities in Canada. Paper presented at the 33rd Annual Meeting of the Society for Cross Cultural Research, San Jose, CA, February 18-22.

Readings on Indigenous Research Ethics

Visit <http://www.ecdip.org/ethics/readings.htm> to view a list of suggested readings.

Related Web Links

Canadian Institutes of Health Research: CIHR Guidelines for Health Research Involving Aboriginal People:

http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/documents/ethics_aboriginal_guidelines_e.pdf

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada: Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans:

<http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/english/policystatement/policystatement.cfm>

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada summary paper on Aboriginal Research dialogues: http://ca.groups.yahoo.com/group/Aboriginal_research

University of Victoria, Principles and Protocols for Research Involving Indigenous Peoples: <http://web.uvic.ca/igov/research>

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