



Approaches to Using Indigenous Research

This document describes two ways we can think about how we use Indigenous research. We should be mindful that there are more ways to think about why Indigenous research matters, but these are two examples that represent ways to view Indigenous research that align with the ethical considerations discussed in the [Why Using Indigenous Research Matters](#) document. The information this document describes is only a starting point. Information about citation methods for Indigenous oral sources can be found on our [Citing Indigenous Oral Sources Tip Sheet](#).

Decolonization is not a metaphor

One of the most important phrases used in Indigenous research is “decolonization is not a metaphor,” which underscores the legacy effects of colonization (Tuck & Yang, 2012). We should read this phrase literally because decolonization means to unsettle and dismantle colonization processes that endure even today. Colonization is not a relic of the past, nor some accident of history, but is instead a structure that shapes the lives of many Indigenous Peoples around the world (Wolfe, 2006). If we decolonize, we therefore redress the series of relationships—political, economic, social, geographical, institutional, etc.—settlers have cultivated with land appropriated from Indigenous Peoples. Specifically, decolonization must be a process of recognizing Indigenous Title of land—sovereignty, self-determination, and self-governance founded upon relationships with land—as enshrined in law. As such, decolonization must also be a process of settler nation-states giving land back to Indigenous Peoples.

Since decolonization is not a metaphor, post-secondary institutions, as a part of the make-up of settler nation-states, must recognize their roles as colonial institutions. They must also decolonize the lands they occupy. Were this to happen, then the intellectual work of research knowledge production that takes place at post-secondary institutions can also become decolonized (Morgensen, 2012; Smith, 2021). Otherwise, academic knowledge would legitimate the continuation of colonization of Indigenous lands, Peoples, and Knowledges. On the individual level, of either being a student or a scholar, we can also decolonize practices of using Indigenous research and studying Indigenous peoples—when we both learn and unlearn—to address historical and present-day socio-political inequalities (Datta, 2018).

These inequalities have shaped and influenced the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual relationships one has with land, learning, and research at a post-secondary institution (Battiste et al., 2002). To say we must decolonize our minds means we must account for and change the ways we think in general, and the ways we think about Indigenous Knowledges and research specifically (Yellow Bird, 2013). If we can change the way we think about Indigenous

Knowledges and research, we can also change the ways we think about the Indigenous lands upon which post-secondary institutions have situated themselves. In response, calls for Indigenization of education may mean well (Antoine 2017; Braz, 2015; Findlay, 2000; Four Arrows, 2019; Ottmann, 2013). Nevertheless, we must consider whether decolonizing education means the same thing as Indigenizing education. If so, then post-secondary institutions can be an ethical space for engaging in decolonial practices (Ermine, 2007). But these calls may also distract from Indigenous Peoples and their allies from achieving full decolonization of Indigenous lands.

Ownership, control, access, and possession

The principles of ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP) ensure that Indigenous Peoples maintain agency over their data and stories for their communities (Alberta First Nations Information Governance Centre, n.d.). OCAP guarantees Indigenous Peoples can determine for themselves the directions of research that involves them. The need for OCAP principles emerges from the academic context out of which we produce empirical research. Empirical research here means how we observe, study, and interact with Indigenous Peoples. Such empirical research can be qualitative or quantitative in design, and sometimes even a combination of the two approaches. Unfortunately, there are many historical examples, including those very recently, of scholars conducting research in ways that harmed Indigenous Peoples and contributed to the colonization of their lands (Smith, 2021). OCAP is in place to make sure such unethical historical research practices do not happen ever again.

OCAP is especially important to practice when conducting research in today's digital environment. For example, we must be mindful of how we engage with Indigenous Peoples whether via a Zoom video call with a Traditional Knowledge Keeper, an anonymous survey of Indigenous youth on social media, or an audio recording of a consultation with an Elder. OCAP allows Indigenous Peoples and researchers to engage in a respectful, culturally safe relationship with each other when sharing (and when not sharing) certain practices, songs, stories, and knowledges (A. Simpson, 2007; L. R. Simpson, 2004; Wemigwans, 2018).

“Nothing about us without us”

In this respect, OCAP fulfills the principle of “nothing about us without us” when it comes to creating spaces within scholarly writing practices for Indigenous Peoples to be the *subjects* who produce research about themselves rather than be the *objects* of research as done by non-Indigenous scholars (Marsden et al., 2020). Unfortunately, this principle of “nothing about us without us” has not been customary practice within the academe, historically speaking, when non-Indigenous scholars misrepresented, distorted, fabricated, and lied about the knowledges Indigenous Peoples communicated and shared with them (Smith, 2021). Additionally, students and scholars, including Indigenous students and scholars themselves, can gift and give back, in a reciprocal process, knowledge to the Indigenous communities whom they have studied. This centering of community engagement and contribution is foundational to many types of Indigenous research including Indigenous Studies specifically (Champagne, 2015).

Conclusion

Indigenous research helps us think about the many questions that intersect with different levels of life (local, provincial, national, international, etc.) and the many ways to exist in the world (environmentally, socially, politically, etc.; in terms of age, gender, race, class, ability, geography, education, etc.). But we cannot turn to and use Indigenous Knowledges presented in Indigenous research in extractive, exploitative ways. While we can be excited to learn more about Indigenous research, Indigenous Studies, and Indigenous Knowledges, we must do so from positions of respect, relationality, and reciprocity vis-à-vis Indigenous Peoples. Most of us are guests on Indigenous lands including Turtle Island, which is otherwise known as continental North America. Therefore, we must engage in the proper cultural protocols of Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous Knowledges, within the context of where we are and who we are in relation to the land, when using Indigenous research in our academic writing. In doing so, we can then learn and unlearn the world around us.

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