



Why Using Indigenous Research Matters

This document describes some of the reasons using Indigenous research matters. We should be mindful that there are more ways to think about why Indigenous research matters, and the information this document describes is only a starting point. This document is meant to help us start to understand how and why we use Indigenous research to complete writing assignments.

What is Indigenous research?

According to [the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council](#) (2024), Indigenous Research can be defined as follows:

Research in any field or discipline that is conducted by, grounded in or engaged with First Nations, Inuit, Métis or other Indigenous nations, communities, societies or individuals, and their wisdom, cultures, experiences or knowledge systems, as expressed in their dynamic forms, past and present.

The four foundations many Indigenous scholars may use in their academic practice relate to the following questions:

- How do Indigenous scholars perceive reality and exist in the world? (which can also be referred to as ontology)
- How do Indigenous scholars know and understand their experiences of reality and the world? (which can also be referred to as epistemology)
- How do Indigenous scholars choose approaches and use data to begin to know and understand? (which can also be referred to as methodology)
- How do Indigenous scholars represent their values when serving communities? (which can also be referred to as axiology) (Hart, 2010; Wilson, 2008).

In formulating their research paradigms, many Indigenous scholars often try to think through and think about the histories, impacts, and effects of colonization on Indigenous Peoples. Within academic spaces, such as the university, colonization often becomes an unavoidable topic of discussion for Indigenous scholars (Smith, 2021). This discussion frequently takes shape in terms of Indigenous scholars dialoguing with, engaging, resisting, and/or overcoming Western knowledge and its centrality within Western post-secondary institutions.

The ethical considerations of Indigenous research

Whether we are students or researchers, we must be attentive when writing about Indigenous topics. This statement also applies to doing research when we consult with Indigenous Peoples

and think alongside Indigenous Knowledges. Famously, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021), a Māori academic from Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Porou, and Tūhourangi, said,

it is still dangerous in the twenty-first century to be an Indigenous person and ‘research’ remains a dirty word for many of the world’s Indigenous peoples and communities... and in every settler society where Indigenous peoples are officially recognized and identified in official statistics, major systemic social inequities and injustices abound. (pp. xi-xii)

Keeping Smith’s words close to our hearts, we must consider some questions before engaging with research on Indigenous topics, with Indigenous Peoples, and alongside Indigenous Knowledges. Grada Kilomba (2008), a Portuguese artist and writer of West African descent (Angola and São Tomé e Príncipe), has developed five such questions. They comprise important ethical, social, historical, and political reflections about how and why we do research.

Additionally, these questions can also inform every part of our research and writing processes. The questions are as follows:

- “What knowledge has been made part of academic agendas?
- And what knowledge has not?
- Whose knowledge is this?
- Who is acknowledged to have the knowledge?
- And who is not?” (Kilomba, 2008, p. 27, as cited in Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021, p. 2).

However, scholars, educational institutions, and settler nation-states colonized, and have been colonizing, Indigenous Knowledges and Indigenous Peoples for hundreds of years (Smith, 2021). In doing so, they have demonstrated a willful lack of engagement with such important questions. They have also ignored the fact that Indigenous Knowledges are as valid, reliable, rigorous, scientific, credible, and explanatory as Western Knowledge. Gregory Younging (2015), a member of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation of Manitoba, has succinctly described the power, persuasion, and pervasiveness of Indigenous Knowledges. He wrote:

Indigenous knowledge systems represent the accumulated experience, wisdom, and know-how unique to nations, societies, and/or communities of people living in specific environments of America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. These knowledge systems represent the accumulated knowledge of what was over 70 per cent of the earth’s land mass prior to the era of colonization in the past few centuries—some ten thousand distinct peoples and cultures. (p. 151)

Over the past 50 years, Indigenous scholars have fought for the legitimacy of Indigenous Knowledges and the necessity of Indigenous perspectives within post-secondary institutions. Building on the work of the past, today’s Indigenous scholars have secured Indigenous Studies as a discipline of academic knowledge. Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers can support the legitimacy of Indigenous perspectives by being active and intentional in their inclusion of Indigenous Knowledges, which can help create a more ethical ecosystem of research in general. Learning how to do this successfully and ethically is becoming a necessary skill for researchers as Canada continues to work on reconciliation and decolonization.

Calls to action – Western knowledge’s truth and reconciliation with Indigenous Knowledges

Historically, scholars and institutions working within and from the paradigm of Western knowledge systems have excluded, delegitimated, and marginalized Indigenous Knowledges. This history includes Canadian post-secondary institutions. For example, Justice Murray Sinclair, chair for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada as well as an Anishinaabe member of Peguis First Nation, has commented on the horrible legacy of Canada’s Indian Residential School system. He said, “Education is what got us into this mess—the use of education at least in terms of residential schools—but education is the key to reconciliation” (Watters, 2015).

It is within this context that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) released its Calls to Action. Many of the calls to action focus on the role education can play in the truth and reconciliation process. Specifically, educators can teach Canada’s settler-colonialist history to non-Indigenous people so they can acknowledge settler colonialism’s current impacts on Indigenous Peoples. Canadian post-secondary institutions have looked at how to decolonize and Indigenize their teaching and learning practices to act towards truth and reconciliation, in a good way, and on parallel paths, with Indigenous Peoples. This process continues to this day.

Conclusion

Using Indigenous research is a valuable practice that aligns with important values such as inclusion, diversity, and fulfillment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s Calls to Action. These are the ethical considerations that researchers should undertake to ensure they are not being extractive or exploitative.

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