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Introduction to the Special Issue: Reconciling Research: Perspectives on Research Involving Indigenous Peoples

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Abstract

IIPJ is pleased to publish a two part special issue ([Volume 8, Issue 2](#) & [Volume 8, Issue 4](#) [forthcoming]), entitled *Reconciling Research: Perspectives on Research Involving Indigenous Peoples*, that focuses on issues, debates, and best practices in research with Indigenous Peoples.

Keywords

Indigenous research, decolonization, reconciliation, research ethics

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Introduction to the Special Issue: Reconciling Research: Perspectives on Research Involving Indigenous Peoples

IIPJ is pleased to publish a two part special issue ([Volume 8, Issue 2](#) & Volume 8, Issue 4 [forthcoming]), entitled *Reconciling Research: Perspectives on Research Involving Indigenous Peoples*, that focuses on issues, debates, and best practices in research with Indigenous Peoples. The movement to change research from a dark, colonial tool used to disempower and control to one that supports Indigenous Peoples, their cultures and communities, and Indigenous-led movements aimed at social change and social justice has been underway for decades. There are, however, lively and ongoing debates about how to do research “in a good way” when working on Indigenous issues and with Indigenous Peoples and communities. These two issues will be both controversial and ground breaking in their approach to this very important issue as authors take on complex and sometimes thorny issues related to translating the various guidelines governing research with Indigenous Peoples into real world practice and into methodologically sound findings that can inform policy, programming, and broader social change. They uncover the unexpected consequences and burdens associated with the rigid application of these guidelines. They confront core debates around the compatibility of Western and Indigenous worldviews and research methodologies, and the roles of insiders and outsiders in the process of conducting research.

In the past, IIPJ has published special issues with themes such as “[The Governance of Indigenous Information](#)” and editorials such as “[Policy Research Good or Bad?](#)” We have also put forward articles before that speak to the notion of incorporating Indigenous and Western knowledges into research programs, but we have not looked systematically at *how* this can be done and *what can impede* the process. It is here that the waters become murky and good intentions don’t always translate into intended outcomes. For example, authors have argued that two-eyed seeing¹ is a key way of integrating Western and Indigenous knowledges (see for example Denny & Fanning, 2016; Hall et al., 2015; Marsh, Cote-Meek, Young, Najavits, & Toulouse, 2016), but we have yet to deeply discuss how this can be done in the best way. Some argue that combining a Western-based gaze and an Indigenous knowledge is insufficient because Indigenous knowledge is often undervalued and, because the two emerge from different cultures, they are fundamentally incompatible. Some say two-eyed seeing is passé; instead systematic Indigenous approaches to research need to be developed in order to prioritize Indigenous ways of knowing. There are others who say that two-eyed seeing when done correctly actually creates a new approach entirely.

The articles in this first part of the special issue focus on three main themes: (a) what are Indigenous methods and how do they shape knowledge about Indigenous Peoples; (b) challenges in implementing best practices in research with Indigenous Peoples; and (c) whether positivistic research methods, such as surveys, quantitative analyses, non-community-based approaches, and applying predetermined labels, can be used in ways that are ethical and beneficial to Indigenous Peoples.

¹ Two-eyed seeing is an approach put forward by Mi’kmaq Nation Elders Albert and Murdena Marshall. It refers to “learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of Western knowledges and ways of knowing . . . and learning to use both these eyes together, for the benefit of all” (“Two-Eyed Seeing,” n.d., para. 3).

Indigenous Methods

An area of rapid expansion in the literature surrounds Indigenous methodologies (general principles about how research can and should be done in order to generate knowledge) and methods (the actual tools and techniques used to collect and analyze data), which are rooted in the cultures, traditional knowledges, and life worlds of Indigenous Peoples. However, beyond this general origin—that is, emerging from Indigenous cultures—there is little agreement about what constitutes an Indigenous method. In this issue, [Drawson, Toombs, and Mushquash](#) (2017) catalogue the wide range of Indigenous methods that appear in the literature in order to explore the commonalities and differences among these approaches as a guide for researchers and communities. They conclude, “One distinction between Western and Indigenous research methods lies in this purpose: research done in collaboration with Indigenous Peoples cannot only reveal knowledge, but also decolonize, rebalance power, and provide healing” (p. 12). Within the literature, they found that the use of Indigenous methods necessitates the adoption of an Indigenous methodology, but an Indigenous methodology can be used with Western methods, like narrative methods, that are not specific to Indigenous Peoples but are considered to be compatible with their culturally sanctioned ways of transmitting knowledge. Indigenous methods have the potential to transform research from a deficits-based perspective to a resilience perspective and to prioritize Indigenous ways of knowing. Marlene Brant Castellano (2004) described it as “an instrument for creating and disseminating knowledge that once again authentically represents ourselves and our understanding of the world” (p. 98).

Implementing Best Practices in Research with Indigenous Peoples

Internationally, the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (UN, 2007), affirmed, among other things, the right of Indigenous Peoples to self-determination, to be treated as a respected partner in matters affecting them, and to be able to control and protect their traditional knowledge. While UNDRIP is not specific to research, these principles can be found in the various guidelines for ethical research that have been drafted in countries around the world. A number of Indigenous organizations have developed guidelines governing research with their people in order to prevent the kind of egregious infringements on their rights that were common in the past when researchers were the “experts” and Indigenous Peoples were “subjects.” Other academic, governmental, and non-governmental organizations involved in research have echoed these principles in their own guidelines for ethical research, as have individual scholars (see for example Assembly of First Nations, 2009; Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2002; Ball & Janyst, 2008; Castellano, 2004; Chilisa, 2012; First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2014; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2005; Katoa Ltd., n.d.; Smith, 1999). Yet, as the authors in this issue highlight, policy must always be informed by practice in order to produce the intended outcomes.

[Riddell, Salamanca, Pepler, Cardinal, and McIvor](#) (2017) review four of the main ethical frameworks guiding research with Indigenous Peoples in Canada: *the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS2); Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP®) principles; Utility, Self-Voicing, Access, and Inter-Relationality (USAI) framework; and Inuit ethical principles. They draw upon their experiences trying to apply these frameworks in their research project, *Walking the Prevention Circle: Re-Searching Community Capacity Building*. They note that researchers who want to engage in ethical research with Indigenous Peoples must follow both the

government's guidelines (TCPS2) and those created by Indigenous organizations (OCAP®, USAI, and/or Inuit ethical principles). They see the challenges arising from two main areas: (a) most guidelines are drafted as general principles that do not provide specific advice or examples about how to address issues that arise during research (e.g., what should researchers do if ethical guidelines from external bodies conflict with local Indigenous customs and practices?); and (b) members of university-based research ethics boards (REBs) are generally experts in standard ethics protocols, but not necessarily those governing research with Indigenous Peoples, which may lead to requirements that are inappropriate and/or at odds with Indigenous ethical guidelines. Based on their experiences, they see a need for: (a) cultural competence training for researchers, members of REBs, and reviewers of grant applications; (b) the inclusion of Indigenous scholars or community boards or organizations who can provide knowledge and guidance about cultural and ethical issues; (c) support from universities and funding agencies, in terms of time and money, that enable researchers to build trusting relationships with Indigenous communities and plan and carry out research collaboratively; and (d) flexibility in REB policies and requirements that allow for adaptations in order to incorporate best practices (such as collaborative planning of the research project, joint or community ownership of data, and consent forms that are written in plain language and give participants greater control over how their data can be used and stored).

[Moore, Castleden, Tirone, and Martin](#) (2017) examine the TCPS2, which has been developed and adopted by Canada's three largest research funding agencies—the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC), and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)—in order to ensure researchers and institutions that receive funding comply with their standards for ethical conduct (CIHR, NSERC, & SSHRC, 2014). TCPS2 includes a chapter specific to research conducted with Indigenous Peoples and communities (Chapter 9). Their study looked at how various stakeholders (community health directors, researchers, financial administrators, and members of REBs) were using and operationalizing TCPS2 as part of research with Mi'kmaw communities. Their findings suggest that TCPS2 fosters positive “best practices” in research with Indigenous Peoples by, for example, encouraging reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships between researchers and communities, which are the foundation of collaborative research. However, they also found serious disconnections between demands of ethical research in Indigenous communities and the policies and practices of research funding agencies, university financial administration, and REBs. Some actually hindered the ability of researchers to engage in research that is Indigenous-led, advances the goals of the community, produces outcomes that benefit the community, and builds community capacity. For example, funding agencies and academic institutions need to adjust their ethics review and financial administration policies to provide the additional time, money, and allowable expenses that are required develop research partnerships with Indigenous communities and support Indigenous communities in developing research capacity—without which communities may be overburdened by the demands of a research partnership. They saw a need to provide training about research with Indigenous Peoples to all parties involved in order to increase the congruence between research best practices and institutional policy and practice. They also saw a need for a standing committee made up of Indigenous and knowledgeable non-Indigenous advisors to guide REBs in reviewing research with Indigenous communities.

[Gokiert, Willows, Georgis, Stringer, and the Alexander Research Committee](#) (2017) share their experiences as members of a community research advisory committee for Alexander First Nation in

Canada. For over a decade, the Alexander Research Committee (ARC), made up of academic researchers working in the community, representatives from departments within the community government, and members of the community, has provided guidance to community-based participatory research (CBPR) projects within the community. The Cree principle of wâhkôhtowin or “working well together” has guided their work. The authors note that, in order to engage in decolonizing research, a space must be created from which it can arise. The research committee provided this space through which to build strong relationships based on trust and mutual respect in order to learn about the myriad of issues that arise when trying to do research in a good way in Indigenous communities. The committee has drafted a guiding principles document that is the foundation for research in the community. It is updated annually in response to developments from within and outside of the community (e.g., the release of TCPS2). They attribute the sustainability of the ARC to “working relationally, the existence of community champions, committing time, a general willingness to co-learn, and the creation of a safe learning space” (p. 5). In terms of impact, they found that there were improvements in research capacity, the quality of research and its outcomes, and in terms of policy and practice. As a direct result of research and the mobilization of knowledge stemming from it, the community has seen tangible outcomes that support of the well-being of the community. It created the opportunity for university-based researchers to learn the teachings and culture from Elders and other community members. They highlight the importance of having funding: “opportunities for employment for community members, the capacity to hire graduate RA’s [research assistants] to gather agenda items and take minutes at each meeting, the resources to travel to the community for face-to-face meetings each month, and the resources to offer a meal each time we gather, has been critical in facilitating opportunities for learning and dialogue” (p. 13).

[Patrick, Machial, Quinney, and Quinney](#) (2017) share their experiences engaging in community-based planning with a First Nations community in Canada in order to protect the drinking water. The authors note that planning around natural resources is part of traditional First Nations culture. However, traditional knowledge and practices were suppressed or disrupted as part of assimilationist, colonial activities. They decided early on to establish a community working committee in order to develop a plan based on the source water protection framework developed for Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC). The collaborative, consensus-based process allowed both Western knowledge and Indigenous knowledge to be incorporated into the planning process. For example, “The Elder on the committee provided knowledge about past land use activities that may affect water quality, as well as the location of private wells, traditional food gathering places, and lake conditions” (p. 8). Despite the fact that the members of the working committee represented different interests in the community (e.g., industry, the environment, infrastructure), the common interest in ensuring the community had access to clean, safe water superseded any competing interests. In this case, the process created a plan that reflected the collective perspectives of the committee members; however, the authors note that this type of planning is time consuming and taking the time to build trusting relationships is critical for the success of the committee. The authors argue that opportunities to meet face-to-face are essential. They recommend respecting traditional protocols under the guidance of a community Elder. They, along with other authors in this issue, stress the importance of humility—as an outsider you are as much a student and a guest as you are an “expert.” For community members, collaborative planning work is often an add-on to full-time employment for which they are often not paid, which means that overburdening committee members is a concern. They also argue that planning will only produce the intended benefits if there is adequate support for implementation in both the short- and long-term.

[Smithers Graeme and Mandawe](#) (2017) believe that discussions around research with Indigenous Peoples must attend to processes of reconciliation, which encompass a range of activities aimed at redressing colonialism in order to create a new relationship between Indigenous and settler peoples and nations. They advocate the use of reflexive methods as a tool in the process of decolonizing research. Reflexive methods “are congruent with decolonizing and Indigenous inquiry through both their recognition of the politics of representation and their highly experiential and relational nature (Kovach, 2009)” (p. 3). These methods enable researchers to think about and work through the issues and challenges that arise while engaging in research with Indigenous Peoples and participating in reconciliatory processes. They used journaling in order to record their experiences and reflections as part of a community-based health research project with First Nations men. Their analysis highlighted the themes of conflict, relationships, and identity. The use of reflexive methods allowed them to explore how they engage in reconciliation both within and outside of research contexts as a non-Indigenous woman (Smithers Graeme) and a First Nations man (Mandawe). They argue that reconciliation needs to be adopted as a priority in research with Indigenous Peoples and the research infrastructure, such as funding agencies, universities, and research institutions, must change to support these processes (e.g., creating funding for reconciliation activities within research grants).

Positivist Research Methods

Pure positivism as a research paradigm has largely fallen out of favor in the social sciences, but many of the methods it championed remain. These include survey methods, quantitative analysis, the classification of things using pre-determined labels that are ostensibly free of bias, and researcher-led studies. It is obvious that these approaches fit less comfortably with Indigenous ways of knowing so can they be used ethically in research with Indigenous Peoples?

[Rainie, Schultz, Briggs, Riggs, and Palmanteer-Holder](#) (2017) note that quantitative data about Indigenous populations is a critical resource used by the leaders of Indigenous nations in the United States (and around the world) for strategic planning purposes, to develop and evaluate policies and programs, to negotiate with US governments at all levels, and to apply for external funding. However, much of the data that is held by external organizations, such as government departments and non-Indigenous research centres, is “sparse, inconsistent, and irrelevant information complicated by limited access and utility” (p. 1). Indigenous Peoples’ justified mistrust of research further complicates the collection and use of survey data. The authors present two case studies involving the Ysleta del Sur Pueblo and the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, who embarked upon initiatives to collect vital data about their people, communities, and lands. This movement toward Indigenous data sovereignty and governance is seen as a key part of the broader Indigenous rights movement. The approach used by both communities involved a partnership between community leaders who brought expertise about their communities and university-based researchers with expertise in survey research methods. The Ysleta del Sur and Cheyenne River population data projects illustrate that tribes may collect, analyze, and use distinct data to inform policy and allocate resources. For example, the Ysleta del Sur Pueblo land-use survey included questions about land use for cultural practices and desired protection of those lands for such practices, data that is not gathered by outside agencies. Cheyenne River’s Voices Research Project collected data on employment in categories that the federal government does not assess (e.g., participation in the arts microenterprise sector). Outside data sources missed a vibrant and active economic sector (i.e., some 78% of those surveyed by Voices indicated that they participated in

microenterprise arts activities). In short, the tribes' strategic responses to inconsistent and irrelevant data produced higher quality and relevant population data controlled by the respective tribe. As is echoed by others in this issue, they assert that resources are needed to ensure communities have the capacity to undertake this type of data collection, analysis, use, and storage in order to meet their community's needs. In addition, they emphasize the importance of community engagement at all stages of the process. Their work demonstrates that survey methods and quantitative analysis can be undertaken according to the best practices of collaborative research described in the qualitative work in the above section.

[Dudley](#) (2017) examines how the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) are assigned to books that cover the genocide of Indigenous Peoples in North America. He notes that the process used ends up being positivistic—the headings are meant to be applied in a neutral way that reflects an objective, external reality. However, the headings are also intended to capture the intent of the author—which in his sample of books directly address the mass killing of Indigenous Peoples. The findings of the analysis of 34 monographs concerning the genocide of Indigenous Peoples in North America reveal that less than half (41%) were assigned the label “genocide.” The remaining books were assigned headings that were vague and non-specific (e.g., treatment of, influence, crimes against, education). Books were also assigned a wide variety of call numbers meaning that they were also physically separated from each other. The result is a biased, obscured, and whitewashed view of the genocide of Indigenous Peoples in Canada and the United States. As Dudley concludes, “Enabling our ability to name and discuss genocide in North America can contribute to a more honest reckoning with our history and hence the basis for reconciliation and social justice” (p. 25). He concludes that in an attempt to be “neutral” and “objective” the Library of Congress actually ends up creating a very biased view of North American Indigenous history.

[Alcantara, Lalonde, and Wilson](#) (2017) comment that the response to the inadequacies and abuses in research stemming from positivist approaches was to adopt community-based approaches that give greater control to Indigenous Peoples within the research process, which was an important and positive development. However, they argue that there is still a place for non-community-based approaches that emphasize researcher autonomy and academic freedom and that these approaches can be used in ways that adhere to prevailing ethical guidelines governing research with Indigenous Peoples, such as TCPS2 and the Indigenous principles of respect, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility, and relationality. They note that employing a variety of approaches helps build a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of complex issues. The decision about whether it is appropriate and desirable to use non-community-based approaches will depend on the research question and in what capacity Indigenous people or communities will be involved. Researchers can engage with the Indigenous world in ways other than formal research partnerships, which, as others in the issue also noted, may place undue burden on Indigenous communities and organizations. They note that there are examples of research with Indigenous communities in the past that were based on authentic and lasting relationships with the community based on mutual respect—even if there was no formal research partnership. They also argue that there are less formal ways of engaging with Indigenous perspectives in order to inform research including feedback in response to research that is made publicly available; conversations; interviews; visits to communities or organizations; existing relationships with individuals, organizations, or communities; published work created from an Indigenous perspective, including work by Indigenous

Peoples; research led by an Indigenous scholar, etc. Non-community-based approaches can be undertaken from a social justice perspective.

An example of this type of research that comes to our mind is the work around applying the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) to First Nations and developing the Community Well-Being Index (CWB) (see Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada [INAC], 2016). Canada consistently ranks among the top countries on the HDI, which is “a summary measure of average achievement in key dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable and have a decent standard of living” (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], n.d., para. 2). For decades in Canada, First Nations leaders have argued that, overall, conditions in their communities fall below the high standard enjoyed by the country as a whole (see for example Assembly of First Nations [AFN], 2006). Politicians have typically responded by citing the amount of money budgeted for First Nations communities (without reference to the amount spent for a similar compliment of services to non-Indigenous communities on a per capita basis) or by citing how much they had increased spending (again without reference to inflation or other factors that may offset these increases or whether communities remain underfunded even after accounting for these increases) (see for example Akin, 2017). The Strategic Research and Analysis Directorate (SRAD) of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (DIAND)² spearheaded an initiative to adapt the methodology of the HDI to generate comparable scores for First Nations in Canada. Given that their goal was to be able to make comparisons between and among First Nations communities, non-Indigenous communities in Canada, Canada as a nation, and countries around the world, incorporating Indigenous-specific measures would have precluded these comparisons. Instead, they used the established measures and techniques developed by the UN and data containing socioeconomic indicators for First Nations communities that already existed. The results were striking—they unequivocally supported the position of First Nations leaders that, on average, there were significant gaps in socioeconomic conditions in First Nations communities compared to non-Indigenous communities in Canada and to the Canadian average (Cooke, Beavon, & McHardy, 2004; O’Sullivan & McHardy, 2008). Conditions in some communities were comparable to those of countries in the developing world.³ The Assembly of First Nations (AFN), the political organization representing First Nations communities in Canada, used the results of the HDI and CWB analyses in their reports aimed at lobbying the Government of Canada to meet its obligations to First Nations (see for example AFN, 2006).

Of course, the CWB is not without critics. Quinless (2017) described,

The Registered Indian Human Development Index and the work of Armstrong provided methodological guidance to the developers of the Community Well-being Index (INAC, 2015a; O’Sullivan et al, 2007). For over a decade, the Canadian Well-being Index (CWB) has dominated the policy arena as the national wellness index used by the Government of Canada to

² Renamed Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) under the Trudeau government. It has also been called Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) and Indian Affairs and Northern Development Canada (also INAC).

³ At the same time, the CWB demonstrated that some First Nations communities had socioeconomic conditions that were at or above the Canadian average and demonstrated strong regional variation (AANDC, 2014).

account for levels of well-being among Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities across the country. However, the tool is severely limited, in that the knowledge systems used to conceptualize well-being embedded in this framework are reflective of the social and cultural values of the dominant western discourse. (p. 3)

So it is clear that this is an important discussion to have and an important investigation to continue as we come to a clearer understanding of how different approaches operate to either further people's interests or impede them. In this example, non-community-based methods were used in ways that supported First Nations in their work to have their constitutional rights upheld. Despite the fact that work on the CWB did not involve the kind of long-term, community engagement typical in community-based approaches, the measure was developed with First Nations goals and perspectives in mind. Of course, "well-being" in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous conceptualizations is far more complex than this composite quantitative score captures. Developing strategies to address gaps in socioeconomic conditions will require a more complete and in-depth understanding to which Indigenous methods and community-based methods are better suited. Used in this way, contrasting approaches (e.g., quantitative and qualitative, community-based and non-community-based) can compliment one another when used in ways that respect Indigenous Peoples and their rights.

What is clear is that the old approach in which researchers planned and carried out research on Indigenous Peoples from the ivory towers of the academy and government without regard for their rights, histories, cultures, and knowledges is no longer acceptable, nor does it make for very good science. There has been substantial progress in establishing guidelines for ethical research with Indigenous Peoples; however, funding agencies and the academy have been slow to bring their own policies and procedures into alignment. There are also likely to be challenges to the scientific establishment as traditional Indigenous methods carve out new channels for scientific inquiry. The special edition comes back to the difficult and important processes of decolonization of the research process, giving readers challenging questions to think through including whether the policy research community has really understood what the past approaches meant in terms of creating mistrust and theft of knowledge. Have we learned the lesson that including culturally relevant processes in research processes can serve to move us past the data collection to actually building lasting relationships and support autonomy and self-determination? The articles in this issue and the one to follow show that while we have many issues to work out, there are many people working in the field, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who are committed to using research as part of the process of reconciliation.

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