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Policy Research: Good or Bad?

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Abstract

Canada went through a tough discussion in July 2013 when it was revealed that between 1942 and 1952 unethical and harmful research was conducted on Aboriginal peoples, most of whom were children. Beyond simply condemning unethical research with Indigenous populations, we need to examine why this happened and understand what the implications and lessons are for "policy research" moving forward. Policy research is a powerful tool when conducted in the proper way. We must never lose sight of the reason we are engaged in the activity: to improve well-being through the improvement of understanding that leads to change. The research process must, itself, be part of the positive process.

Keywords

research, ethics, nutritional experiments, Aboriginal, Canada, residential schools

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Policy Research: Good or Bad?

Canada went through a tough discussion in July 2013. It was revealed that between 1942 and 1952 unethical and harmful research was conducted on the Aboriginal population living in a northern town and with children at six residential schools (The Canadian Press, 2013).

Researchers, who were well aware that the adults and children were malnourished and living on starvation diets, chose to use them as subjects for testing theories concerning vitamin and mineral substitutes. This research was done without their informed consent and, even more importantly, there were no steps taken to ensure that the diets were improved. Particularly awful is the fact that children were shown callous disregard and treated as “experiments.” For example, some students had their milk rations reduced by half for up to two years in order to set the “controls” for the experiment and monitoring (Canadian Press, 2013).

The Canadian Minister of Aboriginal Affairs’ office has responded with a statement: “if this is true, this is abhorrent and completely unacceptable” (Canadian Press, 2013, para. 6).

Of course this *is* abhorrent and unacceptable, but we need to examine why this happened and understand what the implications and lessons are for “policy research” going forward.

Historically, food and food access has been used as a weapon. James Daschuk (2012) has made a compelling case that denying access to food was used to force Indigenous peoples in Canada to move from their traditional territories to “reserves” in the 19th century. The residential school system in Canada, which is a variant of the same policies used elsewhere (USA and Australia for example), saw children forcefully separated from their families and sent to either day or boarding schools. At these schools, children were subject to an assimilation process, which has been described as “taking the Indian out of the child.” We now learn that on top of other reported physical and sexual abuse, children were subject to experimentation around food. Specifically divided into groups where they were given different quantities of food and supplements and observed for different outcomes.

The International Indigenous Policy Journal (IIPJ) is dedicated to publishing the best quality, ethically developed policy research. Promoting evidence-based policy making, as we do, requires the best evidence be produced. However, this is the proverbial two-edged sword: We are also interested in understanding and explaining how non-ethical research gets started and why. Policy research is an important and powerful tool, but it must be conducted in a proper way.

I am a strong advocate of research following the “Four Rs,” first discussed by Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991). Proper policy research must:

Be **RESPECTFUL** of the peoples one is doing research with. This means understanding the diversity of the cultures and knowledge held by the people.

Be **RELEVANT** for the peoples who are the subject of the investigation.

Show **RECIPROCITY**, which requires there is a value created for the Indigenous peoples and they can realize that value. This may be training people in those communities, exchanging

knowledge, creating opportunities, or more. It is a bi-lateral or back and forth process of learning and research activity.

Be RESPONSIBLE, which means leaving the peoples stronger than when you entered into the process. This requires that the interests of those research partners are protected and enhanced and everyone engages in the process to the extent possible.

These principles have evolved into dynamic discussions of community-based research, de-colonization of research methods, governance of data dialogues, and new ethical standards in most countries.

There can never be research collected unethically that leads to real, long-term, positive policy change. Journals, such as the IIPJ, have a responsibility to be watchdogs and gatekeepers because it is our responsibility to encourage the proper conduct of research.

We are currently calling for papers on the governance of data, which will contribute to a world debate on how to treat research data: Who owns it and who should control access. As well, we have called for a major policy paper on the current best practices for Memorandums of Agreements between Indigenous Peoples and researchers.

Policy makers, regardless of where you work or who you are, have to scrutinize the evidence that researchers give you to ensure it was developed properly and stands the test of ethical review.

The Canadian example is sadly not unique. I am reminded of President Clinton's apology for the Tuskegee experiments where Black men with syphilis went untreated so researchers could follow the progress of the disease (Office of the Press Secretary, 1997). There are examples from every country. The point here is that the pursuit of knowledge must never lose sight of the reason we are engaged in the activity: to improve well-being through the improvement of understanding that leads to change. The research process must, itself, be part of the positive process.

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