

FOUR PRINCIPLES TO GUIDE RESEARCH WITH ABORIGINALS

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Many research institutions' ethical codes advise researchers that cross-cultural research may have to be done in a way that is especially sensitive to participants' rights but then doesn't spell out how this might be done. Four guiding principles for research with Aboriginals are: to establish a partnership before seeking such consent; to consult with the relevant authorities, who may be both individuals and the collective; to continually confirm consent to ensure that consent is ongoing; and to provide the participants with all the information and data that might be useful or beneficial to them, and to do so prior to completion of the final report.

Souvent, les codes de déontologie en vigueur dans les établissements de recherche soulignent, aux responsables de recherches interculturelles, la nécessité de se montrer particulièrement sensibles aux droits des participants; mais on précise rarement les moyens à mettre en œuvre pour y arriver. Les recherches sur les autochtones devraient, en particulier, obéir aux quatre principes suivants : (1) établir un partenariat avec les participants, avant de chercher à dégager un consensus; (2) consulter les autorités concernées, qui peuvent être la collectivité elle-même aussi bien que des individus; (3) obtenir sans cesse confirmation du consentement, pour s'assurer que celui-ci tient toujours; et (4) fournir aux participants tous les renseignements et toutes les données qui puissent leur être utiles, et ce avant même de rédiger le rapport final.

A boriginal communities often resent researchers—and with good reason. Those who pursue scientific knowledge frequently seem to ignore issues like local ethics, authority protocols and ownership. By blindly following research conventions, researchers have unwittingly and unilaterally constructed the “other.” Most researchers enter the field knowing that the other exists; indeed, that is why they are there in the first place! But they soon discover that there is considerable mistrust of academics and their intentions among their prospective “subjects.” Some communities are so unhappy with the studies that have taken place in their area that they have refused to allow any more. While researchers agree that it's important to have policies to protect the subjects in social science research, studies of Aboriginal people continue to be motivated more by curiosity than beneficence. The problem arises from the fact that researchers' ethics, rather than those of the researched, often seem to govern the relationships. Aboriginal communities often feel that they have not been consulted appropriately. As one of my research participants said, “when researchers come to me, my first reaction is usually not to say anything. I am very

guarded until I get to know this person. The problem is that I know they're going to do it anyway.”

Professional institutions have begun to revamp their codes of ethics, recognizing in particular the needs of Aboriginal communities. A good example is the “Code of Conduct for Research Involving Humans” developed by the Tri-Council Working Group in 1996. (The three councils in question were the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the Medical Research Council, and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council.) But more must be done. From 1996 to 1999 I conducted ethnographic research with Aboriginal communities on this topic. One recurrent theme in what I heard is that free and informed consent is an ongoing process based on notions of authority and collectiveness, and on a principle of confirmation. The four recommendations that follow address these questions: Who has the authority to give consent? How does one ensure that the consent given is free and informed, as well as ongoing? How may Aboriginal ethical protocols be integrated into researcher education policy?

While most professional codes of ethics acknowledge that ethical principles must be adapted to particular cul-

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tures, this usually is offered more as an observation than as a prelude to instruction about how exactly to achieve this adaptation. The codes don't give researchers any guidelines about what, if anything, to do on this issue. And while the importance of the ethical protocols for obtaining free and informed consent is unquestioned in most circles, what usually is not understood is how free and informed consent might have different implications for Aboriginal participants.

The first guiding principle that will help to ensure free and informed consent is to establish a partnership *before* seeking such consent. The Tri-Council on Ethics recognized the need for collaboration when conducting research with Aboriginal communities. My research with Paiute-Shoshone Tribes in Nevada from 1996-99 led to a similar conclusion. Researchers and participants must collaborate to reach an agreement regarding the nature and purpose of the research and the ways in which it should be conducted. As one of my research participants put it:

Collaboration also means allowing the people an opportunity to make sure that they feel at ease sharing some information in a way that accommodates their own beliefs, and that it is not going to offend any of their spiritual values. Most researchers, I don't think, have a full appreciation of that. And they probably never even anticipate that there could be something like that.

One of the main purposes of collaborative research is to acknowledge and represent different voices. That is particularly important when the researcher's cultural background differs from the participants'. In cross-cultural situations, ethnographic encounters can easily lead to misunderstandings and conflict. In a discussion of some of the problems that might arise, one of the research participants said:

A lot of the people that come from an academic background don't believe anything other than what they have been taught, and they question everything else. And in those cases, they are going to need some type of collaboration to get past any biases and to learn to respect the people's beliefs. I actually think that a lot of projects would be conducive to collaboration. I suspect almost every one that you do, especially when you are involving Native people, is going to be collaborative.

Collaboration is the first step toward free and informed consent. Collaboration implies that the participants are partners who contribute to the research at different levels, be it the design of the

project, the collection of the data, or its interpretation. Each participant contributes to the research in different ways and at different levels, and each participant's voice might be represented in a way that corresponds to his or her own field of competence. This is a fundamental stage in that participants and researchers learn to relate to one another and to the inquiry in ways that are meaningful to them. Aboriginal people must be given an opportunity to voice their opinion when discussing the research agenda. For example, researchers should be willing to explore problems faced by Aboriginal communities by designing the research in a collaborative way. A lot of researchers plan to do collaborative research, but how much collaboration can there really be when everything has already been decided before meeting the research participants?

I remember feeling quite uncomfortable when I had to fill out my university's ethics review form. Among other things, it requires research candidates to clearly explain their research focus and the methodology to be followed. All these issues must be thought out before entering the field, as it is considered unethical to "go into the field" without approval from the university's research ethics board. On one the hand, if I were to do what was considered ethical by the university's research guidelines, I had to give up on the whole idea of doing collaborative research. Indeed, how could I begin to think collaboration when everything had to be decided before I was supposed to meet the people who would "collaborate" with me? On the other hand, if I started to design a research question as well as potential methods for inquiry in collaboration with the participants prior to getting approval from the research ethics board, I was in violation of my institution's ethical guidelines: It would be as if I had gone into the field without the proper travel document.

The second guiding principle should be to consult with the relevant authorities, which are both the individual and the collective.

Consent develops in stages according to who has the authority to speak. Depending on the nature of the topic, two different levels of consent might be involved: that of the informant as an individual and that of another person recognized as the "keeper" of knowledge belonging to a group.

When investigating knowledge that the community considers to be of a collective nature, researchers must first get consent from the custo-

dian of this knowledge, then from the individuals who are willing to become research participants. The idea of knowledge as a group's intellectual property highlights the distinction that needs to be made between knowledge about an individual and collective knowledge. As one of my research participants stated: "You could give consent about a lot of things, but you might just not have the authority to give that consent."

I asked one of my research participants whether anybody within the community could authorize research. This is what he told me:

The person to give permission should be from within the community, but it's not enough. It can't just be anybody from the community. Sometimes, even the Chief is not the person who has the authority to give permission, especially when it comes to ceremonies. Researchers always end up going to the wrong people. You see, the authority to give consent is not necessarily a political authority; it doesn't have anything to do with position of power. For example, if you want to do research on traditional stories, you may have to get consent, not from the Chief, but from an Elder, who can be really quiet, who doesn't say much, but who is the "keeper" of these stories.

The third guiding principle is to continually confirm consent to ensure that consent is ongoing. Consent is to be confirmed at various stages of the research by consulting with the participants. Confirming consent implies that the participants have an opportunity to review the research process, to reflect on what they have said, and to respond to the research findings before the final report is completed. The ethical protocol for free and informed consent should recommend a process that evolves with the inquiry. One of my research participants expressed it as follows:

The confirmation is important to make sure that the data you are using are accurate and are interpreted in the right way. In truly collaborative research, you'd want the confirmation to flow all the way through. If it's to fulfil the needs of two different groups, the results are going to be important for two things: For the researcher, it advances some knowledge about the subject, and then for the participants, there are certain things that they want to see out of this, too. Confirmation is going to make sure that both end products are preserved.

The fourth and final guiding principle is to provide the participants with the data prior to completion of the final report. The partici-

pants must be given all the information and data that might be useful or beneficial to them. Consent for research means that the researcher has a responsibility to the participants not only throughout the research process, but also after the research has been completed. It is important that the participants give their consent to the way in which the research results are being used and disseminated.

Ethical collaborative research requires more than simply informing the participants about their rights; it requires implicating them in all aspects of the research. The participants are not passive "givers" of knowledge that is somehow to be extracted by the researcher from their memories, but active partners in the research. Often, researchers assume that their ethical responsibilities cease when they have completed the ethnographic phase of their research. But ethical questioning should continue in order to avoid misuse of the information that has been obtained.

Aboriginal people are no longer willing to be just subjects of research. Research that is deemed unethical by Aboriginal communities puts social science at risk. It jeopardizes the credibility of the work, and, perhaps mostly importantly, the access to communities and individuals who might still have much to teach us. The ethics of research involving Aboriginal communities need to be defined within a framework that allows for cultural sensitivity. In particular, the process of seeking free and informed consent is not just a contract; it is an ongoing process of renegotiation. Recurrent confirmation is needed in order to ensure that consent is continually informed.

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