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Collection and Governance of Data: Much to Learn

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Abstract

There is an extensive history of research projects with Indigenous communities around the world where the projects were based on Western epistemologies and were neither collaborative, nor community- based. This editorial introduces the International Indigenous Policy Journal's special issue on the governance of Indigenous information. The issue opens a dialog about how data can be collected and governed in a way that empowers Indigenous peoples and communities.

Keywords

data collection, data governance, research ethics, Indigenous methods

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There is an extensive history of research projects with Indigenous communities around the world where the projects were based on Western epistemologies and were neither collaborative, nor community-based. Further, there have been many research projects that have “... been based on disrespectful relationships, misinterpreted cultural ceremonies, and [presented] inaccurate portrayals of First Nations peoples... Researchers have mined both physical and intellectual property, using practices ranging from disturbance of sacred burial grounds to appropriation of ceremonial practices to theft of knowledge” (Assembly of First Nations, 2009, p. 5). This past speaks to the need for a new beginning. As I said in an editorial in volume 4, issue 3: 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 (White, 2013).

We have to begin to understand that as researchers we actually act as intercessors for information, which means we hold a certain level of power because we construct arguments that can impact real people in real time. We build or tear down legitimacy and as such have a responsibility to protect and enhance the peoples we partner with in research endeavors.

There have been some very positive changes in the conduct of research, due in some part to the development of better ethics review and the sincere push by Indigenous people’s themselves for improving how work is done. There is a shift in academia towards respectful research where the community or organization members are partners instead of being simply research participants (or worse yet “research subjects”). There is a growing understanding that Aboriginal knowledge “is integrated and valued throughout the entire research process” (Assembly of First Nations, 2005, p. 5). Importantly, there has been growth in the use of plain language and memorandums of understandings developed by partners in projects that spell out how data is collected and governed.

Research is intrinsically neither good nor bad. It can be either depending on who does it, how it is done, and the outcomes it produces. That said, as the articles in this special focused edition of *IIPJ* point out, there are a lot of things for us to learn. The lessons that are arising from this change in the conduct of research are many: the need to partner; the need to have clear protocols; the need to ensure the research benefits the communities; the need to incorporate traditional understandings and knowledge, where allowed by Indigenous peoples, into all aspects of the research; the need for Indigenous peoples to have a direct say in how data gathered is used; and many more important things.

On the governance of data, the state of our evolution is comparatively meagre. Who decides how to use data? What is the role of the researcher and what is the role of the community partners (or in mass surveys the population partners)?

We are pleased to open a dialogue on these issues and thank the contributors featured in this issue for their work. We do not see this as definitive, but rather a part of a widespread discussion that is going on in multiple countries and regions.

Jerry P. White
Editor-in-Chief
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