

Best and Wise Practices for Equitable and Mutually Beneficial Research within Indigenous, Black, and Other Systemically Marginalized Communities

Centering Community Calls for Ethical Research Engagement Workshop Series Resource Handout

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Purpose: This document was created as a supplemental resource for this workshop series. It summarizes findings from a large scoping review examining community-created protocols for ethical research engagement from Indigenous and Black communities around the world. These protocols articulate the values of communities and their expectations of the ways they want to be meaningfully engaged by researchers and similar authority figures to ensure mutually beneficial relationships, prevent harm, and ensure research practices align with the values and needs of communities. This document highlights how researchers can conduct ethical, respectful, and accountable research by prioritizing values such as humanism, self-determination, reciprocity, and so on. These protocols incorporate principles that surpass traditional institutional guidelines, as they expand on topics such as relational accountability and rapport-building, community-engaged methodologies, the responsibilities of the researcher as stewards of knowledge sharing, and protocols around data protection and sovereignty in order to protect the rights and dignity of communities.

Historical Significance: Historically as well as contemporarily, research has been a site of harm and exploitation for Black, Indigenous, and other systemically marginalized communities - a fact deeply rooted in colonization and systemic discrimination. As a result of numerous instances of state-sanctioned, ill-intentioned institutional research over time, many communities have reasonably developed immense distrust of, and dissatisfaction with the enterprise of research. The research Indigenous, Black, and systemically marginalized communities have been subjected to have often been unethical, extractive, exploitative, and in the worst cases, dehumanizing and fundamentally disconnected from the rights and self-determination of these populations. There are numerous historical examples of research that have co-opted and commodified the cultural knowledges and resources of Black and Indigenous peoples globally, where these populations are viewed as subjects for extraction as opposed to equal partners in knowledge creation. Institutional ethics boards often prioritize compliance, liability, and risk aversion. Researchers often prioritize career advancement over the time and effort required for meaningful relationship building in ethically accountable and respectful research processes. This work centers the calls for ethical research engagement from communities around the world in the aim to inform the research ethics priorities of the western academy.

Six Key Guidelines for Researchers

Theme A: Education on the Community

The three key guidelines under this theme focus on ensuring that researchers have done the work of educating themselves, and reflect on their reasons and suitability for engagement with community. This calls for an iterative form of reflection before, during, and after engagement in a research process.

Key Guideline 1: Self-Reflexivity and Humility

Researchers must reflect on their personal biases, -isms (i.e. racism, sexism, ableism, etc.), power, and cultural assumptions so they are in the best state of mind to engage communities with openness, humility, and a willingness to learn, understand, and empathize with the experiences of community members. Only then can the research they lead impart actual knowledge reflective of community realities.

Reflection Questions: *Am I the right person to carry out this research study? Who else needs to be at the decision-making table? In what ways might my positionality influence the research questions I am interrogating, my interactions with community members, and my interpretations of data?*

Key Guideline 2: “Do No Harm” Principle

Research must prioritize avoiding harm to rights holders and community members. Research must address community needs, protect, and support the overall well-being of those involved in a research process. Protecting the social, cultural, spiritual, physical, and psychological wellbeing of communities facilitates respectful and meaningful engagement. Further, research ought to be timely, relevant, and beneficial to communities.

Reflection Questions: *How do I know that my research inquiry is relevant and beneficial to the community? What are the ways that I can plan and put safeguards in place to mitigate and prevent harm to community in my own research process?*

Key Guideline 3: Meaningful and Ongoing Relationship and Trust Building

Trust serves as the foundation for collaboration and meaningful relationship building in addressing the long history of exploitation and misrepresentation in extractive research. Building trust through transparency about agreed-upon research goals, informed consent and the rights of all involved in a research process, and clear and open communication for dealing with disagreements are all tools for fostering collaboration. This ensures communities feel respected and valued.

Reflection Questions: *How can I center care, meaningful relationship-building, respect and reciprocity in the research processes I am a part of?*

Theme B: Community Self-Determination

These three key guidelines below encompass the understanding that researchers are not the only “experts,” as community members are knowledge experts that enter these processes with a lifetime of lived experience. The researcher, in many ways, is more of a steward, archivist, translator, and record-keeper of said knowledge and information derived from a study.

Key Guideline 4: Community Participation and Self-Determination

Actively and intentionally practicing power-sharing with community leaders in a research process. This can include involving community members as advisors to ensure oversight of a research process and direction that aligns with community priorities, respects cultural protocols, and promotes community autonomy of knowledge produced from said research.

Reflection Questions: *What are the ways I have decentered my power, knowledge and expertise in this research process to make room for community-based knowing and worldviews? Does the research process center the priorities of community and allow for power-sharing? Am I creating space at key phases of a project to consult with Elders, community leaders, and/or knowledge holders so as to mitigate potential harms and maximize the potential benefits of my research?*

Key Guideline 5: Traditional and Culturally-Relevant Community Methodologies

Using traditional community methods when possible to center the approaches that are culturally relevant, and to empower Indigenous, Black, and systemically marginalized communities. Traditional methods, such as sharing circles, facilitate culturally sensitive interactions and prevent misrepresentation by contextualizing knowledge within the community’s practices and non-western, decolonial epistemologies.

Reflection Questions: *Have I consulted with community members on the best approaches or methods for research engagement? Are there traditional or cultural practices I am aware of in the community that would be facilitative for knowledge-sharing processes?*

Key Guideline 6: Sovereignty and Data Governance

Communities have ownership and control of what data is shared and how their knowledge is shared. Researchers ought to do all they can to solicit consent throughout the research and knowledge mobilization process. This protects cultural and intellectual resources and ensures research benefits the community.

Reflection Questions: *What are the community-based protocols and agreements that I am beholden to, and how do I prioritize and advocate for them within my institution and academia? What are the mechanisms I will put in place so participants can modify or withdraw their data throughout the research process?*