

DISCUSSION PAPER ON RESEARCH AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

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With recent concerns over the conduct of geographers working in Indigenous communities, the co-chairs of the Indigenous Peoples Specialty Group of the Association of American Geographers (AAG) provide the following discussion paper concerning standards for research by geographers in Indigenous communities.

We choose not to simply focus on specific individuals or projects, because to do so would imply that their academic research is our singular matter of concern. Practices that disrespect Indigenous peoples and autonomy are not a recent problem in geography, nor are they necessarily a limited problem. Institutional Review Boards have the authority to hold individual researchers accountable, and to give the researchers a fair hearing, but the geographical community has an interest and an obligation to set expectations and standards for our discipline.

We choose instead to get beyond the immediate controversy, and address issues of research methodologies, ethics, larger contexts, and positive role models, to offer a few insights that may resonate longer than the latest listserv battle. We hope to use the current controversy as a learning opportunity for geographic researchers on appropriate and inappropriate ways of interacting with Indigenous communities.

Research ethics

In her groundbreaking book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith recognizes that in recent years, “Some scholarly communities of scientists may have well-established ethical guidelines, many have not. Even if such communities have guidelines, the problem to be reiterated again is that it has been taken for granted that indigenous peoples are the ‘natural objects’ of research. It is difficult to convey to the non-indigenous world how deeply this perception of research is held by indigenous peoples....”ⁱ Smith adds that the “collective memory of imperialism has been perpetuated through the ways in which knowledge about indigenous peoples was collected, classified and then re presented in various ways back to the West...”. Smith identifies research as “a significant site of struggle between the interests and ways of knowing of the West and the interests and ways of resisting of the Other....the pursuit of knowledge is deeply embedded in the multiple layers of imperial and colonial practices.”ⁱⁱ

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted by the General Assembly in 2007, recognizes member states’ poor treatment of indigenous peoples, and calls for “control by indigenous peoples over developments affecting them

and their lands,” and “the demilitarization of the lands and territories of indigenous peoples.” It also states that Indigenous peoples need to give their “Free, Prior and Informed Consent” for any decisions that affect their well-being. The Declaration states in Article 11, Section 2, that “States shall provide redress through effective mechanisms, which may include restitution, developed in conjunction with indigenous peoples, with respect to their cultural, intellectual, religious and spiritual property taken without their free, prior and informed consent or in violation of their laws, traditions and customs.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Much of the debate around research ethics focuses on the intentions of the researcher, and the researcher’s commitment to Indigenous peoples. But in many instances, it is not the *intentions* of the research but its *effects* that cause damage in Indigenous communities. The histories of Native peoples everywhere are full of outside interests (governments, churches, anthropologists, physicians, and educators) who honestly sought to improve the lives of Indigenous people, but ended up causing more harm than good. The many examples in the 20th century include boarding schools, the removal of Native children, and sterilization of Native women without their full consent.

Without full Indigenous self-determination in the research process and full control over the finished datasets and maps, inadvertent or unintended consequences become more likely. These consequences may include geographic data being used by government forces against Indigenous peoples and their collective lands, even if they participated themselves in acquiring the data. They may include the increased privatization or allotment of Native lands in the name of building economic stability.

In extreme cases of “geopiracy,” Indigenous sharing of their geographical knowledge may profit corporate and academic interests who do not share the credit or profit for the knowledge, much like pharmaceutical companies profit from “biopiracy” of traditional ecological knowledge. Smith observes, “Indigenous groups argue that legal definitions of ethics are framed in ways that contain the Western sense of the individual and of individualized property—for example, the right of an individual to give his or her knowledge, or the right to give informed consent....Community and indigenous rights or views in this area are generally not recognized and not respected.”^{iv} This includes institutions that believe “scholars should be allowed to conduct research for the public good with complete intellectual freedom” including the right to have “final authority over and responsibility for the contents and conclusions of their documents.”^v

The intervention of academic researchers in Indigenous communities (as the past experiences of anthropologists have taught us) can also pit Native peoples against each other, as they are split into the camps of those who oppose and support a particular project. This process resembles too closely the colonial tactic of “divide-and-conquer,” with intertribal and intratribal rivalries being exacerbated by the presence of outsiders, whether deliberately or otherwise. The support of some Native people for a project is not a sufficient retort to criticism of a project by other Native people. Only by answering the questions and concerns honestly and completely can a researcher alleviate concern about a project. But the best way to avoid these conflicts in the first place is to involve the communities in determining the purpose and scope of the project from its conception.

Larger contexts

Controversies about the research ethics of individual academic projects cannot be separated from the larger political, socioeconomic and cultural contexts, and examining these larger contexts helps in understanding the concerns of Indigenous communities. This is particularly true in parts of the Americas where Indigenous peoples have played a central role in toppling and replacing governments (such as in Bolivia and Ecuador), and in leading rebellions against corporate globalization (such as in Chiapas and Oaxaca). These movements have often been targeted with extreme repression by U.S.-aided militaries and federal police (such as in Colombia, Peru and Mexico). It is understandable that Indigenous movements would mistrust a U.S. military that with one hand funds academic studies of their communities, while with the other hand provides training and weapons to governments suppressing their rights.

The powerful and growing Indigenous movements are increasingly being targeted by U.S. military and intelligence agencies themselves, as a real or potential national security threat to U.S. interests.^{vi} The National Intelligence Council (NIC) projected in 2005 that “the failure of elites to adapt to the evolving demands of free markets and democracy probably will fuel a revival in populism and drive indigenous movements, which so far have sought change through democratic means, to consider more drastic means...”^{vii}

The Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO), headquartered at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, is one leading example of the application of this emerging doctrine. The FMSO published a 1999 study that lumped together “Insurgencies, Terrorist Groups and Indigenous Movements”.^{viii} A 1997 FMSO study focused on Indigenous rebellions and other “insurgencies” in Mexico.^{ix} A 1998 book by an FMSO researcher states that “The coming center of gravity of armed political struggles may be indigenous populations, youth gangs...or insurgents” and that the Internet is increasingly being used by “Indigenous rebels, feminists, troublemakers...”^x

A 2006 FMSO-funded geographic study claimed that “it is perhaps indigenous peoples’ demands for land tenancy and territorial sovereignty where they have presented the most radical challenges to neoliberal regimes and democracy itself.” The same study observed that “the ‘War on Terror’...requires a...commitment to geographic fieldwork and analysis with bold new initiatives”.^{xi} It is a legitimate fear on the part of some Indigenous movements that studies led or funded by U.S. military or intelligence agencies are incorporating them into the rubric of the “War on Terror,” even when in the name of preventing “mistakes” in military policy and neoliberal economics.

Since the beginnings of the Cold War, the Pentagon has established an alliance with U.S. universities, channeling funding into on-campus research.^{xii} While we may consider the U.S. military as having separate branches or divisions with different goals, it is not difficult to see how research funded by one branch can be taken out of context by another with a different intent--especially if the results of research “must be made freely available to everyone including the United States Government agencies...”^{xiii}

Positive research models

Intense controversies over research ethics may lead some geographic researchers to avoid working with Indigenous peoples, in fear of causing offense or misunderstanding. But we feel that it would be a mistake to avoid working with Indigenous communities due to the sensitivity of this relationship. If anything, building mutually beneficial relationships with Indigenous nations are a challenge for geography as a discipline to overcome its colonial and imperial past, and a unique opportunity to remake itself. It is the arrogance of powerful academic institutions that generates most of the friction with Native peoples. Individual researchers may make mistakes, but honest mistakes can be forgiven. If we assume we're guests, we may be welcomed, but if we assume we'll be welcomed, we're no longer guests.

Academic researchers have the option to go beyond simply researching Indigenous peoples and cultures. They can also research the interaction of Native and non-Native societies and communities. Non-Native researchers can take responsibility for studying the actions of their own communities and governments, and help Native nations remove obstacles and barriers to the full exercise of self-determination. They can also proactively support the human and sovereign rights of Indigenous peoples as, for example, the AAAS Science and Human Rights Program has committed itself.^{xiv}

Certain principles can guide the relationship between researchers and Indigenous communities. These principles need to be applied (as Smith points out) even when the researchers themselves are Native people. The National Museum of the American Indian is one of many institutions developing such guidelines.^{xv} We feel that the primary purpose of such guidelines in academia should not be to legally protect institutions from legal recriminations of research, but to protect the rights of Indigenous communities involved in research.

We can paraphrase or sum up some of the emerging Indigenous peoples research guidelines in a general way, and hope that the Indigenous Peoples Specialty Group can use these as discussion points to begin developing and proposing guidelines to the AAG:

First, researchers need to form partnerships with Indigenous communities, rather than presenting these communities with a formulated research plan. Researchers can approach communities first with their capabilities, but the communities need to shape the ultimate purpose of the research, and receive full information on the form, methodology, and sponsors, in negotiations prior to the start of the project. Full and informed consent needs to be secured from Indigenous partners, individuals and/or communities participating in or affected by the research.

Second, benefits of the research should flow to the Indigenous partners, including acknowledgement, fair return and royalties. Researchers should reciprocate for this knowledge with appropriate service to the community, and by not flaunting the knowledge that has been shared with them. Indigenous communities and individuals

should have control over what aspects of their traditional knowledge or “intellectual property” is shared or is kept in their possession.

Third, Indigenous partners should have the opportunity to review and revise drafts of the findings, and have access to the final product. Agreements on the confidentiality of sources, and protection of sacred places and knowledge, must be maintained even after the research project is complete. Researchers should maintain a relationship to the community, even after it no longer serves their funding or career interests.

Fourth, relationships with Indigenous peoples should be maintained not simply within the confines of Western ethics or legal principles (including concepts such as “intellectual property”) but also within Indigenous cultural frameworks. This may mean forming lifelong bonds of service. Traditional protocols--specific to local circumstances--may include reciprocity or diplomatic gifting, mutual assistance outside of the boundaries of academic studies, and discussion of personal and family perspectives. Researchers should remember that Native peoples are looking as much at our hearts as at our minds.

As geographic researchers on Indigenous peoples and places, we may acquire funding, institutional support, publications, and the respect of our academic colleagues. But without respect and integrity in our interactions with Native communities, we actually would have very little. Conversely, even a poor and obscure geographer can have a fulfilling career, and a rich life, through learning from Indigenous peoples at their kitchen tables.

As Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes, “From indigenous perspectives ethical codes of conduct serve partly the same purpose as the protocols which govern our relationships with each other and with the environment. The term ‘respect’ is consistently used by indigenous peoples to underscore the significance of our relationships and humanity. Through respect the place of everyone and everything in the universe is kept in balance and harmony. Respect is a reciprocal, shared, constantly interchanging principle which is expressed through all aspects of social conduct.”^{xvi}

ⁱ Linda Tuhiwai Smith. (1999). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research & Indigenous Peoples*. New York: Zed Books Ltd.,, p. 118.

ⁱⁱ Smith, pp. 1-2.

ⁱⁱⁱ United Nations General Assembly. (2007). United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. General Assembly Resolution 61/295 (Sept. 13). <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/drip.html>

^{iv} Smith, p. 118.

^v The American Geographical Society (2009) Guidelines for Ethical Conduct of Foreign Field Research.

^{vi} Naomi Klein. (2005). The Threat of Hope in Latin America. *The Nation* (Nov. 4). <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20051121/klein>

Gustavo González. (2005). 'War on Terror' Has Latin American Indigenous People in Its Sights. *Inter Press Service* (June 6). <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines05/0606-03.htm>

^{vii} National Intelligence Council. (2005). Latin America in 2020: Will Globalization Cause the Region to Split? In *Mapping the Global Future 2020*. Washington, D.C.: National Intelligence Council 2020 Project. http://www.dni.gov/nic/NIC_globaltrend2020_s3.html#page78

^{viii} Gerald Gato. (1999). Insurgencies, Terrorist Groups and Indigenous Movements: An Annotated Bibliography. Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, Kan. *Military Review* (July-Aug.)
<http://www.smallwars.quantico.usmc.mil/search/LessonsLearned/LatinAm/insurgbib.htm>

^{ix} Graham H. Turbiville, Jr. (1997). Mexico's Other Insurgents. *Military Review* (May-June), 81-90. <http://fmso.leavenworth.army.mil/fmsopubs/issues/mexico/mexico.htm>
or http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/mexico/usa/army_on_epr.html

^x Geoff Demarest. (1998). *Geoproperty: Foreign Affairs, National Security and Property Rights*. London/New York: Routledge, pp. 84, 243.

^{xi} Radiance Research Team. (2006). Executive Summary, México Indígena: Mexican Open-Source Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Project Final Report, Year One. (June 5), pp. 5, 11 http://web.ku.edu/~mexind/sections_1_and_2.pdf

^{xii} Noam Chomsky *et al.* (1997). *The Cold War & The University: Toward an Intellectual History of the Postwar Years*. New York: The New Press.

^{xiii} The American Geographical Society (2009). Guidelines for Ethical Conduct of Foreign Field Research.

^{xiv} American Association for the Advancement of Science. (2008). Science and Human Rights Program. <http://shr.aaas.org/>

^{xv} Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. (2009). Protocols for Conducting Research in Indigenous Settings: Guidelines for Ethical, Appropriate and Successful Methodologies. (Draft MS).

^{xvi} Smith, p. 120.