Ethical guidelines for researchers working with Aboriginal communities

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Outline

1. The importance of research with, on behalf of, and involving Aboriginal people
2. Broad ethical considerations
3. National statements
4. What I look for in an ethics application
5. Gaining entry to a community
6. What to expect
7. How can Aboriginal people benefit from research?
What I do

Academic linguistics, involving recording, analysing and, to some extent, providing useful materials in Aboriginal languages. Also, advice to stakeholders such as the NT Dept of Ed.

• [http://www.abc.net.au/indigenous/map/](http://www.abc.net.au/indigenous/map/)
Numbulwar (Rose River Mission)
North Australian Kriol
1. The importance of research with, on behalf of, and involving Aboriginal people

• Why bother? Too difficult?
• ATSI peoples represent an important clinical, psychological/behavioural, and anthropological minority
• We can’t really claim to understand how human beings work, without understanding ATSI peoples
Importance of research

Closing the Gap (2008, COAG)

• close the gap in life expectancy within a generation (by 2031);
• halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five by 2018;
• ensure access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four year olds in remote communities by 2013;
• halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for children by 2018;
• halve the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 (or equivalent) attainment rates by 2020; and
• halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and other Australians by 2018.
Importance of research

• From one perspective then, research on ATSI peoples is an important way in which Australian society aims to reduce the disadvantage experienced by ATSI people with respect to non-ATSI people

• For many Aboriginal people, there is an expectation that research will have some positive outcome for their perceived disadvantage
2. Broad ethical considerations

- The right to left in peace and quiet
- Informed consent, and gratuitous concurrence
- The (chequered) history of research on Aboriginal people
- Benefit vs risk
- The products of research, control over such
- Research partnerships
3. National statements on ethical research protocols

- NHMRC
- AIATSIS
- Australia Council for the Arts
- ARC Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language (CoEDL)
NHMRC


Other protocols


NHMRC national statement

• 2 pages on research involving ATSI participants
• “A cornerstone of an ethical research relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples is respect for and valuing of cultural and language diversity.”
NHMRC Values and Ethics

• Identifies ‘six core values’ as being important to ATSI peoples:
  – Reciprocity
  – Respect
  – Equality
  – Responsibility
  – Survival and protection
  – Spirit and integrity
NHMRC national statement

• The national statement requires that **any** research involving ATSI participants must be assessed by a HREC (i.e. must undergo full assessment, not just vetting at a local level: ATSI research can’t be deemed to be ‘minimum risk’)

• Which means that it must be assessed by people who (a) have networks with ATSI people, or (b) are familiar with the ATSI peoples in question
Indigenous Linguistic and Cultural Heritage

• A new policy document, written by members of the ARC Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language (CoEDL), to become adopted by the ARC in due course
Indigenous Linguistic and Cultural Heritage

• “The CoE acknowledges that simply adhering to institutional requirements does not entail an ethical outcome, and we endorse the NHMRC’s statement that it ‘is possible for researchers to “meet” rule-based requirements without engaging fully with the implications of difference and values relevant to their research. The approach advanced in these guidelines is more demanding of researchers as it seeks to move from compliance to trust’” (NHMRC 2003:4 Values and Ethics [my emphasis])
Indigenous Linguistic and Cultural Heritage

• Special focus on Indigenous knowledge systems (language; myths; ethnoscientific traditions; music, art and performance) archiving and access, and intellectual copyright, not all of which will be relevant to all researchers
UN rights of indigenous peoples

Article 31 of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states:

- Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts (UN 2007) (AIATSIS 2012: 5)
Specific proposals

1. Developing aims and research questions
2. Considering a research agreement
   - Can be good protection for both ‘sides’
   - Not all groups will want to do this
   - Especially not before they know a researcher well
3. Building a collaborative research team
   - An excellent way of giving back to the community, developing skills and knowledge (on both sides), promote pride and respect
Indigenous Linguistic and Cultural Heritage

4. Compensation
   – Follow local practice (consult local organisations), but compensation is expected for most activities involving ATSI participants throughout Australia
   – Needs to be negotiated, preferably in advance to avoid ill feeling

5. Employing interpreters (discussed below)

6. Ensuring informed consent (discussed below)

7. Specific issues with children and families

8. Copyright and traditional knowledge
Indigenous Linguistic and Cultural Heritage

9. Identifying participants’ preferences for archiving, access and future uses

10. Working with legacy material

11. Licensing the use of records

12. Training and skills sharing

13. Consultation and respect in regards to presentations and publications
New proposals in the CoEDL doc

• Research projects need to constantly be the subject of negotiation with Aboriginal communities
• More specific guidelines about how to manage the research project
• There needs to be a 'two-way' exchange (benefits, obligations on both sides)
• In essence, this comes down to respect for the people you are planning to work with
4. What I look for in an ethics application

- Evidence of established ties with a community
- If not: then attempts to use existing networks, such as a steering committee or mentor, or local Aboriginal group, who can provide a link (e.g. Traditional Owners Corp, other organisations)
- Ideally, evidence of involvement of local people in the research
- Consideration of the benefits/risks
5. Gaining entry to a community

• How to start?
How to start?

• Working with/through *Aboriginal organisations* is a good way to begin, e.g. Aboriginal language centres (which also frequently act as local Indigenous knowledge documentation, archiving and education centres), also Ranger organisations (NAILSMA), RUIL (UMelb)

• Personal contacts can be invaluable, particularly when visiting a community for the first time. Network your academic contacts: many have experience with Aboriginal communities or know someone who does.
Gaining entry to a community

- Permission to enter Aboriginal Land (defined by the Commonwealth) is provided by the Aboriginal Land Councils (NLC, CLC, GELC, etc).
- As a researcher, you need a *research permit*, not just a visitor permit. They will expect you to already have ethical clearance from your institution, and will also ask for details about Intellectual Property Rights agreements.
Gaining entry to a community

• Often your first point of contact in a community will be the ‘brokers’:
  – (Sansom 1980): Aboriginal (and non-Aboriginal) people recognised as being cultural intermediaries
  – Can have a number of motivations, sometimes purely short-term, more often genuine cultural ambassadors
  – Eventually, you will probably need to get beyond the brokers
6. What to expect

• Cultural considerations
• Language issues
• Life in remote townships
• Local whitefellas
Cultural considerations

• Life in many remote Aboriginal settlements is still governed by traditional ways of interacting, expectations of other people, and modes of existence
• Some of these can seem quite foreign if you have no prior experience of them
Kinship

• Social relationships in all Aboriginal communities (remote, rural and urban) are governed by kinship, to a lesser or greater extent.

• Kin ties are much more important, and much more binding, to most Aboriginal people than friendships or other kinds of alliances.
Kinship

- Not only that, but kinship is at the core of almost every other aspect of life: traditional ceremonial obligations, rights to land, rights to marriageable partners, rights and obligations to share resources with others, and the organisation of groups for some purpose are all determined by a person's place in the scheme of kin relations.
Kinship

• In ‘traditional’ communities, but even those which are not so remote, kin is not just biologically determined, but socially determined

• In many places, everyone you know has a kin relation to you. It may not be an actual genealogical relationship, but it is a kin relationship nevertheless and carries much the same set of rights and responsibilities
Kinship and research

• Why is all this stuff relevant?
• Because, in almost all Aboriginal communities, kinship is at the heart of social organisation, local feuds (which can be very long-standing), and the likelihood that two people with work with you or with each other
• Understanding kinship is fundamental to understanding how Aboriginal society operates
Kinship and researchers

• Often, researchers (if they hang around long enough, or are regarded as important enough to bother with) will be given some kind of social classification which enables local people to reckon their kinship relationship to that researcher (and the researcher’s family, associates, etc)

• Such relationships should be taken seriously
Interactions

• Interacting with Aboriginal people, particularly in remote areas, can be a frustrating and bewildering experience.

• Language is often an issue. Most remote Aboriginal people do not speak English as their first language. Few people speak it well.

• In these areas, traditional languages or (more commonly) some kind of contact variety—such as Kriol—is the lingua franca.
Language

• If you are not familiar with the local vernacular, it helps to have an interpreter.
• Interpreters can not only help you understand what people are saying (including nuances you would otherwise miss), they can also act as brokers to the community and avoid you making serious cultural faux pas
• When I'm out bush, I rarely go anywhere without a local offsider
Language

• Literacy levels in remote areas can be shockingly low, as well as knowledge in general about whitefella ways of doing things (e.g. ethics forms, forms in general, informed consent, “research”, and “university”)
Interactive style

• It's not just language that can be an issue: many aspects of interactive style can be quite different to mainstream Australian society
  • Questions are handled differently
  • Importance of indirectness
  • Hearsay
Personal relations

- Apart from kinship considerations, there are some broader generalisations about which classes of people can interact in Aboriginal communities.
- In general, interaction between sexes is much more restricted than in mainstream society.
- If you are a woman, you can expect to work mainly with women, and likewise for male researchers.
Personal relations

• Often, as a researcher, you will be directed to older members of the community initially (in particular, depending on the nature of your business, older women)

• The knowledge and authority of older people is taken seriously in many communities

• Young people may avoid researchers like the plague ... except for the kids!
Gender expectations

• In many communities (particularly former mission settlements), there are expectations of ways of behaving and dress, particularly with respect to women.
• Women are expected to dress demurely, and not to interact with men in particular ways, particularly when not in company with others.
Life in remote townships

• Many roads are cut-off during the wet season, making access difficult and/or expensive: plan your trip accordingly

• During the build-up (Sept/Oct-Dec roughly) the heat and humidity can be pretty uncomfortable, making work outdoors a challenge
Local whitefellas

• Part of the outback experience
7. How can Aboriginal people gain from research?

• Apart from the long-term gains we hope for in health, education, employment ...

• There are also short-term benefits possible. One of the most concrete of those is direct employment of Aboriginal people in your research team, in whatever capacity (see comments above, w.r.t. the CoEDL policy)

• Intangibles: getting the attention of whitefella researchers can provide a big boost for traditional culture, the authority of elders, etc
To sum up

• Don’t take the involvement (or interest) of Aboriginal people in your research project for granted
• Building up trust will take time and effort
• The rewards, however, on many levels, are great
From a personal perspective...

- Importance of mutual respect
- Nothing is impersonal
- Friendships/partnerships can be extremely rewarding and long-lasting
A small selection of useful resources

- Research Unit on Indigenous Languages: https://indiglang.arts.unimelb.edu.au/
- Resource Network for Linguistic Diversity: http://www.rnld.org/
- Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages: http://www.vaclang.org.au/