

# Research, Ethnic Fraud, and the Academy: A Protocol for Working with Indigenous Communities and Peoples

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## CONTEXT: OBJECTS OF RESEARCH

**NOT SINCE THE EARLY 1990S** when the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP, 1991-1996) was underway has there been a comparable flurry of excitement around Indigenous research and corresponding attention to Indigenous policy development. But like the era of RCAP, we are in the midst of two large-scale, multi-year research projects such: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC, 2007 – 2015) and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous (MMIWG, 2017 – 2019). A partial explanation of the activity around Indigenous research is the considerable financial resources attached to these inquiries: RCAP had a budget of \$92 million (in contemporary dollars), the TRC \$60 million, and the MMIWG \$54 million. While RCAP, the TRC, and MMIWG were largely Indigenous-led inquiries concerned with matters of Indigenous justice and developing policy responses, there has been a noticeable spin-off in non-Indigenous research and policy circles.

Perhaps predictably, non-Indigenous interest in Indigenous issues has swelled. Today, major research funding agencies, such as the federal Tri-Council,<sup>1</sup> have set aside historic funding levels for Indigenous-related research, which is cause for optimism. But there are also many reasons to be cautious.

**Indigenous Peoples and communities must also be attentive to potential for harm that this new era presents to Indigenous nations and their communities by opportunistic, exploitative, and unscrupulous settler-researchers.**

While universities, colleges, and other research institutions embrace notions of Indigenization and decolonization, there are considerable concerns about settler-colonial ethics and how they continue to dominant research design and direction. With notions of Reconciliation and Indigenization finding themselves on administrative agendas, they may be reproducing the outcomes that Vine Deloria Jr. railed at 50 years ago. In 1969, Deloria lamented that, “Indians have been cursed above all other people in history. Indians have anthropologists” (Deloria, 1969, p. 78). Deloria went on to highlight the problematic nature of settler ethics in research, underscoring the unresponsiveness of outsider policy: “we should not be objects of observations for those who do nothing to help us” (Deloria, 1969, p. 94)<sup>2</sup>.

**Policy and programming for Indigenous public and primary healthcare—one of the most pressing concerns for Indigenous peoples—seems to be the new Anthropology.**

Health research conducted by White settlers and other outsiders, in fact, has been among the top offenders to the respect and integrity of Indigenous Peoples. Recent history has shown that White settler research ethics not only reduce Indigenous individuals to objects—as Vine Deloria would observe—but have treated Indigenous Peoples as objects without humanity. A number of examples come to mind such as the nutrition experiments on Indigenous children attending Indian Residential Schools<sup>3</sup>, skin-grafting experiments on Inuit<sup>4</sup>, and the coerced/forced sterilization of Indigenous women.<sup>5</sup> Much of this falls within recent memory, particularly the heinous practice of sterilizing Indigenous women without their knowledge or consent. Disturbingly, White settler research ethics has either overlooked or explicitly permitted these dehumanizing policies and procedures.

But there are more challenges to contend with beyond the average problematic settler researchers. We are seeing the rise of race-shifting and self-Indigenizing settlers. These are self-identifying “Indigenous” individuals without connection to our Nations and communities and who continue to silence our voices.

**They reproduce the settler-centric research without being accountable to our Nations while scoring lucrative research grants. This trend is seen elsewhere, among those self-Indigenizing individuals—with very tenuous and often no discernible Indigenous ancestry—are laying claim to the title of unceded Indigenous territory as well as many other inherent Indigenous rights.**

Darryl Leroux, PhD, a professor at Saint Mary’s University in Halifax, has been following this new trend, and it is the subject of his forthcoming book, *Distorted Descent: White Claims to Indigenous Identity*.

Considering this background, we, as Indigenous academics strongly assert our inherent responsibilities and ground our research in relational ethics that are transparent and accountable. For these reasons, we encourage Indigenous academics at all levels of training to seriously consider applying or adapting our co-developed Protocol for Working with Indigenous Communities so that the broader research community might begin to seriously examine the role of identity and identity fraud.

## **A PROTOCOL FOR WORKING WITH INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES**

### **Whereas:**

Indigenous peoples have lived in what is now known as Canada for countless millennia. The Government of Canada has constitutionally defined Aboriginal Peoples as Indian, Inuit, and Métis within s.35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*, but this definition does not fully capture the complexity of Indigenous Peoples’ identity as described by those Peoples.

Every individual has a right to self-identify based on culture, identity, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or other facet of their life. This right is adjoined with responsibility and accountability to all Indigenous Peoples and is relational, ethical, and contextual.

Existing paradigms, approaches, frameworks, legal definitions, etc. for confirming or validating identity are fraught with colonial underpinnings, racism, and discriminations. On their own, these approaches may be relationally unethical and contribute to race-shifting, secrecy, and the state’s ongoing legal erasure of our Peoples.

But considering that:

- The responsibilities, privileges, and burdens associated with seeking research funding and academic positions (including doctoral positions) reserved for Indigenous persons should be accorded to only those with Indigenous identity.
- Individuals who self-identify as Indigenous, especially in a research and academic context, have a responsibility to clearly articulate and declare their connections to established, legitimate Indigenous communities, thus confirming their connection to family and community.
- Indigenous researchers and/or academics should be supported to commit their time and efforts to guide, mentor, or supervise those who are Indigenous, if those students can fulfill their self-identification responsibilities as set out below.

## COMPONENTS AND COMMITMENTS OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Considering all of the above, we aim to provide plain language guidelines to assist discussions of assertions and claims of Indigenous identity, particularly in the academy. There is a growing practice of self-Indigenization and race-shifting creeping into these spaces and it is an abhorrent practice. An increasing number of non-Indigenous people are self-identifying as Indigenous for the sake of personal, professional, positional, and financial gain.

**We believe this protocol can begin the development of culturally appropriate, reciprocal, and transparent ways of ongoing engagement with Indigenous Peoples within the academy; and to pragmatically address claims of self-Indigenization.**

**Indigenous students commit to:**

- Provide, in writing or orally, a declaration of their familial connections to community;
- Provide reasonable assurances, in writing or orally, that the community or communities to which they are connected is consistent with the understanding of “Indigenous” maintained by the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, especially:
- “Self-identification as indigenous peoples at the individual level and accepted by the community as their member;
- Historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies;”<sup>6</sup>
- Provide, if requested, the name of a person or names of persons who can confirm their connection to the community/communities with which they claim affiliation or clearly articulate why this is not possible.

**Indigenous researchers/academics commit to:**

- Accepting all reasonable assurances and confirmations by students of their Indigeneity, which is predicated on trust, reciprocity, and good faith;
- Preferentially work with Indigenous students, based on the above commitments, in order to further advance, recognize, and strengthen the position of Indigenous researchers and their voices within the academe; and/or
- Supporting each other in their willingness or refusal to work with students based on their ability or inability, to meet with above-mentioned responsibilities.

## CONCLUSIONS

Indigenous Peoples, communities, and Nations are familiar with marginalization in discussions that have direct relevance to our existence, such as education and public policy. While the rhetoric of Nothing about us without us has emerged as a clarion call for centering ourselves within various arenas, it is still the case that our voices and our existences remain precarious in public dialogues.

Even while researching us, colonial institutions appear to be committed to excluding Indigenous Peoples at every stage of the research development.

In contrast, our labour is also in demand largely outside our communities. Indigenous Elders, knowledge keepers, community members, students, and academics are increasingly being asked to engage with Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers.

**But other than self-declarations of Indigeneity, there are few requirements to explain how one is actually Indigenous in post-secondary institutions.**

In our current colonial moment, research on Indigenous peoples – and the university itself – is deeply implicated in the direction of every conceivable facet ensnared by settler public policy, running the gamut of the social, economic, and cultural. As is well known, the history of Indigenous public policy has been impelled by non-Indigenous priorities and conducted by non-Indigenous sources with the purposes of civilization, assimilation, or death. We are committed to the continuation of Indigenous life as determined by Indigenous Peoples.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Leroux, D. (n.d.). Court cases: Powley-related “Eastern métis” cases in Québec, New Brunswick & Nova Scotia. Retrieved from [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1v0rY8VHS\\_PJRF8kHh4A\\_i49ad3OEXqwFWeuQYhD\\_dqc/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1v0rY8VHS_PJRF8kHh4A_i49ad3OEXqwFWeuQYhD_dqc/edit)

Leroux, D. (2019). *Distorted descent: White claims to Indigenous identity*. Winnipeg, Canada: University of Manitoba Press.

Native American and Indigenous Studies Association. (2015, September 15). NAISA council statement on Indigenous identity fraud. Retrieved from <https://www.naisa.org/about/documents-archive/previous-council-statements/>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The Tri-Council includes the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

<sup>2</sup>Deloria, V., Jr. (1969). *Custer died for your sins: An Indian manifesto*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.

<sup>3</sup>Mosby, I. (2013). Administering colonial science: Nutrition research and human biomedical experimentation in Aboriginal communities and residential schools, 1942–1952. *Social History*, 46(91), 145-172.

<sup>4</sup>Emberley, J. (2008). Skin: An assemblage on the wounds of knowledge, the scars of truth, and the limits of power. *ESC*, 34(1), 1-9.

<sup>5</sup>Stote, K. (2015). *An act of genocide: Colonialism and the sterilization of Aboriginal women*. Winnipeg, Canada: Fernwood.

<sup>6</sup>United Nations. (2006). Fact Sheet: Who are indigenous peoples? (United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, May 12, 2006). <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/unpfi-sessions-2/fifth-session-of-unpfi.html>