**RESEARCH IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES: AN OVERVIEW**

**by Simon Moss**

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| **Introduction** |

This document presents a series of guidelines that could help non-Indigenous researchers in particular conduct research in Indigenous communities. Nevertheless, the diversity of Indigenous communities is rich and extensive. The lessons and insights you gain about one community might not apply to another community. Consequently, nobody can develop a definitive guidebook on how to conduct research in Indigenous communities. Yet, this document—a summary of the videos created by Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers who have worked in communities—might offer some useful insights.

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| **Clarify your research interests and motives** |

Researchers may explore a variety of questions in Indigenous communities. Nevertheless, in general, the purpose of your research should be to facilitate the capacity of Indigenous communities to voice their concerns, share their solutions, and disseminate their knowledges. In contrast, the following table outlines some inappropriate motives of some researchers. This table also clarifies why these motives are inappropriate.

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| Inappropriate motives of some researchers | Why these motives are inappropriate |
| To evaluate or to implement their own solutions to the perceived problems of Indigenous communities | * The problems that researchers assume are concerning may diverge from the priorities of the members of these communities * The solutions that researchers assume may be helpful are often implausible or inappropriate * These solutions disregard the knowledge and insights that Indigenous communities have accrued over many decades and centuries |
| To experience an exotic and interesting culture | * The personal experience or enjoyment of researchers does not assist the community * These communities are often inundated with researchers, who intrude on their lives * Therefore, they would prefer to restrict research to programs that facilitate the growth and sustainability of the community |

Therefore, if you want to embark on this research, you should feel motivated to

* embrace the perspectives and insights you hear in the community
* appreciate your assumptions about the community could be misguided
* commit to actions that might assist the community

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| **Chose a suitable supervisor** |

Before you begin your research, you should organize an effective supervisor panel. You might have already organized one or more of your supervisors. But you might choose to include other supervisors as well. The following table outlines some of the qualities of effective supervisors. At least one, and preferably all, of your supervisors should exhibit these qualities. These qualities are relevant to all candidates, but especially pertinent to Indigenous candidates or to non-Indigenous candidates who would like to work in Indigenous communities.

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| Suitable qualities of excellent supervisors | Details |
| Fosters a trusting, open relationship | * You should feel your supervisors respect your perspectives * You should respect your supervisors * Your supervisors should encourage you to challenge their opinions * Your supervisors should be accessible and available when urgently needed |
| Provides a blend of clarity and autonomy | * Offers guidance on the practices you must observe or the regulations you must fulfil * But otherwise grants you the autonomy you need to adopt your own perspectives * Is attuned to when you need guidance and when you would prefer independence * Thus, acts more as a facilitator than a manager |
| Embraces diverse knowledges | * Does not impose their own perspectives but accommodate the needs of candidates * Embraces unfamiliar philosophies and methods * Appreciates the values, culture, and history of this community or similar communities * Learns in concert with you |
| Has acquired the relevant skills | * Can offer support on how to prepare and write a thesis * Has worked in Indigenous communities or is Indigenous |

Depending on your topic, you could establish an Indigenous Reference Committee to assist you in guiding your research in culturally respectful ways.

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| **Read about similar research conducted by Indigenous researchers** |

Typically, before you start your research, you would review the relevant literature. If you plan to conduct research in an Indigenous community, you should diligently review the writing of Indigenous peoples, scholars, academics, and researchers—perhaps including Indigenous peoples outside Australia. Seek advice from your supervisors or other Indigenous researchers on which literature might be relevant to your research.

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| **Organize permission to visit the relevant communities** |

To organize permission to visit the relevant communities, you need to initiate a series of activities.

**Decide on which communities to visit**

First, you need to decide which communities might be receptive to your research. To reach this decision, you should consider these principles

* If possible, choose only a community that is familiar to one or more of your supervisors or colleagues.
* In particular, choose a community in which one of supervisors or colleagues send you the contact details to someone in this community
* If possible, choose a community in which members are receptive to research but have not been inundated with research

**Contact someone in this community**

Hopefully, someone has sent you the contact details of a relevant person in the community. You could then email this person to arrange a telephone call or simply call this person. During this telephone call

* You could briefly convey your research interests. For example, you might indicate that you are interested in completing a PhD in cardiac health.
* Convey your desire to listen to members and learn from the community
* Indicate the outcomes you would like to achieve—such as develop some health resources
* Ask whether you feel the community might be interested in your research

**Organize permits**

If the community is likely to be interested in your research, you then need to organize permits to visit. To seek permits, you need to contact the Land Councils, such as the Northern Land Council or Central Land Council. Specifically

* Google “Wikipedia Land Council” to identify the relevant Land Council
* Visit the relevant website of this council.
* On the contact page, click a link to “Apply for a permit” or something similar
* Complete the online application form.

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| **Learn about the community** |

Before you visit the community, you need to learn about the people, history, and protocols of this community. You can derive this information from supervisors, colleagues, Land Councils, the office in this community, and many other sources. For example, you should clarify the protocols around gender. To illustrate

* In some communities, early in the project, male researchers would primarily speak to elder males, and female researchers would primarily speak to elder females.
* As the project continues, this principle might no longer apply

Furthermore, the following table outlines some of the logistics you should consider and the resources you should organize before you visit.

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| Logistics or resources | Details |
| Consider transport carefully | * If driving, utilize a 4WD and complete a 4WD course * If flying, arrange someone to drive you from the airport—because the airstrip is often some distance from the community and sparse |
| Food and drink | * Bring water; water might not be available at the airstrip * Bring your own food if your diet is restricted, but appreciate that refrigeration might be limited * Realize that groceries tend to be expensive |
| Accommodation and electricity | * Organize accommodation in advance; accommodation tends to be limited and not always what you may be accustomed to * If camping, seek advice on spots—to avoid locations that are sacred or teeming with spiders for example * Electricity might not be reliable |
| Money | * Bring cash. You should not leave cash on the table, because people will assume you are offering this cash * ATMs are often not available or working * If people ask for money, cigarettes, or anything else, you are welcome to say no if you prefer |
| Health | * If you feel at all ill, postpone your visit * You do not want to infect the community * And health services are likely to be very modest * Always bring insect repellent and sunscreen |
| Risks | * Determine whether scabies is common in the community * If so, always use your own bedding and towels—and wash your clothes regularly—to diminish the likelihood you will contract scabies. * Seek advice on other precautions as well |
| Clothes | * Both men and women should dress modestly and, for example, not wear tight or revealing clothes * For example, women should not wear shorts or short skirts * Wear clothes that are branded with the university or school, so people understand your role * Wear closed shoes to protect your feet * Bring a hat |

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| **Initial contact** |

When you arrive at the community, you will hopefully have arranged someone to drive you to your accommodation. Ask this person to introduce you to someone who might be interested in your research. But, in the first few hours or even days, you should start to develop trust and relationships. Some Indigenous communities refer to this time as *warming the ground*. During this period

* You can mention your research but only briefly. When you mention your research, always refer to your intention to collaborate and listen to the community
* Instead, your aim is to learn about the community—about anything people like to discuss
* If invited, participate in their activities and demonstrate your willingness to embrace the culture
* At this time, or before you arrive, seek the names of potential co-researchers and translators who you could engage and pay. Seek advice from the university and community about suitable rates.

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| **Develop relationships with co-researchers and translators** |

You will need the assistance of one or more co-workers and translators. Often, the same person can be a co-worker and translator. This person will be vital to all the key phases of your research as the following table outlines

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| Phase | Role |
| Before data collection | This person will help you clarify the community interest in your project |
| During data collection | This person will not only translate the questions and answers, but will also help navigate cultural disparities and offer you methodological advice.  This person might even need to ask members of the community more questions to clarify their answers, because individuals utilize traditional words that are not as common in the community today |
| After data collection | This person may help you interpret the data and will evaluate your interpretations |

Because this person is so important to your research, you need to acknowledge this person appropriately in all publications; payment is not sufficient to demonstrate this respect. Indeed, his work can be exhausting for the co-researcher who needs to shift between cultures and navigate a variety of complexities. The research might even expose this person to various risks. Consequently, do not inundate this person with too many demands

**Develop the relationship first**

Before you start your research, you should first establish a strong, trusting relationship with this person. You might converse or consume tea together, for example. This relationship is important because

* this person needs to learn your language and mannerisms to interpret you correctly
* likewise, you need to learn the language and mannerisms of this person
* that is, you might speak the same language but use certain words or customs differently
* this person needs to appreciate the purpose of your research; this person can then initiate activities to help you achieve your goals

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| **Develop a shared research purpose** |

Some researchers arrive to a community with their own research questions. But, unless these questions resonate with the community, members will not be able to convey meaningful answers. The research will be futile. Instead, you need to converse with individuals and groups in this community to clarify their perspectives and priorities. For example

* you might sit with a group of individuals from the community, perhaps in the shade of a tree, to discuss matters that relate to your research
* during this discussion, they might listen to your perspective and you would listen to their perspective
* over time, a shared understanding might evolve
* they might then relay this research to other members of the community

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| **Integrate their practices and methodologies to design your research** |

Many non-Indigenous researchers do not appreciate that Indigenous communities have develop their own conceptualizations, methodologies, and techniques to conduct research: Research is not confined to Western societies. Therefore, whether you are an Indigenous or non-Indigenous, you should embrace these methods because

* these methods are more familiar to the community and, therefore, will generate more penetrating data rather than superficial responses
* these methods enable co-researchers to utilize their strengths
* the conceptualizations, methodologies, and techniques of these communities have often been overlooked in the past—and thus might be more likely to generate insight now
* traditional Western research has not been entirely fruitful in the past

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| **Develop a plan to implement the research** |

To implement the research

* the co-researcher specifically, and the community more broadly, will consider who can guide the research—sometimes called the backbone.
* this backbone may include family members, elder, and other relevant individuals
* the backbone is not a formal committee, who record minutes and the like, but more an informal group who respond when needed
* the co-researcher and backbone can then decide how to conduct the research and who will participate—and then communicate this information to you
* these practices encourage members to share their perspectives, culminating in rich data and insights

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| **Plain language statements and consent forms** |

To conduct research, all researchers need to submit an ethics application, together with a plain language statement and, sometimes, a consent form. The plain language statement outlines the research to individuals who might participate. If they agree to participate, these individuals sign a consent form. However, in many Indigenous communities, besides limited English, you need to consider several complications

* First, some older people may not be able to read or write any language. For many Indigenous individuals, English may be a third or fourth language; they may be able to speak and understand, but not read or write, English
* Second, even when people understand English, they might not understand all the concepts. For example, the plain language statement might refer to confidentiality. But, confidentiality, as understood from a Western perspective, might not be relevant to an Indigenous community
* Third, to be polite and to save face, people might pretend to understand the plain language statement and consent form; the consent is thus not informed
* Fourth, some people experience hearing impairments and, therefore, might not hear soft speech
* Fifth, in many Indigenous communities, permission at one time does not guarantee permission at other times.

The following table thus presents some guidelines to follow whenever you present a plain language statement and consent form.

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| Principle | Example |
| Present orally | Although you might have prepared a plain language statement and consent form on paper—in English or in language—a suitable person should convey this information orally in the language they speak. Perhaps someone can construct an audio recording of these forms. The audio might include sentences like “Hello, my name is …” but translated to the language they speak |
| Reduce abstract terms to more tangible objects or activities | Do not refer to confidentiality. Instead, specify how you will maintain confidentiality, such as store the notes in a locked box. |
| Refer to tangible objects or activities they have observed | If you indicate the research might be communicated over the internet, some people might not be able to grasp this notion. So, use an analogy that is relevant to all members of this community |
| Continue to seek permission | Each time you interview someone, seek permission about whether this individual is willing to participate, regardless of whether this person signed a consent form previously |

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| **Conduct the interviews** |

Before you start your research, you might have read some literature on how to conduct interviews. Interviews are like conversations—and so they are natural and simple to conduct. Nevertheless, in indigenous communities, you should be aware of several complications:

* whenever possible, engage a translator to conduct the interviews in the language they speak; even people who speak English will offer more penetrating answers in their preferred language
* sometimes, the interviews will need to be postponed hours, days, or weeks because of various unforeseen events, such as sorry business if someone dies
* seek advice on where to conduct the interviews; some spots are sacred because of ceremonies, for example
* seek advice about avoidance relationships—pairs of people who cannot speak to each other. That is, do not approach someone if this person shares an avoidance relationship with another person to whom you are speaking
* recognize that some knowledge is sacred—so seek advice on whether some questions are inappropriate and may encroach on this knowledge
* even translators might not understand you if you speak too rapidly or utilize jargon as well as ambiguous terms; speak slowly, carefully, simply, and precisely.

Indeed, during the interviews, if you feel the translator is experiencing challenges, you can stop to confer to this person. You can discuss the meaning of your questions or intent to help the translator.

You should recognize that many participants will have experienced trauma. Even the associations of some participants with research may be traumatic, as proponents of decolonising approaches reveal. To limit the likelihood that you might amplify this trauma

* check that participants feel safe; they might, for example, prefer to answer questions in a group
* ask questions in a location in which participants feel safe
* do not ask questions that participants do not feel authorised to answer; sometimes, only elders can answer certain questions
* do not rush participants; they need time and space to contemplate

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| **Analysing and reporting the data** |

You should not analyse the data alone. Instead, you should complete the activities that appear in the following table.

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| Activity | Example |
| Analyse the data with the co-researcher or translator | That is, read the data or listen to recordings together to identify codes, themes, categories, and insights; consequently, this person can clarify any misconceptions. For example, you might discover that, because of a misunderstanding, this person asked a slightly different question to what you intended |
| After you summarize the data, return to the community to verify your report | If the community feels your report does not reflect what they intended to communicate, you might need to collect more data; the community might organize this procedure too |

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| **Final words** |

After you have completed your research, the community will expect you to act as soon as you can. That is, if you planned to introduce a program, develop some resource, or relay this report to the government, they anticipate immediate action.

Yet, in practice, because of constraints in funding or impending deadlines, researchers may not be able to fulfil all these standards. But regardless, researchers can always question their assumptions and adopt the perspective of this community as respectfully as possible. For further information, watch the informative and engaging videos at <https://www.cdu.edu.au/indigenous-leadership/ripci>

Finally, to maintain the reputation of you and your institution—and to optimize the benefits of your research—you must deliver all the commitments you promised the community. If you cannot deliver these commitments on time, update the community and communicate as transparently as possible.