

# Indigenous Futures: Research Sovereignty in a Changing Social Science Landscape

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# Executive Summary

The issuance of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada report provides an opportunity and clear need to reaffirm the right of Indigenous communities to be equal partners and leaders in research within their communities. Similarly, Indigenous communities have articulated the principles and policies that should guide research within their communities as well as the ways in which social science methods, including statistical approaches, can be harnessed to promote self-determination among Indigenous communities. Meanwhile, social science research is becoming increasingly technical, often using complex research designs and highly technical methodological approaches, including specialized quantitative analyses of experimental and observational data. Institutional, organizational and human resources are required to support Indigenous Peoples in their development of capacity to critique, participate in and lead social science research in their communities. Without these types of resources, Indigenous perspectives are at risk of being ignored or undervalued, particularly in instances of evidence-based policy making.

Specifically, we ask:

1. What are the primary methodological approaches used across social science disciplines to study Indigenous issues in Canada?
2. To what extent do Indigenous peoples and communities in Canada actively participate in social science research in their communities, including by methodological approach?
3. Where are the institutional, organizational, and human capital capacity competencies and gaps in Canada, and how does the Indigenous research landscape in Canada compare to those in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand?

To address our 3 research questions outlined above, we compiled and analyzed two new bibliographic databases:

- *Canadian Social Science Indigenous Research (CSSIR)* database of peer-reviewed and grey literatures in multiple social science disciplines that include Indigenous peoples or communities in Canada as the primary population of interest between 2005 and 2015
- *Indigenous Social Science Research Policy (ISSRP)* database compiles existing peer-reviewed and grey literature on the existing institutional, organizational, and human resources related to social science research methodologies in Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand published between 2005 and 2017.

## **What are the main approaches and levels of Indigenous participation in social science research?**

We construct and analyze a new bibliographic database of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and grey literature published in the last decade on Indigenous issues in Canada. We developed our classification system from the following understandings about social science research (for a discussion of these issues in qualitative research, see Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba 2011). Our classification system was also informed by our understanding of Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies. While there is not one Indigenous methodology, but many (Kovach 2010), Indigenous methodologies often share an epistemological understanding of knowledge as relational, as between peoples or between people and the natural world (Wilson 2001). We classified over 500 journal articles according to their epistemologies, evidence sources, and methods of analysis. We also coded the gender, organizational affiliation, and Indigenous self-identification of the first five authors of each article. Additional study characteristics, such as

study setting (e.g., urban, on reserve) and whether an Indigenous language was used were also coded. Finally, we coded the level of Indigenous community participation, including a separate category of studies led by Indigenous communities.

Our preliminary analysis of the CSSIR database suggests that there is significant room for improvement in the ways in which Indigenous peoples participate in social science research about their communities in Canada. First, half of all research does not include any interaction with Indigenous peoples. On the one hand, theoretical or conceptual studies or those relying on only primary and secondary sources are not necessarily less supportive of Indigenous research sovereignty. On the other hand, such research could benefit from greater input and interaction with Indigenous peoples and communities. Second, research that involves interaction with Indigenous research participants could go much further to go beyond minimum requirements of Tri-Council policies and to deepen meaningful Indigenous participation in research. Third, relatively little research is led by Indigenous communities, uses Indigenous languages, or includes authors who self-identify as Indigenous. This, too, suggests room for improvement in supporting and promoting research participation by Indigenous peoples and scholars.

The results also suggest that there is an association between higher levels of participation by Indigenous communities and the use of Indigenous epistemologies and evidence sources and analysis methods that are consistent with greater participation of Indigenous peoples. Likewise, when Indigenous communities or authors directly lead research, studies more often include Indigenous perspectives and evidence and methods that directly engage Indigenous peoples and communities.

### **What institutional, organizational, and human capital resources support Indigenous research in Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand?**

Institutions or formal and informal rules, policies and norms that shape research on Indigenous Peoples include relevant research policy, ethical regulations, incentives, and epistemologies. These institutions present several similarities across the four countries included in this report. In the last four decades, all four countries initiated a transition from colonial studies that considered Indigenous Peoples as research objects to decolonizing research through the recognition of Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous people as researchers. This movement is part of the demand from Indigenous nations and communities for their right to self-determination. As a result, all four countries have developed ethical guidelines to regulate and oversee research on Indigenous individuals and communities. Despite the development of ethical regulation and some funding programs that acknowledge Indigenous knowledge and rights to decide on their own research, some other academic rules create conflicts. Researchers working with participatory research and Indigenous epistemologies still have greater difficulties obtaining funding for their studies and publishing their work in mainstream high-impact peer reviewed journals.

Organizations that promote/conduct research and/or researcher training in Indigenous studies have experienced recent changes in all four countries. Indigenous organizations were established to promote participatory research and the recognition of Indigenous knowledge. Also, with the exception of Australia, all countries have seen the expansion of Indigenous-led tertiary institutions that have widely contributed to the Indigenousization of the curriculum and the consolidation of Indigenous scholarship. However, these changes have been insufficient to grant full recognition to Indigenous knowledge and increase the research capacity of Indigenous

communities. Participatory research and research partnerships still do not enjoy the same status and recognition of traditional research and universities do not have sufficiently skilled scholars to conduct these kinds of studies.

Despite changes in institutions and organizations that shape Indigenous research, gaps of human capacity remain in all four countries. While literature on human capacity for social science Indigenous research is scarce, mainly composed of policy-oriented reports that focus on initial levels of postsecondary education (non-degree and bachelor programs), it shows that there is a pipeline problem that starts with high school completion and extends to faculty recruitment and promotion. In all four countries, this pipeline is attributed to limited funding for postsecondary Indigenous education, lack of culturally relevant career guidance, neglect of Indigenous knowledge and values at mainstream universities, and persistent racism. Excepting Australia, all countries have developed Indigenous tertiary institutions that have contributed to increased Indigenous participation in higher education. Yet, these institutions are often underfunded and have difficulties attracting and retaining faculty. Increased funding is another common solution but at least in the case of Canada and the US, such increases are constrained by the overlapping of responsibilities between provinces (states), the federal level, and Indigenous Nations.

Overall, while the development of ethics statements and policies has been a sign of significant progress, Canada still falls short of full recognition of Indigenous knowledge. To achieve it, some lessons could be learned from other countries, such as the Indigenization of the curriculum through Indigenous-led pedagogical innovations and the participation of Indigenous individuals (e.g. Elders) in university governance as implemented in New Zealand. Also, though numbers of Indigenous scholars in Canada are comparable to the US and Australia, Canada could increase its number of Indigenous scholars, following models used in Australia and elsewhere. Finally, although none of the analyzed countries has solved the conflict between promoting participatory, Indigenous-led research and mainstream academic metrics, Indigenous-led institutions could offer lessons to revise these metrics and harmonize academic success with community –based research and scholarship.

### **Key messages**

- Social science researchers should be encouraged to deepen the participation of Indigenous communities in their research.
- Social science researchers studying Indigenous issues should be trained in Indigenous perspectives and encouraged to incorporate Indigenous participation in their studies, especially when studies are grounded in mainstream disciplinary approaches and methods.
- Researchers should be transparent and report their ethics approvals and processes, and editors and publishers should encourage and support such transparency.
- Gatekeepers, like article reviewers and journal editors, should recognize the value of participatory research that includes Indigenous perspectives, and university policies should recognize epistemological and methodological biases in mainstream, disciplinary publications and should ensure that Indigenous scholars and research are not devalued or disadvantaged.
- Universities should foster equitable knowledge exchange between social scientists and Indigenous communities, including around issues of epistemology and methodology.