
Some Ethical and Procedural Requirements for Research by Westerners among Indigenous People

Jim Harries

PhD, University of Birmingham, UK

Adjunct Faculty, William Carey International University, Pasadena, California

Chairman, Alliance for Vulnerable Mission

Missionary, East Africa

“Research is still a monster that can only be tamed by intelligent white researchers,”¹ that “has trapped [indigenous] people within a cultural definition which does not connect with ... oral traditions ... or lived reality,”² leaving them to be “the other.”³

Introduction

Can accepted mainstream research methodologies be used regardless of cultural and language differences? Insights articulated in books on research methodology are regularly used in the exploration of indigenous cultures. People of those indigenous cultures can take, once they have known English, those same guidelines and apply them to their own research. This article suggests that, unfortunately, this practice can result in specificities of research discourse being lost in a cloud of jargon. To use Ryen’s words: “the discourses and debates in the West tend to get re-cited and recycled in terms of the substantive realities in other societies and cultures.”⁴ This results in, as Chilisa “noticed ... two knowledge systems in operation, one that resonated with the researched and another that was academic and informed by Western disciplines.”⁵

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indigenous (majority world) citizens be encouraged to follow research methodologies devised in the Western (first world)?⁶ Could these not be “imperial legacies of Western knowledge” that exclude aspirations of indigenous people?⁷ Should Western researchers assume that the principles of research they apply to their own communities simply transfer when they carry out research interculturally? Principles of research ethics, such as the need for informed consent, are often “contested in the West,”⁸ so why export them to the South as if they are universal common sense? Tshiveletsho’s study asks how one will get consent from the spirits who possess mediums!⁹ We need to dialogue on “what is included or not” in guidelines given to the indigenous world.¹⁰ This article focuses especially on Western scholars who are assigned to, interested in, or motivated to carry out research among indigenous people.

1. J. Zeelen, “Common grounds: inter-cultural aspects of social intervention” in: *Indilinga: African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems* 1: 7–18, 2002, 68.

2. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonising Methodologies: research and indigenous peoples*. (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1999), 170.

3. M. Gaotlhobogwe, T.E. Major, S. Koloi-Keaikitse, and B. Chilisa, “Conceptualising Evaluation in African Contexts,” 47-62, in: F. Cram, K.A. Tibbetts, and J. LaFrance, (eds). *Indigenous Evaluation: new directions for evaluation*, 2018, 159, 50.

4. Anne Ryen, “Do Western Research Ethics work in Africa? A discussion about not taking ‘the taken for granted’ for granted,” in: *Mosenodi*, 15(1 & 2), 2007, 31-45, 34.

5. (Bagele Chilisa, *Indigenous Research Methodologies* (London: Sage, 2012). Chilisa does not mention the implication that these two systems might benefit from being in two languages, i.e., the academic in Western language(s), and the one of the “researched” in indigenous language(s). For more on this, see below.

6. My focus in the majority world is on Africa. In the first world, my focus is on the USA/UK.

7. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd Edition. (London and New York: Zed Books, 2012. Kindle version.)

8. Ryen “Do Western,” 37.

9. B. Tshireletso, “The Mazenge Spirit.” Unpublished thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirement of the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Theology, University of Botswana, 2001.

10. Ryen “Do Western,” 43.

Whether “pursuit of knowledge” itself actually necessarily brings benefits, is a key issue that researchers may ignore at their peril. For some indigenous people, this is questioned.¹¹ Today’s valuations of knowledge for its own sake, and the assumption that there is “universal truth” on which one can build, should be recognized to be a relatively recent insight for many. Such notion of truth is inspired by Christianity¹²: “Western ontology is based on one reality” arising from the West’s history in monotheistic theology, whereas “African [ontology is based on] multiple realities” says,¹³ (although Gaotlhobogwe does not overtly recognize any connection of this to theology). Because the understanding that there are multiple realities means that “theorizing on [their] own existence and realities is not something which many indigenous people assume is possible,”¹⁴ there is an important sense in which Christianizing a people is a necessary prerequisite to expecting them to be able to see value in research. Smith mentions that churches are thick on the ground among the Maori with whom she is concerned,¹⁵ but does not further explore the implications of this discovery.

I here consider key issues that should be reflected in the design and implementation of research, that are to avoid it being “implicated in the marginalization of indigenous people.”¹⁶ Particularly in focus are that:

1. Researchers practice their trade in an ethical manner.
2. Research results be accurate, such that action or further research based on the results obtained continue building helpful truth.

These two considerations clearly overlap: what is inaccurate may well, supposing a Christian worldview in which there is a nature of reality that renders “pursuit of knowledge” comprehensible in the first place, be unethical.

Research into conditions in the majority world should take account of context. That is to say for our purposes specifically—it should take account of contextual differences between the Western and the indigenous. To ignore contextual differences, i.e., to implement one’s research in the indigenous *as if* it is part of the West, is clearly to introduce bias. To avoid such bias, one’s research into the indigenous should draw on the outcomes of prior research. Specifically, a researcher should begin with a foundation in what is already known in a context, and then engage their research to further push the boundaries of knowledge. In particular, research

11. Patti Lather, “Praise for the First Edition,” in: Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonising Methodologies: research and indigenous peoples*. (Second Edition.) (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1999).

12. Kwesi Kwaa Prah, “Introduction: winning souls through the written word,” 1-34, in: Kwesi Kwaa Prah, (ed.) *The Role of Missionaries in the Development of African Languages*. (Cape Town: CASAS, 2009), 4-5.

13. Gaotlhobogwe, “Conceptualising,” 51.

14. Smith *Decolonising*, 29.

15. Smith *Decolonising*, 96.

16. Donna M. Mertens, Fiona Cram, and Bagele Chilisa, (eds.) *Indigenous Pathways into Social Research: voices of a new generation* (London: Routledge, 2016).

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into the indigenous by a person from the West must in some way compensate for a greater degree of unknown than does parallel research that is engaged in more familiar Western contexts.

I begin in this article by looking at known qualities of the indigenous. These are case studies for the kinds of *research compensation* that subsequently become my major focus. Evidently others are also practicing “research compensation”: “The intellectual debates in qualitative research over the past few decades offer interesting, sensitive alternatives to analyze data from complex local contexts.”¹⁷ I then consider key issues pertaining to choice of language in research, and the way in which translation between indigenous and Western languages is to be approached. The following section considers how to compensate for implications of the power of the researcher, that typically arises as a result of their connections and influence. I consider the implications of having research backed by powerful institutions, and advocate an alternative, which is research conducted by vulnerable individuals with a long-term commitment to the indigenous people concerned.

Contextual features of the majority world that are to be presupposed

I will take six features of indigenous communities as case studies. These case studies are examples of what might be particular or peculiar about the indigenous as against the Western. I take the six case studies as truisms—especially with respect to much of sub-Saharan Africa. If any of my points are under dispute, then my reader can take them as just-examples.¹⁸

First, indigenous people are more holistic in their thinking than are Western people whose worldview is dualistic.¹⁹ Holists,

17. Anne Ryen, “Exploring or Exporting: qualitative methods in times of globalisation,” 439-453, in: *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 14(6), November 2011, 444.

18. If my reader considers these case studies to be not “true,” then they can still take them as illustrative examples of what might be true.

19. I take it that their Christian heritage has given the Western a more dualistic worldview. (A debate, perhaps initiated by Weber [Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1930.)] on the relationship between Protestant Christianity and dualism and development in the contemporary modern sense, continues in many circles.)

or monists, as I am here understanding them, do not draw a clear line between the material and the spiritual, or between a person and the context they are in.²⁰ Such co-identity between a person or spirit and *real* things, will affect how language is used, and how many research questions and issues are comprehended.²¹

Second, for many indigenous citizens, Western languages are learned in school, and not at home from their parents, relatives, friends, and so on.²² Because indigenous people are monists whereas Westerners are dualists, correct use of Western languages by indigenous people requires using a Western language other than as they would *instinctively* or *naturally* communicate.²³ This means that, should they use a Western language “naturally,” (in the same ways as they use their own languages and according to their innate thinking), then for Western people, there will be something wrong with the way they are communicating. That is—they will not be rightly understood; they risk being misunderstood; they seem to say things in a wrong way.

Third, indigenous peoples are almost invariably in a relationship of *unhealthy dependency* on the West.²⁴ Because of such dependency, research on indigenous peoples from the West carries the risk that the West will be provided with answers that seek to perpetuate the flow of resources on which they are dependent. Typically, such flow is dependent on some kind of charity, requiring the indigenous people to “plead poverty.” This is like research by an employer on his employees; it is fraught with the risk of the research resulting in answers that perpetuate lucrative employment, regardless of truth or otherwise.

Fourth, the indigenous people may well live in awe of their Western compatriots. Certainly, in parts of Africa with which I am familiar, the West seems to be the source of almost all the “good things” people have. From radios, to computers, to shoes, wedding rings, the Bible, reading and literacy, iron sheets for houses, burnt bricks—all that technology seems to come from the West. The Westerner can as a result appear very God-like. How someone came up with all that stuff may be well beyond indigenous people’s comprehension, although for them to admit as much may not be wise.²⁵

20. I take holism and monism as essentially synonyms.

21. I meet problems of language in the writing of this article. “Real” in English, implies being a member of the material side of the dualism. This sentence is obviously written from a Western perspective, as will be my practice throughout this article, and as is “the norm” in write-ups of research on the indigenous using English.

22. Other Western languages include French, Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish and so on. My focus is on English.

23. This is reflected in the widely observed fact that much learning using Western languages in indigenous countries, occurs by rote.

24. I consider indigenous dependency on the West to be *unhealthy* for various reasons. For more on unhealthy dependency, see Josephat Charagu, “Overcoming Unhealthy Dependency,” *fivestonesglobal*, <https://fivestonesglobal.org/overcoming-unhealthy-dependency/>, (2015) accessed March 5, 2018, who tells us that unhealthy dependency produces: “slaves and victims of hopelessness and desperation.”

25. There are many reasons it may not be wise. Specifically,

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Fifth, related to the above, causation in the West is said to be physical. This is implicitly believed by many Western people, despite in detail its obviously being erroneous.²⁶ Indigenous people realize from the outset that there is more going on in the world than merely physical forces. For example, in much of Africa, envy is recognized as a salient social force, which in English often comes to be known as witchcraft.²⁷ The indigenous having a celebrated greater orientation to non-physical forces such as envy, results in a default discrediting of Western philosophy’s orientation to positivism and Newtonian-type physics. These kinds of default undermining of Western civilization perpetuate the need for indigenous citizens to follow the West by imitation rather than as a result of understanding.

Sixthly, and related to the above, much of the indigenous world operates on the patron/client system. In this system, wealthy, powerful people on whom one is dependent are to be praised. The patron/client system does not lead to rational socio-economic development. Hence, Western interests tend to be in favor of its undermining. In indigenous ways of life however, patron/client relationships are not considered transient. They are more likely to be taken as normal for perpetuity. As a result, a barrage of praise to the West, which is run-of-the-mill for its “clients,” can, as far as serious Western research is concerned, be little more than a pack of lies.

admitting ignorance can result in loss of opportunities to lead projects initiated by Western people for the indigenous.

26. Newtonian physics continues to be hegemonic in Western thinking, despite its repeatedly being undermined by more recent scholars, starting with the most renowned Albert Einstein.

27. Jim Harries, “Witchcraft, Envy, Development, and Christian Mission in Africa.” *Missiology: An International Review*, 2012, 40(2): 129–139.

Language and translation

Educational systems in indigenous communities being what they are—imitations of Western schooling—many indigenous people spend prime years of their youth learning about and preparing for encounters with the West. They are being prepared to meet foreigners from the West on Westerners' own terms (i.e., using English). Research conducted on indigenous people by Westerners using Western languages such as English easily becomes research into the effectiveness with which the educational system has enabled indigenous people to conceal their actual identity and to present themselves as if they are dualists (i.e., have a Western worldview). Ironically, Smith's classic advocacy for indigenous research seems almost oblivious to this issue, so that the language in which research is to be carried out is barely mentioned.²⁸ More aware of this issue perhaps, Kovach suggests that one should "respect indigenous research frameworks *on their own terms*" (my emphasis)²⁹ for which I take her as meaning "as expressed in their own languages (cultures)."

It should be clear that when research from the West, which seeks to identify truth, is faced with this multi-year professionally prepared almost universalized (in the indigenous) screen of pretense called "Western education," that some compensation or adjustment is needed for indigenous truth to be ascertained. Ryen gives us an example of how a discourse may not mean what it appears to mean: An indigenous Tanzanian says that "medicine men ... are just stories,"³⁰ but then can distinguish real from fake medicine men! Whatever is the indigenous origin of the term "just stories" seems to imply something quite different to the English translation we are given. Ryen, wants to get around this imposing of foreign categories by seeking to find out what is in Tanzania "taken for granted."³¹

Indigenous people usually rightly realize that there are correct ways of using English.³² So-called pidgins are not as highly respected as is the ability to use the grammar, pronunciation, and linguistic-flow of native-speakers of English.³³ Westerners, who

28. Smith, *Decolonizing*. She does mention the importance of recovery of the Maori language on page 39, but does not further develop that point.

29. Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: characteristics, conversations, and contexts*. (London: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

30. Ryen "Exploring," 444.

31. Ryen "Exploring," 445.

32. Saeed Rezaei, Parvaneh Khosravizadeh, and Zahra Mottaghi, "Attitudes toward World Englishes among Iranian English Language Learners." *Asian Englishes*, 2018. Rezaei et al. found themselves, and cite other scholars who have made the same observation, that non-native English speakers respect native-Englishes more than they do other versions of English.

33. There continues to be much debate in scholarly circles, as to whether world-Englishes need to be linked to native-speakers' English. https://www.academia.edu/35986228/Native_and_Non-Native_Teachers_in_English_Language_Classrooms_Professional_Challenges_and_Teacher_Education_Juan_de_Dios_Martinez_Agudo_ed._De_Gruyter_Mouton_auto=download&campaign=upload_email. The desire of indigenous people that their English be based on a Western

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tend to control resources, *do* care that English be used "properly," so want to hear certain things said in certain ways. This becomes a problem for non-native English-speaking people. If English is used by indigenous citizens for indigenous purposes, it will inevitably appropriate local syntax, vocabulary, grammatical structures, thought-forms, logic, and worldviews. All this will create a gap with Western native-English. In turn, any honing of English to achieve Western credibility will inevitably result in English being less effective at reflecting local indigenous reality.³⁴

Discourse in non-Western contexts (i.e., in indigenous contexts) reflects, at least to an extent, local realities unfamiliar to the West. Thus indigenous uses of Western languages need to pass through a process of translation before they make correct sense to the West. If English is the language used by the indigenous people, one faces the thorny prospect of translation being within-a-language; translation from English to English. This process easily becomes so problematic, as to be in practice almost totally impractical.³⁵ This impracticality results in such translation falling between the slats. Unfortunately, untranslated indigenous uses of Western languages are an extremely poor medium through which to learn in the course of intercultural research by the West into the indigenous: Not translating between Englishes results in an ignoring and concealing of many of the very differences that, in theory at least, a researcher might be looking for.

standard, seems to be unquenchable.

34. This is a point made by Lawrence Venuti in many of his writings, including: Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: a history of translation. Second Edition*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

35. Jim Harries, "Building Castles in the Sky: A Case for the use of Indigenous Languages (and Resources) in Western Mission-partnerships to Africa." (Presented by Jim Harries at the Vulnerable Mission workshop, Pasadena, California, September 24, 2013. in *Global Missiology*, April 2016, 3(13). <http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/viewFile/1883/4192> [accessed October 26, 2020], 6.) One reason it is impractical, is because in popular perception, the differences that a translator between two Englishes works with, are not "supposed to" exist.

Chilisa et al.³⁶ seek for “discussion of the ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions that inform research from an indigenous relational perspective.” They also concede that such should “co-exist” with rather than be integrated into Western knowledge “because these are two distinctly different systems.”³⁷ This ties in with Smith’s category, by which indigenous research should be seen as distinct.³⁸ These authors see a distinct system developing within the *same* language, English. Their discussion of its wider ramifications—two mutually incompatible global Englishes, one for the West and another for the indigenous world—is not explored in more detail.

Because “stories emerge within the parameters of particular contexts,”³⁹ I suggest that research into an indigenous community should always be engaged using an indigenous language. Use of that indigenous language enables presupposing “particular indigenous contexts” in a way that a Western language just cannot match. To engage using a Western language is to in terms essentially of accuracy, severely limit if not totally disqualify one’s research before one has begun: Kovach totally failed to identify with “outsiders view of the indigenous ... [that is expressed in English as] “all natives are this, all natives are that.”⁴⁰ A prerequisite for accurate (ethical) Western research into the indigenous, is that it must be carried out by a Western person familiar with an indigenous tongue.⁴¹ The indigenous language needs to be learned in cultural context, and not simply from books, tapes, etc. Certainly the role of the indigenous language is to enable participants to understand. Merely translating into indigenous tongues at some point in the process hardly enables profound understanding, though, if the whole research process has been designed in Western English! For more on the importance of the use of indigenous languages see Gaotlhobogwe et al.⁴²

Note that, given my argument already presented above, the person who is required to do the research using the indigenous language, cannot be the indigenous person. If the indigenous person performs the research, then our problem remains, whenever they seek to translate their results into English. It is the Western researcher who, in order to translate indigenous truth into his language or worldview, must engage the translation process. A researcher endeavors to widen his people’s knowledge and understanding. To extend the boundaries of something, requires a knowledge of what was there before. Because, in principle, indigenous nationals do *not* know Western contexts, if the people to be informed are Western people, then it is the Western scholar

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who must be bicultural.⁴³ This can render use of indigenous research assistants illegitimate. Research by the Western scholar must be conducted in the indigenous language, to be subsequently translated into the Western language by the same scholar.

Truth and power

In the patron/client system that is widespread around the indigenous world, answers to questions and communication of truth varies according to the power of the person being addressed. This is because the patron/client system puts people into a kind of contract. The wealthy agree to respond benevolently (in some measure) to pleas for help, in exchange for the loyalty and praise of their clients. This system is not generative of *truth* as it is known in the West. Neither does it orient people to development as known in the West; it results in ongoing dependency on patrons. As mentioned above, widespread educational systems among indigenous people teach indigenous nationals what are the expected responses to Western worldviews, including the language in which powerful foreign institutions and interests to discover truth about the indigenous.

One could add that it is anyway difficult for a Western scholar interested in an indigenous nation to get a sufficiently deep grasp of an indigenous language to acquire thick understanding of that indigenous context.⁴⁴ Thick in-context learning of language is demanding in many ways, and takes long-term singular dedication. The evident solution to the dilemma presented in this article, of the Westerner acquiring a true understanding of the indigenous, is that the West should encourage its citizens to devote themselves to indigenous research in a *vulnerable way*. That is, if linked to a Western institution, then distantly, and indirectly so. Such vulnerable researchers are not to be evidently wealthy or influential.

Such exploration of indigenous contexts will additionally result in investment into an indigenous language. If low-key, West-

36. Bagele Chilisa, Emily Major Thenjiwe, and Khudu-Petersen Kelne, “Community Engagement with a Post-colonial African-based relational paradigm,” 326-339 in *Qualitative Research*, 17(3), 2017, 327.

37. Chilisa “Community,” 331-332.

38. See her discussion on *Kaupapa* Maori (1999:185).

39. Kovach *Indigenous*, 47.

40. Kovach *Indigenous*, 1122.

41. Ryen “Exploring,” 449.

42. Gaotlhobogwe “Conceptualising,” 57-58.

43. Jim Harries, *The Godless Delusion: Europe and Africa*. Eugene, (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2017).

44. <http://culturalstudiesnow.blogspot.co.ke/2012/05/clifford-geertz-thick-description.html>

ern investment into an indigenous language can help to boost that language. (To avoid the envy of other groups, an outsider should invest into the indigenous concerned in a way that does not raise the hackles of other groups.) Whatever key insights the Western person has to offer the indigenous, this must not require outside languages or resources. The kind of input that fits the bill here is the Gospel of Jesus.⁴⁵

The wealthy and powerful could also have a role to play. The major role I perceive for them, in addition to that of encouraging vulnerable intervention from the West as mentioned above, is that of working to undermine the currently problematic hegemony of Western languages among indigenous people. This can be effected by reducing subsidy on Western languages. Certainly, use of Western languages in the indigenous communities should not be accredited by the Western world.⁴⁶ This may encourage indigenous people to invest in education in what they understand (using indigenous languages) instead of in what they do not understand (using Western languages). Self-understanding is arguably a vital prerequisite for effective and sustainable social, economic, and other forms of human development. An improved indigenous people's self-understanding will remove some of the barriers to the Westerner's understanding of the indigenous.

Conclusion

This article considers what actually happens when researchers seek to explore indigenous people. It finds that methodologies employed frequently presuppose unrealistic and non-existent levels of similarity between the West and the indigenous. Such presupposition can render the rest of a research process illegitimate. When the resultant research is as a result inaccurate, its outcome can be immoral. For example, research by Western scholars into the indigenous that simply confirms the status quo can undergird oppression, poverty, and various abuses.⁴⁷

Two concerns that can particularly easily render research methodologies inappropriate are those pertaining to language and power. In terms of language, this article explains how widespread and dominant use of a Western language such as English in research makes accurate representation of indigenous cultures impossible. In terms of power, a researcher's being known as wielding, or potentially wielding, financial power, results in maneuverings oriented to pleasing so as to benefit from that wealth, regardless of truth on the ground. Hence, to be effective, researchers need to fall in the category in this article considered as *vulnerable*, i.e., research in the indigenous should be engaged using indigenous

45. Development initiatives from the West to the majority world typically require outside funding, whether it be for well-digging equipment, funding for education, buildings, inputs (e.g., agricultural or medical) and so on. At a basic level, evangelism and discipleship do not require such inputs.

46. Continuing use of Western languages in indigenous contexts might otherwise be motivated by its potential to transport indigenous people to lucrative positions in the West, or Western resources to the indigenous context.

47. As such abuses may be perceived in the West.

This article... emphasizes the responsibility the West has, given the authority it has taken over indigenous people in many parts of the world, to *itself* use its *own people* to do research on the indigenous. ... Westerners must strive, even at great personal cost, to reach positions of profound vulnerable empathetic identity with indigenous people.

languages and indigenous resources.

The discussion in this article does not claim to cover all the bases related to indigenous research. Smith is right to say that "indigenous communities continue to view education in its Western, modern, sense as being critical to development and self-determination."⁴⁸ They aspire to something in the West, even if often not knowing what it is. The question of the legitimacy of the worldview assumed in Western research is rooted in a complex history of the West, more detailed exploration of which go beyond the bounds of this article.

The wider literature on indigenous research methodologies tends *not* to focus on the need either for use of the indigenous language in reporting and in the research process, or on the need not to be dependent on outside funds. This is understandable, as often foreign resources and languages are exactly the means potential researchers are targeting. At the same time, this article points out, these very two features act to disqualify much research activity. This article, as a result of the above dilemma, emphasizes the responsibility the West has, given the authority it has taken over indigenous people in many parts of the world, to *itself* use its *own people* to do research on the indigenous. It emphasizes the need for such researchers to be very vulnerable to the people they are researching. Westerners must strive, even at great personal cost, to reach positions of profound vulnerable empathetic identity with indigenous people. The buck cannot be passed!

A closing challenge to indigenous communities, is to realize that research engaged "on them" by the West is a process of trying to understand "the other" by indicating where they resemble or do not resemble "us." The equivalent for indigenous people is not to research themselves, but to research the West, using indigenous languages, to try to make sense of it from where they are standing.