

World view



By Jennifer Grenz

Ethics review boards should respect Indigenous scholars

Institutional ethics review processes routinely impede Indigenous academics' research with Indigenous communities.

I am a Nlaka'pamux woman of mixed ancestry who works on the reclamation and revitalization of Indigenous food systems at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. Being an Indigenous, tenure-track assistant professor is something to celebrate.

I was aware that many barriers to my success awaited me as I began my academic appointment. My Elders, friends and family openly worried because I was embarking on a journey in academia, an institution that is a symbol of colonization shrouded by a history of extractive and harmful research on Indigenous Peoples.

Partly because of such harmful practices, research-ethics committees have become a norm in many parts of the world. As an Indigenous woman, I wholeheartedly support these structures. But I did not anticipate that the ethics board at my own institution would become a barrier to my research.

Despite many ethics boards attempting to decolonize, for example by accepting and considering Indigenous research methodologies (A. Hayward *et al.* *J. Empir. Res. Hum. Res. Ethics* **16**, 403–417; 2021), their processes and assessment criteria are still created mainly for non-Indigenous researchers. They don't account for our years of developing trust and nurturing relationships in ways that go well beyond ordinary research partnerships; nor do they respect the extensive knowledge and cultural awareness we bring to our work with Indigenous Peoples. When we enter the campus, we carry with us our communities and established relationships of kinship, friendship and service. Ethics boards do not seem aware of the harms they can inflict on these relationships by imposing requirements that alienate us from our own People.

We need institutional research-ethics review processes designed specifically for Indigenous scholars conducting research alongside Indigenous communities. Anything else is colonialism masquerading as inclusion. Even if Indigenous scholars are included in their development, the ally-centric lens of ethics boards subjects academics like me to culturally inappropriate gatekeeping of my research.

During my PhD, I interviewed an Elder for a research project with a non-Indigenous graduate student. As our knowledge-sharing session began, the student pulled out a research release and participation form mandated by her ethics committee, explained what it was and asked the Elder to sign it. He immediately complied. But when I pulled mine out, he physically flinched and shook his head, "No. We don't do this."

He was right. We don't do that. For me to require an Elder



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to sign something can be disrespectful. Pulling a document out just makes me, as my auntie put it, "one of them" – a non-Indigenous researcher.

Similarly, current standard requirements of ethics committees – such as providing the exact questions that we will ask Elders and knowledge keepers, and having fixed research objectives and methodologies – are not consistent with our ways of knowing. But this led to challenges with our ethics board: draining phone calls providing crash courses on Indigenous research methodologies to the many staff members I was repeatedly passed on to. My research was seemingly held hostage until I complied to colonizing it. We need room for the reflexivity and the relationality of our world views, the ability to respond to changing community needs and to honour community values and protocols.

Reaching out to other Indigenous colleagues, I realized that I was not alone. Some described giving up on research projects entirely after ethics boards required culturally inappropriate revisions to their applications. Others suggested ways to get around the review process.

Let Indigenous academics stand before our co-researchers – our Indigenous communities – and be wholly and solely accountable to them. The ethics of research projects between Indigenous researchers and Indigenous communities should be reviewed only by those communities. The mathematics of Indigenizing research-ethics processes is not simply one of addition – adding inclusive policies and diverse perspectives. It must include subtraction: it means giving up control.

This would not give Indigenous researchers a free pass on research ethics with Indigenous communities. Indeed, our accountability is greater. Breaking trust is the worst thing that could happen: it brings shame to our family names, it ends the work with the community and word spreads between communities. For someone like me, whose research is rooted entirely in service to Indigenous Peoples, with no separation between the personal and professional, that would be devastating.

If research-ethics processes are not about legal protection for the institution, as the staff at my university say, the word of the communities should be sufficient.

Recently, an Indigenous master's student told me that she doesn't think she will pursue a PhD, because she sees what I go through on a daily basis. She would rather just go back home and do good work. This is an important cautionary tale of what is at stake if we do not learn to honour Indigenous ways of knowing, understanding and doing.

Recruiting Indigenous researchers is not where the hard work of reconciliation ends for universities. It is only the beginning. From there, they must lift colonial constraints to ensure our longevity and success in academia. Our communities are depending on us to bring our gifts home.