

Decolonizing Research: Implementing OCAP Principles

Trigger warning: Indian Residential Schools

Introduction

There is an urgent need to [decolonize](#) and reimagine research that includes First Nations and Indigenous Peoples, their traditions, and their ways of knowing. Historically, research has been used against Indigenous Peoples, and has been used to justify colonial policies and attitudes. While doing research with and about Indigenous communities may be well intentioned, it carries all this baggage and can unintentionally harm Indigenous communities. The history of research as harmful has instilled racist practices within research that, if people are not aware of them, can unintentionally replicate. Many Indigenous folks have grown to distrust research. Others are tired of constantly being studied and seeing no material benefits in their lives.

For research to be employed as a tool for empowerment and change, there must be a shift within how research is done – from the questions we ask, to the methods we use to answer those questions, and the way we share those answers. Most importantly, this shift cannot be led by the systems that caused this harm in the first place – it must be led by community.

OCAP (Ownership, Control, Access, Possession) is a set of guidelines, geared towards non-Indigenous researchers, regarding how to respect the rights of First Nations while doing research with and about them. First Nations have the right to control the data collection processes done in their communities. They should own how this information can be stored, interpreted, used, or shared. OCAP is a method that can be used to decolonize research work towards reconciliation, as it shifts the power away from traditional research processes towards First Nations owned and produced processes.

Research as a Tool of Colonization

Because of past and ongoing colonization, First Nations and Indigenous Peoples are typically studied in research projects. This research often takes place without the permission, consultation, or involvement of Indigenous Peoples and First Nations in so-called Canada (Ormiston, 2010). Moreover, traditional research typically does not acknowledge the right to [self-determination](#) possessed by First Nation and Indigenous communities. For example, traditional research often creates policies and programs for these communities instead of with these communities. Traditional research has

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been (and in some cases, continues to be) used as a tool towards assimilation of First Nations and Indigenous communities and their knowledge, tradition, and ways of knowing.

An example of research as a tool for colonization and assimilation of First Nations and Indigenous Peoples is the nutrition experiments within the [Indian Residential Schools \(IRS\)](#) system in the late 1940-50's. After First Nation and Indigenous children were stolen from their lands and forced into IRS', Canadian scientists, organized by the Canadian Government, used the children as test subjects to investigate the effects of various diets and dietary supplements (Owens, 2013). These research experiments often involved decreasing food intake or withholding supplements to already starving children. The children did not consent to participating, nor did they know the experiments were occurring. The 'findings' of this study influenced the Canadian Food Guide and caused long-term health impacts of malnutrition and hunger among those in IRS' (Tennant, 2021).

Decolonizing Research through OCAP

OCAP (Ownership, Control, Access, Possession) are First Nations principles which “assert that First Nations have control over data collection processes, and that they own and control how this information can be used.” (The First Nations Information Governance Centre, n.d.). OCAP is a tool that can be used to achieve First Nations data sovereignty by expressing and adopting the various world views, traditions knowledge, and protocols of all First Nations in so-called Canada. “OCAP® asserts that First Nations alone have control over data collection processes in their communities, and that they own and control how this information can be stored, interpreted, used, or shared.” (The First Nations Information Governance Centre, n.d.).

The principle of **Ownership** means that cultural knowledge, data, and information is owned collectively by a community (The First Nations Information Governance Centre, n.d.). **Control** means that First Nations and their communities have the right to control all aspects of research and information management processes that impact them. They can assert control at any stage of a research project, including: resources and review processes, the

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planning process, and the management of information. **Access** means that First Nations must have access to information and data about themselves. It also means First Nations have the right to manage and make decisions regarding who can access their collective information. Lastly, **Possession** refers to the physical control of data. Possession is a mechanism that allows First Nations to exercise ownership.

OCAP in Action

An example of a research project that implemented OCAP is the Provincial Health Services Authority's "Healthy Eating and Food Security for Urban Aboriginal Peoples Living in Vancouver." The goal of this project was to explore the barriers associated with healthy eating and food security, as the partner communities all agree that healthy eating and food security were key factors for preventing chronic disease in First Nations and Indigenous Peoples. Their 20-week study allocated a significant amount of time to connect with the Indigenous community (Urban Aboriginal Community Garden Kitchen Project (UAGGKP)) that they partnered with. This produced an opportunity to establish trust, relationships, and engagement with the project. During this time, researchers participated in cultural events, attended

meetings, volunteered in their gardens and kitchens, and consumed Indigenous culture, foods, communication systems and community strengths. If researchers neglect to allocate time for forming connections and relationships with First Nations and Indigenous communities, they will not have the foundation required to implement OCAP into their project.

Researchers consulted the community to create an advisory committee to ensure their results were applicable to First Nations and Indigenous Peoples, and that the approaches were culturally relevant and respectful. This follows the OCAP principle of Control, as this Committee helped refine the research question, selected the methodology, shaped analysis, and planned research dissemination. The Committee also ensured that First Nations and Indigenous resiliency was highlighted throughout the project and members received an honorarium for their knowledge, as recommended by OCAP. Instead of engaging in interviews as their initial research plan suggested, the Committee recommended that they engage in storytelling, which allowed for a less-structured methodology which was led by trained facilitators. In alignment with the principle of Ownership and Possession, the knowledge and data from this study was

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co-owned by the research team and the UAGGKP. This study outlined tips for engaging and collaborating with First Nation and Indigenous communities (in reference to OCAP principles), and recommends undertaking a manageable project, investing in community engagement and partnership development, valuing traditional knowledge, and fostering community leadership.

For more examples of OCAP in action, see: Fast, 2014 or Waddell-Henowitch et al., 2022. Importantly, these studies have open access on the internet and do not require readers to have an account or pay to access the knowledge. This is another example of OCAP in action, as increasing access to research findings is paramount to decolonizing and reimagining research.

Conclusion

Past and present colonization and harm against First Nations and Indigenous Peoples takes forms in many ways, especially through research. To decolonize so-called Canada, it is important that we reimagine all aspects of the research process to better reflect, include, and amplify First Nations and Indigenous Peoples. The First Nations Principles of OCAP are a solution that researchers can

draw upon to that are anti-racist and anti-colonial. To take “The Fundamentals of OCAP” course and learn more about this tool for decolonization, click [here](#).

Special thanks to Jenna Robinson and Sydney Sheloff for helping to put together this fACT Sheet.

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Edmonton Social Planning Council
#200, 10544 - 106 Street,
Edmonton, Alberta, T5K 1C5
www.edmontonsocialplanning.ca
[@edmontonspc](https://twitter.com/edmontonspc)

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