

THE NATIVE PEOPLES TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE OFFICE  
NATIVE AMERICAN RESEARCH LECTURE SERIES

***Bridging Worldviews: An  
Approach to Ethical Research  
with Indigenous Peoples***

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This presentation is part of the ***Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Property: the Ethics of Cultural and Environmental Sovereignty and Stewardship*** series.

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Marlene Castellano serves as the only Aboriginal member on the Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics for the Government of Canada. She does not speak for the panel. She draws from her expertise in Indigenous research in presenting considerations in Aboriginal Ethics Policy Development.

- There are layers of diversity in Aboriginal communities with regional, cultural, and political differences. Policy should serve diverse sectors of Aboriginal communities.
- Public policy in Canada has been directed towards absorbing Indians into the “body politic.”
- There are not just political or cultural differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. The pressure for Aboriginal people to “disappear” has evoked resistance and determination, resulting in open confrontations over lands.
- Aboriginal communities are defined as; geographic, organizational, or more loosely structured communities of interest.
- Areas of tension between Aboriginal communities and academic researchers and institutions’ of research evolve around; holistic worldview contrasted with physical or mechanistic view of reality, and indigenous science vs. reliance on empirical science. Oral tradition is uncomfortably accommodated as legitimate knowledge.

**Requirements for beginning dialogue on research ethics:**

1. Recognizing that Aboriginal people occupy a distinct place in Canadian society.  
- “Aboriginal people approach research collaboration with expectations that creation of knowledge is a shared endeavor that will be advanced by respectful, reciprocal human relationships.”
2. There is common ground to build shared ethics of research but work needs to be done on finding “common language” that communicates to all parties.
3. Acknowledging the past. Meaningful communication has to move past unspoken memories and the defensiveness that history generates.
4. Risks to human dignity must be identified.

**Considerations on the framework of “respect”:**

- The core principle of respect for human dignity must be interpreted in order to work in intercultural relations and in ethical Aboriginal research.
- Particular obligations are created in Canada by treaty rights and the Constitution. Dialogue must occur regarding these rights.
- There is a duty to respect to Indigenous knowledge systems. Indigenous knowledge is a living system.

- Respect must be given for cultural heritage – artifacts, cultural property, collective knowledge and skills, intangibles like folk lore and customs, representations, art, cultural practices.
- Respect for Aboriginal diversity in identities, interests, and circumstances. Local ethics assessment must be considered along with institutional reviews.
- Principles of respect must be reciprocal and translated into practice.

**Additional considerations in policy development:**

- Reports from field suggest that ethical problems exist around ownership and control.
- Aboriginal communities recognize that for research to be credible, it must give fair treatment to differing views.
- Moral Aboriginal leaders, such as elders, can help researchers resolve conflicting interests.
- If you are an outsider to an Aboriginal community, you cannot do research without official permission.
- Ethics of respectful relationships are critical.
- Conflicts can exist around privacy and confidentiality of research data.
- There must be equitable distribution of risks and benefits between Aboriginal community and researcher.