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Indigenous Peoples in IS Research**

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Studying the Other or Becoming the Other: Engaging with Indigenous Peoples in IS Research

Michael D. MyersUniversity of Auckland, New Zealand
m.myers@auckland.ac.nz**Hameed Chughtai**

University of Southampton, UK

Pitso Tsibolane

University of Cape Town, South Africa

Liz Davidson

University of Hawai'i, USA

Amber G. Young

University of Arkansas, USA

Abstract:

This article is based on a panel discussion at the 2019 International Conference on Information Systems (ICIS) held in Munich, Germany. This panel was concerned with the ethics and politics of engagement with Indigenous peoples in information systems research. As members of a research team that have been studying the use of social media by Indigenous peoples to collaborate and further their cause, we have recently become aware of some of the unintended consequences of IS research. Since others could easily appropriate our findings for political purposes, we believe that we as IS researchers need to become more sensitive to the ways in which we study and engage with “the Other.” Hence, the panelists discussed and debated the nature and extent of a researcher’s engagement when studying Indigenous peoples and their uses of IS/IT. The panel, chaired by Michael Myers, included three panelists who have been studying Indigenous peoples’ use of social media (Liz Davidson, Amber Young and Hameed Chughtai), and one panelist who is an Indigenous scholar studying Indigenous theories in IS (Pitso Tsibolane).

Keywords: Indigenous peoples, engagement, ethics, politics, social inclusion

[Department statements, if appropriate, will be added by the editors. Teaching cases and panel reports will have a statement, which is also added by the editors.]

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1 Introduction

Our interest in how information systems can promote social inclusion led us to obtain a Worldwide Universities Network research grant to investigate the use of social media by Indigenous peoples. We set out to study how Indigenous peoples are using technologies such as social media and the Internet to coordinate digital activism campaigns and protests (Ortiz et al., 2019). Increasingly, Indigenous peoples from around the world are no longer working in isolation but are collaborating across social media and attracting international support for their digital activism campaigns. Most of these campaigns are focused on issues such as cultural identity restoration and natural resource preservation (Young, 2018). A recent example is the ‘Idle No More’ campaign originating in Canada. This campaign started out as a local movement to protect Indigenous environment and culture, but spread as far as Hawai'i and New Zealand where other Indigenous communities appropriated the #IdleNoMore theme to address cultural and environmental issues (Caven, 2013).

Though the importance of this topic was apparent from the start, shortly after we began the project we became aware of how much this topic is intimately related to the ethics and politics of engagement in research. The need for ethical engagement is especially salient given that most Indigenous peoples are vulnerable due to the lingering effects of colonial oppression. While we have tended to think of ourselves in the past as independent, objective scholars, we are now starting to question this stance (see also Joia, Davison, Andrade, Urquhart, & Kah, 2011). Hence, one purpose of this panel at the 40th International Conference on Information Systems (Munich, Germany) was to discuss and debate the nature and extent of a Western researcher's engagement when studying Indigenous peoples. This resulting discussion, summarized in this article, provides food for thought for anyone interested in promoting ethical interactions between Western researchers and Indigenous peoples.

2 Indigenous Peoples and the Process of Othering

The term Indigenous peoples "is an umbrella enabling communities and peoples to come together, transcending their own colonized contexts and experiences, in order to learn, share, plan, organize and struggle collectively for self-determination on the global and local stages" (Smith, 2012, p. 17). Encyclopædia Britannica defines Indigenous peoples as "native inhabitants who were dispossessed of their land by outside peoples, either by conquest, occupation, settlement, or some combination of the three. The term most commonly refers to those peoples subjugated since the late 15th century by European powers and their colonies" (Lee-Nichols, 2019). Sometimes known as First Nations, Aboriginal peoples or Native peoples, many Indigenous peoples have been marginalized by colonialism and continue to face threats to their sovereignty, well-being and natural environment. In colonized contexts where Western culture dominates, social constructions of meaning are often built around a rigid hierarchy in which the colonizers outrank the colonized (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1998). Central to this hierarchical social construction is the process of "othering", i.e., representing the colonizers as typical and normal and the colonized as exotic or primitive, and thus, the 'Other' (MacNaughton & Davis, 2001).

Indigenous groups may use information systems in ways similar to dominant society groups, e.g., to run Tribal affairs related to finance, accounting and member engagement. Yet, we should also consider that Indigenous groups and Westerners may have vastly different conceptualizations of and uses for information systems. These different conceptualizations are not always accounted for in the academic literature. In contemporary studies of information systems, the following phrase, in one form or another, is found in abundance: *we live in an increasingly digital world*. While the latter part is used as a starting point of inquiry, the former – the we – is uncritically taken to mean those in dominant society, i.e., the colonizers. Edward Said argued that this uncritical acceptance of Western authority as the default can be "discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with [the Other] — dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it" (Said, 2003, p. 3). We agree with Said and suggest that it is this 'we' that establishes an invisible border between us in the West (including the researchers based in the West or using the theoretical frameworks and methods built using the principles developed in the West) and the Others (including the human subjects of inquiry that may be located in radically different socio-political contexts). Thus, new insights are often built on a moral foundation that accepts the theoretical dominance of the West over other epistemes and, in so doing, contributes to the othering process and reinforces the border between the researcher and the researched (Hooks, 1992, 2013).

According to the critical theorist Bell Hooks, the aim of theory is to transfer knowledge across borders, to find ways of reaching the other side. Recently, Indigenous scholar Linda Smith has made a similar analysis and suggested "in a very real sense research has been an encounter between the West and the Other. Much more is known about one side of those encounters than is known about the other side" (Smith, 2012, p.8). Very little effort is made to truly cross the border and learn from Indigenous peoples, their theories, stories, and knowledge. For example, Hooks reflects upon on the uncritical state of theory:

"While the theory was all about border crossing, there was little talk about actual practice, of what makes bonding possible across race, class, gender, and diverse politics. Our silence about practice surfaced because no one really wanted to talk about the difficulties of bonding across differences, the breakdowns in communications, the disappointments, the betrayals" (Hooks, 2013, p.143).

3 Decolonizing Information Systems Research

The socio-political process of undoing the effects of colonization is termed *decolonization*. Information systems scholars are interested in understanding the extent to which information systems and information systems research embody colonial or postcolonial systems (Lin, Kuo, & Myers, 2015; Ravishankar, Pan, & Myers, 2013; Smith, 2012), and how systems and IS research can be decolonized (Chughtai et al., 2020). The problem is twofold. First, there is an over-reliance on methods and theories that are built by/for the Western world to develop new theoretical insights. These insights – which are no doubt very valuable – may be unfit to explore the problems of the Other – Indigenous peoples as well as other ethnic social groups that subscribe to radically different worldviews. Second, Indigenous peoples and their work are often considered subpar and unfit for modern research. We question this orthodoxy, in the critical spirit of Hooks, and reject the dangerous view that “the Other who is subjugated, who is subhuman, lacks the ability to comprehend, to understand, to see the working of the powerful” (Hooks, 2009, p. 92). Instead, with this work our hope is to open a dialogue toward acceptance of Indigenous knowledge, methods and perspectives in IS research.

Some information systems researchers have previously warned that research intended to promote social good can be misappropriated for harm, and thus they called for researchers to “exert mindfulness” toward the development of more responsible scholarship (Young, Selander, & Vaast, 2019). Since our research with Indigenous peoples could have unintended consequences and could potentially be appropriated by others for political purposes, we believe that we as IS researchers need to become more sensitive to the ways in which we study “the Other” or engage with “the Other.” We also want to be mindful to ensure social inclusion efforts do not function as oppressive tools for assimilation. We seek to understand ethical ways to include Indigenous peoples in the research process and consequent benefits without dictating the ways in which Indigenous peoples are included. The mission of AIS is to “serve society through the advancement of knowledge and the promotion of excellence in the practice and study of information systems.” Thus, we need to make sure that we are indeed serving society and making society better, not worse. That is, we must ensure that the benefits of our research are not disproportionately enjoyed by members of a dominant society while the costs of our research are carried by those outside of dominant society.

The purpose of this panel session was thus to discuss the following question: How should we engage with Indigenous peoples when conducting IS research, and to what ends? Specific questions for discussion included:

- Should we aim to remain neutral and objective with respect to the causes of Indigenous peoples?
- If we are sympathetic to their causes, how does this affect our study?
- Should we support them and become actively engaged?
- Should we retain a critical stance towards dominant power structures as well as marginalized ones?
- Should research on Indigenous peoples be restricted to Indigenous scholars themselves?

The panelists articulated different positions on these issues in brief presentations and in response to audience participation, as described below.

4 Organization of the Panel

The panel was chaired and moderated by Michael Myers. After Michael introduced the purpose of the panel, there were three presentations by Liz Davidson, Hameed Chughtai and Pitso Tsibolane. As Amber Young was unable to attend ICIS, Michael briefly summarized her views on the topic. Following these presentations, there were three rounds of discussion and debate. During each round, Michael posed a question to the panelists. After each panelist had responded, he then opened the floor for comments and questions from the audience. At the end of each round, he asked the audience to vote on a question related to the particular topic (indicating their support for or against by a show of hands). The three questions were as follows:

1. Should IS researchers study marginalized groups such as Indigenous peoples? Can IS researchers and our typical (well-accepted) research methods represent Indigenous narratives?

2. Are there substantive and consequential differences in IS research into Indigenous groups and their activities than with other subjects of IS research, and if so, what are they? Is the labeling of people as “marginalized”, marginalizing or empowering for these groups?
3. How should editors assess papers that study Indigenous peoples? Should the same criteria of scientific objectivity and distance be applied to such studies?

Michael pointed out that in answering these questions, the panelists should keep in mind the mission of AIS which is to “serve society through the advancement of knowledge and the promotion of excellence in the practice and study of information systems.”

Following the discussion of these three questions by the panelists and the audience, Michael asked each panelist to give a brief final statement. He then concluded by briefly summarizing the key points raised.

5 Initial Position Statements

To stimulate debate and to surface varied perspectives, the panelists each articulated a viewpoint on whether and how IS researchers might study uses of IS/IT among Indigenous peoples, particularly their uses of social media to express and gain voice.

Liz Davidson argued that most IS researchers should refrain from making Indigenous peoples’ use of information technologies an object of study. Few IS researchers, who typically are ensconced in business schools, have adequate anthropological or sociological training to understand the complex societal, economic, cultural and historical issues these peoples experience. Following the dominant norms and structures of Western universities, IS researchers are expected to publish research in IS and management journals for their own career advancement. Can the experiences of Indigenous peoples and their uses of information technology be authentically articulated as theoretically driven “contributions” to the IS literature? Given that IS research has been criticized for lacking relevance to more obvious audiences in business settings, it is questionable that such publications could have much relevance or utility to the peoples studied. Also troubling is the potential to further exploit Indigenous peoples as research subjects primarily for the benefit of others, such as IS researchers and management constituents. In some fields, Indigenous peoples have previously been used as a sample of convenience or as a novelty to make the research more exotic or topical. Indigenous peoples have also been coerced into participating in research. With the ease of scraping user-generated social media data from various channels (with or without the content-producers’ consent), it is all too easy for IS researchers to repeat these patterns by expropriating the content generated by these groups in order to pursue the researchers’ own interpretations, interests and priorities. The history of marginalized peoples being experimented on reminds us of the real damage that can be done when vulnerable people are used by researchers. If IS researchers are too removed from Indigenous groups, they may be unaware of the potential for paradoxical effects of their research such as when research benefits leaders but not those members disenfranchised by their leaders. It is often the case that researchers cannot predict ways in which their research may be used against those they study. Should Indigenous peoples, as potential subjects of study, be asked to assume unknown risks? Perhaps, but only if it is likely that IS research on Indigenous peoples uses of IS/IT would be beneficial to these groups. However, given the concerns expressed here, such research should be conducted primarily by Indigenous scholars (in relevant fields of study), as these scholars are best positioned to address issues and to serve their communities. At the least, IS researchers should be invited into a community’s research interests, rather than assuming the right to make Indigenous peoples their object of study.

Amber Young’s position was briefly summarized by Michael Myers. Amber’s position is that non-Indigenous IS researchers can study Indigenous peoples, but they should be sympathetic to the cause of the Indigenous peoples they are studying. They should not remain neutral but take an informed stand as political and ethical issues arise. Emancipatory action research and similar methods provide a way for non-Indigenous scholars to join Indigenous peoples in their struggles. Researchers should not shy away from engaging with Indigenous peoples. Exclusion of Indigenous peoples from research samples may serve to further marginalize them and characterizations of vulnerability may be paternalistic. If all research focuses on and engages with subjects from our dominant society only, the implications of our research may not generalize to Indigenous societies. As a result, Indigenous peoples will not share in the benefits of research-generated knowledge. Many Indigenous groups own corporations. For instance, Native American Nations are often hybrid organizations operating in political, corporate and cultural spheres. Thus, our management backgrounds are beneficial. Researchers should find ways to include Indigenous

peoples in research processes and consequent benefits. While Indigenous scholars have unique insights, so too do non-Indigenous scholars and other members of the Indigenous group who may not have an Indigenous scholar to represent their views. Thus, Amber's stance is that non-Indigenous scholars can ethically engage with Indigenous groups. As outsiders, non-Indigenous researchers may notice subtle patterns and political dynamics that in-group members do not notice. Yet, researchers have special obligations when working with Indigenous groups. For instance, we should not criticize cultural practices we do not understand or assume the outcomes we value will be of value to Indigenous peoples. Research with Indigenous groups should always benefit the group and not dominant society alone. Researchers should be limited in what they can publish from research with Indigenous groups and respect cultural copyright differences. Indigenous leaders should have veto power over certain research narratives to minimize the potential for weaponization of research findings. Research with these groups should be altruistic and publication incentives may muddle motives. Therefore, authors and editors should consider the value of a publication against any risks to the focal group.

Hameed Chughtai argued that, not only should an IS field researcher from a different culture be able to study Indigenous peoples, IS researchers should also be free to retain a critical stance on the particular movement or cause that they are studying. In fact, without engaging with the Indigenous people, a researcher can inadvertently further marginalize the marginalized. Why? An Indigenous researcher might already be involved in the context and may not be able to step out of it to see the bigger picture (e.g., postcolonial context). On the other hand, an external researcher might be able to see the bigger picture. Hameed argued that an external researcher cannot fully know what is going on in the field, but needs to be involved in the field while upholding a critical distance. While we have a moral duty to tell the truth, we cannot truly know what is going on without becoming closer to the researched. To address this conundrum, Hameed suggested that a critically engaged approach is needed. First, a critique is required to acknowledge one's own position before studying the other. Most, if not all, Indigenous practices are situated in a postcolonial context. A researcher always has a preconception of the context of the research (although they may not be aware of their own prejudices) and it cannot be set aside. Second, a critique of the context is required. Without taking a critical stance, the produced accounts of the Indigenous – the 'Other' – are either in relation to the dominant culture (be it the West or the East) or the dominant forces within the Indigenous culture that might be contributing towards marginalization (Said, 1989, p. 212). Hence, Hameed argued that when researchers study the "Other" they should not see it as a study of the Other, but as a study along with the Other toward achieving an understanding that is anchored in the context of the Other. By becoming engaged with Indigenous peoples, IS researchers can better understand the complex social situations and, at least, tell the stories of the Indigenous people from the Indigenous perspectives. If we are to situate contemporary IS research in relation to the broader societal debate concerning contemporary postcolonial issues, we must begin by attending to the ways in which we – as researchers – are engaging with others.

Pitso Tsibolane argued that, while the concept of Indigenous research is dynamic, complex and highly contested, it nevertheless provides IS researchers with a rich perspective to navigate knowledges outside of the Western research paradigm. He argued that, beyond being 'the study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions', Indigenous research should be understood as an engagement with Indigenous communities that seeks to re-center Indigenous voices, languages, concepts, worldviews, histories, experiences, knowledges and beliefs. All researchers who are committed to the advancement of knowledge should enter the Indigenous research field with an attitude to know and understand theory and research from Indigenous perspectives and purposes. Such researchers need to approach Indigenous research both as a form of epistemic resistance and as a critique of the marginalizing effects of mainstream approaches and coloniality. While researchers should always be critical when conducting research, engaging in Indigenous research calls for reflexive positionality towards the meaning and manifestations of power and control in the context of the research, particularly the ability of Indigenous communities to negotiate the research agenda, methodologies and cultural boundaries. Pitso proposed Ubuntu, the sub-Saharan relational ontology of being and becoming human, as a useful approach in the study of the various roles of IS in the lives of Indigenous people. Embracing Ubuntu's relational humanness in Indigenous research implies the recognition of the 'complex wholeness involving the multilayered and incessant interaction of all entities' (Ramose, 2009, p. 308). These entities refer to the ethical interdependence between human beings, the natural environment and the non-living ancestors. Ubuntu as an Indigenous theory provides an ideal theoretical lens with which to better understand the concerns, struggles and aspirations of the Indigenous 'other'. IS researchers from different backgrounds are provided a generous and inclusive paradigm in the Ubuntu maxim; 'I am, because we

are; and since we are, therefore I am' (Mbiti, 1990, p. 106). A prior engagement with Indigenous theories and perspectives, therefore, serves as a necessary entry point to ethical and culturally sensitive Indigenous IS research.

6 Three Key Questions for Debate

Following the presentation of the position statements summarized above, Michael posed three questions to the panelists and opened the discussion to audience members:

6.1 Should IS researchers study marginalized groups such as Indigenous peoples? Can IS researchers and our typical (well-accepted) research methods represent Indigenous narratives?

Liz Davidson reiterated her arguments that IS researchers should not study marginalized groups such as Indigenous peoples. This is because a key objective of most IS academics is to publish papers needed for tenure and promotion, and vulnerable people should not be used as research subjects simply to get the scholar's research papers published in top journals. Indigenous peoples have been exploited enough without IS scholars contributing to further exploitation. Another concern is that IS scholars tend not to be adequately trained in research methods and theories that would be best suited for this kind of work – hence our current IS research methods are not well suited to representing Indigenous narratives.

Hameed Chughtai argued that IS scholars should study marginalized groups such as Indigenous peoples. He agreed that we should be sympathetic to their cause and we should certainly not exploit Indigenous people for our own purposes. However, a critical stance could be valuable. Our current IS research methods are not well suited to representing Indigenous narratives, since a critically engaged stance is needed with respect to IS research methods. He pointed out that many social theories of human interaction, social structures and agency are built with, and for, predominantly white Western societies (Spivak, 1999). Therefore, our standard toolkit of research methods can neither capture nor represent the Indigenous narratives even if they are applied to marginalized groups located within a white Western geographical context such as the Sámi people of northern Scandinavia.

Pitso Tsibolane argued that IS scholars can study Indigenous peoples, as long as they seek to understand Indigenous perspectives. They need to be aware of colonial history and the ways in which current research methods are often subtly influenced by this. Hence our current research methods are not well suited to representing Indigenous narratives and these methods themselves need to be decolonized.

6.2 Are there substantive and consequential differences in IS research into Indigenous groups and their activities than with other subjects of IS research, and if so, what are they? Is the labeling of people as “marginalized”, marginalizing or empowering for these groups?

Liz Davidson believes that this is indeed an important ethical issue, which is not limited to research involving Indigenous peoples. In the past, IS research researchers gained access to research settings or data sets without the informed consent of the individuals or groups studied, for instance when firm management turned over employees' email data for research studies. Today's institutional review boards (IRBs) place some constraints on these practices by requiring that research subjects provide their informed consent. However, what does “informed consent” mean when many data sources are considered as “public” (e.g., on social media platforms) and thus open for use by any researcher willing to “scrape” data? So-called “de-identified data” (not personally identifiable) also tend to escape IRB scrutiny. These IRB loopholes suggest that IS researchers have the right to study any groups or activities that occur “in public” (such as protest postings via Twitter, Facebook and so on). There are ethical considerations for all such research studies, but the consequences for Indigenous peoples may be greater. Not only are contextual details and personal identities harder to mask (de-identify or anonymize) in small, culturally distinctive communities, but members of the Indigenous community may not share the same values and expectations about what constitutes “private” activity or the proper uses of community knowledge with researchers. Acknowledging that these communities are “marginalized” in terms of dominant research practices, we should respect their right to control how their voices and actions are interpreted through research.

Hameed Chughtai argued that there are radical differences in IS research into Indigenous peoples and their (digitally mediated) practices. Unlike conventional subjects of research, Indigenous peoples subscribe to and live by philosophies that are different than Western worldviews. Some of the Indigenous practices are adaptable to the theoretical and methodological toolkit of the modern IS researchers, while others are not. For example, what we – the researchers – see, a technology qua technology, for Others it might have deep spiritual or sacred meanings and, thus, may not be understood in the same way. Similarly, the concept of social structure or agency is quite different in the Indigenous context. These differences might be either overlooked or dismissed under the guise of (mis)interpretation. Hameed suggested that the interpretation of Indigenous practices should use theories and methods that are built with Indigenous epistemic frameworks. Hameed also argued against using labels as they carry the danger of reinforcing ‘us’ over ‘them’. In order to truly address differences, Indigenous people should not be labelled as marginalized; instead, they should be called by their actual Indigenous names (be it of things, people or places). While it is fruitful, and to some extent empowering, to use the marginalized perspective as a starting point of inquiry, researchers should be careful in labelling an Indigenous group as marginalized when describing their practices or engagements.

Pitso Tsibolane argued there is a deeply problematic historical relationship between Indigenous people and the idea of scientific research. Smith (2012) characterizes this tenuous relationship as one that “stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful” (p. 1). Researchers stepping into the field of Indigenous research inadvertently shoulder the violent legacies associated with European imperialism and colonialism. It is therefore important for IS researchers wishing to explore this area of research to critically reflect about the social, political, cultural and ethical implications of their ontological and epistemological assumptions before they engage with Indigenous people and communities. Undertaking research among Indigenous communities also calls for IS researchers to seek an understanding of the beliefs, values and worldviews central to the specific community they wish to engage. This entails studying the works of Indigenous scholars who have highlighted decolonial and multi-paradigmatic approaches such as Kaupapa Maori as well as the sub-Saharan relational ontology of being human - Ubuntu, the Andean philosophy good living – Buen-Vivir and others, to think critically about indigeneity and just research.

Pitso also argued that the labelling of Indigenous people as “the marginalized” can be a form of epistemic violence. This labelling could potentially be employed by the powerful to create difference between themselves as the norm and the Indigenous Other as inferior in order to further deny the marginalised Other subjectivity and voice (Spivak, 1988). IS researchers therefore have to be reflexive about their use of marginalizing terminology, their positionality, as well as their attitudes towards the plight and agendas of Indigenous communities.

6.3 How should editors assess papers that study Indigenous peoples? Should the same criteria of scientific objectivity and distance be applied to such studies?

Liz Davidson suggested that applying the dominant standards for “scientific objectivity and distance” to studies that incorporate or present research from the perspective of Indigenous peoples will likely be problematic. It is a bit arrogant to assert that totally “objective” research exists when studying social phenomena. All researchers approach their studies with their own specific interests and theoretical and methodological perspectives. That said, ontologies and epistemologies of Indigenous peoples may differ substantively from those commonly found in IS journals. Research that adopts or develops Indigenous knowledge about and for Indigenous peoples (related to IS use) might become more accepted for publication in the IS field by following the types of practices that brought qualitative, interpretive research into the mainstream of IS journals in the 1980s and 1990s. For instance, there could be conferences, mini-tracks and journal special issues devoted to the development of new methods and theoretical perspectives as well as exemplar research publications that address Indigenous practices, ontologies, and epistemologies. These efforts could build a cadre of qualified and interested reviewers for such research.

Hameed Chughtai argued that editors should welcome research into Indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples, like any other social group, are using digital technologies and social media for diverse reasons (which includes raising awareness and activism). It is quite dangerous to exclude a social group because their practices do not conform to the dominant discourse. He reminded the audience that one aim of the Association for Information Systems is “to serve society” – therefore, it is the moral duty of editors to make sure the voice of the marginalized groups such as Indigenous peoples are heard in reputable IS journals (Ortiz et al., 2019). He further argued in favor of using Indigenous methods and theories to explore the

issues surrounding Indigenous peoples. He reminded the audience that a major problem of cultural anthropology for many years was to treat its subjects (the Indigenous peoples) from a distance as a scientific curiosity. IS scholars must learn from the mistake of early cultural anthropology and take a more involved and engaged approach to study Indigenous phenomena. As the literature lacks Indigenous theoretical toolkits, new principles for evaluating Indigenous research might be needed and are thus called for.

Pitso Tsibolane argued that the peer-review of Indigenous research for scientific publication should equally exercise the necessary quality standards while also requiring researchers to disclose their reflexive positionality. Researchers need to demonstrate reciprocal and meaningful inclusion of Indigenous participants in the research process, as well as the prioritization of Indigenous ways of doing and knowing. While Indigenous research is still a relatively new developing discourse within the IS field, Indigenous scholars from other fields have been debating ways and principles of evaluating Indigenous research for some time. Gleaning from their work and the principles they have developed could enable the field to develop IS-relevant Indigenous research evaluation frameworks. Weber-Pillwax (1999) suggests a useful framework to do Indigenous research. She says that, unlike traditional research, Indigenous research is grounded in the ways of who and how Indigenous peoples are.

Pitso proposed an evaluation framework based on the seven (7) principles articulated by Weber-Pillwax (1999), who is an Indigenous researcher in educational studies. The principles have been subsequently affirmed and applied in other fields of research by others (Chilisa, 2012; Kovach, 2015; Martin & Mirraoopa, 2003; Ray, 2012; Smith, 2012). The first principle highlights the need for editors and reviewers to consider whether the research in question recognizes the relatedness and interconnectedness of living and non-living things. Secondly, reviewers and editors should determine whether the motives for the research ultimately benefit the Indigenous communities concerned. Thirdly, it must be assessed whether the foundations of the research reflect the lived experiences of Indigenous communities being studied. Fourthly, it should be assessed whether the theories and methods used to conduct the research are located within the Indigenous epistemology. Fifthly, the research being evaluated should not only be transformative but, sixthly, it should also value and recognize the cultures, languages and the sacredness of personal and community integrity. Finally, it should be assessed whether the research recognizes indigenous languages and cultures as living processes.

6.4 Audience Response and Lessons Learnt

After a constructive discussion, we found that the audience was primarily in favor of the position that IS researchers can study marginalized groups such as Indigenous peoples. The audience was also in favor of the position that our typical research methods are not well suited to representing Indigenous narratives, although this vote was not unanimous. The audience agreed with the position that there are substantial differences in IS research into Indigenous groups and other subjects of IS research. As for the labelling of people as marginalized, most of the audience thought that this term was acceptable. Given the critical nature of the panel, it is unsurprising to find that the audience agreed with the position that positivistic criteria of objectivity and distance should not be applied to such studies. Rather, editors need to ensure that authors engage with Indigenous theories and perspectives in an ethical and culturally sensitive way.

Despite panelists' competing positions and compelling counter-arguments, we observed that the panel converged on a single issue of addressing the problematic process of othering in our field. When it comes to studying Indigenous peoples and the socio-political topics entrenched in their context, the panel learnt that there exists a conceptual ambiguity surrounding the topic. This ambiguity can be best discussed at six broad levels: the ambiguity of representation, the ambiguity surrounding the identification of the context, the ambiguity of language, the ambiguity of available theories and methods, the ambiguity of the modes of production of knowledge, and the ambiguity of assessment criteria to evaluate Indigenous research studies. These levels are interrelated in the practice of conducting and communicating academic research. Table 1 outlines these six broad levels or ambiguity along with a few suggested future research questions.

| Issue | Insights | Future Research Questions |
|---|--|---|
| Ambiguity of Representation | Who can and cannot represent and conduct research into Indigenous issues? Some groups cannot be considered privileged over others to study select topics. Given the complex power structures operating, both inside and outside a social group, Indigenous scholars agree that it is difficult to truly know who can represent a group, and who can speak on behalf of a community (Bishop, 2011a; Smith, 2012). Moreover, as Bishop (1998) say, "the manner in which 'others,' that is those who are subjugated, understand their own actions and experiences often hides the true nature of their situation" (p. 213). | <p>What are the ethical criteria for authentic representation of the practices, goals, and issues related to IS research topics with Indigenous Peoples?</p> <p>What processes might assist different stakeholders within and across affected communities to reach consensus on representation in IS research projects?</p> |
| Ambiguity of the Context | It might be naïve to suggest that Indigenous people are incapable of understanding their issues. Due to historical colonial issues, it is difficult to maintain a "critical distance" in order to examine sensitive issues; this is applicable to both an outside researcher (who may be unfamiliar with the context), or an insider researcher (who may have an agenda that runs counter to the benefit of the community). Like Bishop (2011a) we are also aware of and sensitive to "the concerns that insiders are accused of being inherently biased, too close to the culture to ask critical questions" (p. 4). | <p>What are some of the ways in which researchers can make sense of the empirical setting as Indigenous sacred worlds where the research is constituted, and how does the Indigenous context influence the researchers?</p> <p>How can a researcher achieve and maintain a critical distance in their empirical context?</p> |
| Ambiguity of Language | The language used by researchers working in Indigenous contexts can be used for as well as against Indigenous peoples. We agree that many otherwise benign terms such as 'marginal' and 'oppressed' can be loaded and problematic when discussing sensitive social topics and groups. Denzin (2008) says that even the essential term 'research' is a "dirty word" as it reduces the researched to subjects under the control of the researcher (p. 115). Researchers need to be positioned within the discursive practices of the Indigenous communities they wish to explore. | How can the influence of language on how IS research is performed in Indigenous settings be brought to the analytic foreground and critically examined? |
| Ambiguity of Application of Theories and Methods | It is unsurprising to learn that some researchers believe that a theory or method built on the Western worldviews should be considered acceptable to explore Indigenous issues. This is extremely problematic but unsurprising because even some critical theorists hold the view that Indigenous issues should conform to Western worldviews, using conventional practices, and interpreted using one's preferred language (see Bishop, 1998; Denzin, 2008). | <p>What are some of the limitations of interpretive and critical theory to address issues in an Indigenous context?</p> <p>What can IS researchers, who are vested in traditional Western-style research methods, learn from Indigenous theories and concepts?</p> <p>What are some of the practical ways in which IS researchers can engage with Indigenous methods of doing research?</p> |

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| Ambiguity of the Modes of Production of Knowledge | Emancipation is a complex theme which is embraced by many critical researchers and students of Indigenous studies. By solely focusing on emancipation, it is easy to lose sight of the larger epistemological project of uncovering, communicating, and preserving Indigenous knowledge. Hence, emancipation carries a risk of becoming an insidious theme as Smith (2012) says: “The struggle for the validity of indigenous knowledges [sic] may no longer be over the <i>recognition</i> that indigenous people have ways of knowing the world which are unique, but over proving the authenticity of, and control over, our own forms of knowledge” (original emphasis, p. 104). | How can researchers identify and address the challenges associated with the power structures and the production and legitimization of Indigenous knowledge? Who is responsible for communicating, interpreting, translating, and applying the insights of research into communities, and vice-versa? |
| Ambiguity of Evaluation and Criteria of Assessment | In the IS research literature, there are no guiding principles to conduct and evaluate Indigenous studies. Therefore, it is not clear how one should go about doing Indigenous research in our field. A lack of principles also creates problems for editors as they may rely on existing scholarship that may have a different agenda; for example, Denzin (2008) points out that many traditional qualitative researchers are insensitive to Indigenous needs and “want to control the criteria that are used to evaluate indigenous experience” (p. 100). We agree with Denzin that “the purpose of [Indigenous] research is not the production of new knowledge, per se. Rather, the purposes are pedagogical, political, moral, and ethical, involving the enhancement of moral agency, the production of moral discernment, a commitment to praxis, justice, an ethic of resistance, a performative pedagogy that resists oppression” (p. 102). Hence, a set of principles of conducting Indigenous research are required. | What are the guiding principles of conducting, analyzing, and evaluating studies related to Indigenous topics? |

We agree that these are complex and subtle issues and should be dealt in a careful manner. More importantly, these issues should be further discussed by paying attention to the power relations that fuel the aforesaid ambiguities. Without solving these ambiguities, it is difficult to move toward decolonization of IS research, and we may remain shackled to the colonial ideas that are often implicit in our research.

7 Conclusions and Suggested Directions

There was a good attendance at the panel session, indicating a lively interest of IS scholars in the topic. The presentations and subsequent discussion highlighted some of the key challenges in moving the discussion forward. The panel and the audience agreed that there is value in research into Indigenous peoples uses of IS/IT.

Our panel’s starting point was a humble recognition that there exists a process of othering. That is, Indigenous peoples are seen as incapable of producing or interpreting complex epistemic content and hence they need to be emancipated – an emancipation that can only be done by a Western researcher or using the theoretical frameworks and tools produced using Western knowledge. As Bishop (1998) says, some critical theorists continue to “claim that they have the formula for the emancipation of [Indigenous] as oppressed and marginalized people” (p. 212).

We observed in our panel discussion and interaction with the audience that there are subtle but strong signs of a preference of using Western theories in our field. For example, some scholars suggested to use

theories of performativity that are grounded in the new materialism and posthumanism; others pondered the possibility of using theories of motivation and acceptance of technology. These theories are exemplars of Western thinking and rejected in decolonization debates (e.g., Bishop, 2011b; Denzin, 2008; Smith, 2012; Spivak, 1999). A common thread in contemporary qualitative studies is of the impossibility of taking a neutral position in doing and producing research.

Of course, our field is not an exception but, unfortunately, follows an unfortunate trend in qualitative studies. As Bishop (1998) demurred:

“Much qualitative research has also maintained a colonizing discourse of the 'other' by seeking to hide the researcher/writer under a veil of neutrality or of objectivity, a situation where the interests, concerns, and power of the researcher to determine the outcome of the research remain hidden in the text.” (p. 208)

Ten years after Bishop's protest, the situation was more or less the same, as pointed out by Denzin (2008):

“Under the guise of objectivity and neutrality neoconservatives deny the culture's rights to self-determination... And some radical theorists think that only they and their theories can lead the culture into freedom, as if members of the culture suffered from an indigenous version of false consciousness” (p. 99 – 100)

More recently, Kovach (2018) argued that the Western gaze is still dominant in qualitative research. However, we hope that our panel provides a starting point, if not the way out of this colonial mindset and moves us toward the decolonization of our field. One simple but powerful message that we wish to give is of our invitation to do research into Indigenous issues. The panel accepted the value generated by our current theories and methods but believed that new ones are needed to understand Indigenous context. Like Said (2003), we have been

“arguing that [the Other] is itself a constituted entity, and that the notion that there are geographical spaces with [!]indigenous, radically "different" inhabitants who can be defined on the basis of some religion, culture, or racial essence proper to that geographical space is equally a highly debatable idea. I certainly do not believe the limited proposition that only a black can write about blacks, a Muslim about Muslims, and so forth” (p. 322).

7.1 Recommendations

To conclude, Michael asked each panelist to make a very short concluding statement. Michael then thanked the panelists and the audience for what was a very engaging panel discussion. The panel ended by calling for more research into Indigenous affairs but suggested to proceed with care. These are summarized as some recommendations and suggestions for future directions of research.

Our first recommendation is that scholars need to revisit the fundamental definition of research. As Denzin points out, critical thinking has challenged many prevalent views but “the definition of research has not changed, to fit newer models of inquiry” (p. 110). This should be changed. The change may require engaging with local bodies such as the Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) and the Research Ethics Committee (RECs) that manage and control how to do research. Like Norman Denzin (2008), we also take the position that “IRBs are institutional apparatuses that regulate a particular form of ethical conduct, a form that may be no longer workable in a transdisciplinary, global, and postcolonial world” (p. 97). These institutional bodies are “coldly calculating devices” that simplify complex concepts to build one model to fit all forms of research – this seems wrong to us and reflects an uncritical approach (p. 108). We encourage Indigenous researchers to work with their local research institutions in order to legitimize Indigenous research methods; some notable examples are guidelines provided by the Assembly of First Nations in Canada¹.

Our second recommendation is that researchers should be attuned to the subtle issues of for whom do we write and for whom the text speaks (Chughtai et al., 2020; Clarke & Davison, 2020). This is particularly relevant to address the problems surrounding representation, legitimacy and authenticity in Indigenous

¹ See First Nations Ethics Guide on Research. Research and Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge, https://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/fn_ethics_guide_on_research_and_atk.pdf

research. We reiterate the view of Fine, Weis, Weseen, and Wong (2000) “that questions of responsibility-for-whom will, and should, forever be paramount” (p. 125).

Our third recommendation is that researchers working in Indigenous contexts should resist the temptation to blindly follow recent trends in theory and method. Many new theories are grounded in colonial views, insensitive to Indigenous peoples’ issues and, consequently enforce, as Kovach explains, “a Western gaze that propels a ruthless *materialism*” and insists on developing knowledge (emphasized, p. 388). Researchers are encouraged to engage with Indigenous philosophies and worldviews.

Our fourth recommendation is that editors and reviewers should encourage Indigenous knowledge in the corpus of the IS research literature. Editors should encourage and guide authors to engage with Indigenous research methods and go beyond *normal* qualitative research.

Our fifth recommendation is that researchers should aim to develop a set of principles conducting Indigenous research in our field. We have provided a starting point to develop these principles in the form of future research questions. More specifically, the principles should follow Indigenous sacred epistemology. One possible explanation is provided by Denzin (2008) who says that “this sacred epistemology recognizes and interrogates the ways in which race, class, and gender operate as important systems of oppression in the world today” (p. 118).

Our sixth and final recommendation is that researchers and editors should pay attention to the larger societal and methodological issues surrounding Indigenous research. This is important, for although we have taken a small step toward decolonization of IS research, decolonization is part of a much larger project in critical Indigenous theory. Specifically, *decolonization* should pave the way to *healing, transformation* and *mobilization* (Denzin, 2008; Smith, 2012).

We believe that IS scholars have a moral duty to engage with world affairs. To that end, a critical stance is required, a stance that accepts the other and invite the other to speak. But, we - the researchers – cannot truly know what is going on (with them) without becoming closer to the researched. The aim of the Association for Information Systems is to ‘serve society,’ but it is rarely discussed how researchers should serve society (beyond working in and for industry and businesses). Therefore, we suggest a decolonial turn is required in IS research; a decolonial position that critiques Eurocentric hegemonic patterns of knowledge and claims of discovery and encourages plural ways of understanding the world.

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About the Authors

Michael D. Myers is Professor of Information Systems at the University of Auckland Business School, New Zealand. His research interests are in the areas of qualitative research methods in information systems, and the social, organizational and cultural aspects of digital technologies. He won the Best Paper award (with Heinz Klein) for the most outstanding paper published in *MIS Quarterly* in 1999. Michael served as a Senior Editor of *MIS Quarterly* from 2001-2005 and as a Senior Editor of *Information Systems Research* from 2008-2010. He also served as President of the Association for Information Systems (AIS) in 2006-2007 and as Chair of IFIP Working Group 8.2 from 2006-2008. He currently serves as joint Editor-in-Chief of *European Journal of Information Systems*. Michael is a Fellow of AIS and a LEO award winner.

Hameed Chughtai an ethnographer and Lecturer at the University of Southampton Business School. His research focuses on the phenomenon of technology using interpretive field research methods, specifically studying people's engagement with information technologies in everyday practices. His research has been appeared or forthcoming in journals such as *European Journal of Information Systems*, *Information Systems Journal*, *Computers in Human Behavior*, *Communications of the AIS*, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* and in the proceedings of various conferences.

Liz Davidson is the W. Ruel Johnson Professor of Information Technology Management at the Shidler College of Business, University of Hawai'i. Her interest in Indigenous research methods, scholarship, and related ethical and political challenges developed from her experiences at the University of Hawai'i, which has a mission to serve the Hawaiian people as well as to uphold the mission of a Research 1 university. She has taught and advised Native Hawaiian PhD students studying in an IS program and has learned to appreciate their unique perspectives on research, knowledge, and community. As Editor-in-Chief of *Information and Organization*, she has also engaged with authors trying to bridge the gaps between traditional social science research and Indigenous studies.

Pitso Tsibolane is a researcher and Lecturer of Information Systems at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. His research focuses on understanding the meaning of digital technology to communities at the margins of society through grounded interpretive research. His research has appeared in the proceedings of conferences such as AMCIS, PACIS and others.

Amber Young is Assistant Professor of Information Systems at the University of Arkansas. Her research interests are in the areas of how technology can be used for social good and emancipatory collaboration. She is also interested in how technologies shape identities. Amber has collaborated on research with the Klamath Tribes and consulted for the Chickasaw Nation. She is a member (by marriage) of the Five Tribes Freedmen. Her research has been published in *MIS Quarterly*, *Information Systems Journal*, *Information and Organization*, *Communications of the AIS*, and other outlets. She is Associate Editor of *Information and Organization*.

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