

The San people of southern Africa: Where ethics codes for researching indigenous people could fail them

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There is a long and often complicated history of researchers studying Indigenous people. In 1999, the education scholar Linda Tuhiwai-Smith,

in her book "[Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples](#)," emphasized the colonial character of much research. She warned that it "brings with it a new wave of exploration, discovery, exploitation and appropriation."

Well into the [20th century](#), researchers depicted groups like the Indigenous San of southern Africa in a racist fashion, fixating on their physical characteristics and writing of their "savage" or "primitive" state.

Historically, many researchers did not care about their study participants' consent or agency, or how they could benefit from the research, for instance through improving their position in society.

This has gradually shifted over the past 50 years. Global organizations such as the Ethical Research Partnership [TRUST](#), the [American Anthropological Association](#) and most, if not all, credible academic institutions, have created ethical rules and guidelines to protect vulnerable populations from exploitation and promote their role in research.

But, as I and a group of fellow ethnographers, together with [San people](#) from all over southern Africa, show in [a recent paper](#), such ethical guidelines have flaws.

Today there are [about 130,000 San people](#) in Angola, Botswana, [Namibia](#), South Africa and Zimbabwe. They were historically nomadic hunter-gatherers; in the past century or so, their lives have become more settled, based on agriculture and wage labor.

The pitfalls we identified in the guidelines manifest mainly in three ways: by oppressing [vulnerable groups](#), by being ambiguous about [potential benefits](#) to the participants, and by being difficult to follow in practice.

Three issues

There are several reasons why ethical conduct in scientific research is so important. Ethical rules are there to prevent what's known as "[ethics dumping](#)", in which unethical research practices are used in lower-income countries that would not normally be allowed elsewhere. They also guard against "[helicopter research](#)", when scientists from high-income countries conduct their research without involving local scientists or communities.

In 2017 a [code of conduct](#) was created by academics and San leaders working with and for the South African San Institute, the South African San Council and TRUST. The [paper](#) discussed in this article, as well as [one other](#), analyzed problems with this code and similar instruments, and individual contracts unique to a particular piece of research.

These were:

1. Oppression of opinions: Authorities (often NGOs) sometimes want to push their agenda by keeping unwelcome ideas out of the research. In South Africa, a colleague of mine encountered dubious gatekeepers who claimed to represent the community she hoped to study and who wanted to dictate whom she could interview.

An instrument intended to promote ethical research was used to exclude particular people, or their ideas.

2. An over-emphasis on immediate benefits: Most codes of conduct and contracts include a clause that research must be "beneficial". This ignores the essence of what most [scientific research](#) is: fundamental and not applied. Fundamental knowledge is not immediately practical but it is crucial to make research potentially beneficial.

I have worked on [research](#) about a land claim by the San in northern Namibia. Knowledge similar to the sort reflected in my research [has helped San groups](#) in other parts of southern Africa [regain or retain land](#). Will my research do the same? I have no idea, because that takes time—the research doesn't instantly benefit the participants.

A focus on benefits also ignores different interests and perceptions within communities. A benefit for some may be detrimental to others. For instance, [research](#) can support wildlife management and the creation of tourism jobs for some. But these activities may constrain other livelihoods in the same community. In a [Namibian case study](#), some San complained about restrictions on hunting, small-scale farming, or keeping livestock.

3. Practical limitations: In southern Africa it is often unclear in advance whom you need to contact to discuss and sign something, and what the legal status of codes and contracts is. In our experiences, e-mails often go unanswered. Many local San do not even know—or, in some cases, care—that these instruments exist. For most, researchers' needs and aims are not a priority in their ordinary lives.

In such cases research codes and contracts mainly legitimize the researchers' and gatekeepers' role in research, but not necessarily that of the people being studied.

This is not an exhaustive list of potential issues. Others include the imposition of a red tape culture, illiteracy among participants and a lack of clear consequences if researchers behave unethically even after signing a contract.

Paper is no panacea

We are not opposed to instruments that can empower research

participants, but they are not a panacea. Researchers need to scrutinize such codes' inherent and complex challenges. They also need to put collaboration at the heart of their work.

Examples of such scrutiny and collaboration already exist. Some San groups, such as the [Ana-Djeh San Trust](#), have created initiatives to increase their participation in research, including community training to raise awareness about research. In such cases they like to collaborate with researchers they trust, normally because they have been in contact with them for many years already. Such trust is at the heart of good collaborations and is, we would argue, much more important than paper agreements.

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