



Letter to the Editor

Letter to the Editor. Re: “[Indigenous dataset of Dayak, Malay, and Chinese communities in Sintang Regency, West Kalimantan, Indonesia by A. Gandasari et al., Data in Brief, 2024, 53, 110147]”



1. Background

The issue of extracting and publishing knowledge and what are often referred to as datasets from Indigenous communities has been discussed in depth and questioned by Indigenous scholars globally [2,3]. In light of the recent article in this journal by Gandasari and colleagues [1], it is timely to have similar conversations in Indonesia. As a base principle, Indigenous scholars assert that research with Indigenous peoples needs to serve the well-being of Indigenous communities. As such, it is crucial to ensure that the research practices of social scientists, including how empirical materials are generated, kept, and used, are conducted in the interests of Indigenous peoples [3].

The article by Gandasari and colleagues [1] offers an effort to advance research with Indigenous peoples in Indonesia by publishing a dataset containing knowledge and insights from Dayak, Malay, and Chinese communities in Kalimantan. The authors assert that this is part of an effort “to document Indigenous knowledge to preserve local communities’ culture” (p. 1). Whilst such efforts are important, their stance regarding the open use of Indigenous knowledge through open-source publishing practices in Indonesia warrants further discussion.

The practice of releasing datasets for further research reflects contemporary trends towards open sources as a response to the replication crisis in quantitative psychology and the broader social sciences [4]. A central assumption to this approach in sharing data is the principle of reproducibility, which refers to how such dataset can help other researchers to produce ‘reliable’ results, or, within the context of qualitative research also operating primarily from a natural sciences model, as a form of ‘confirmability audit’ [5]. Open-source publishing is also evident in the practice of uploading preprints and sharing datasets and associated supplementary materials. Such research can be useful in efforts to address the replication crisis and for checking the validity of statistical relationships reported in published research. However, such natural science-driven research practices have different implications for social sciences working with Indigenous peoples.

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We share Gandasari and colleagues' [1] concern in investing efforts to support the well-being of Indigenous groups. However, the adherence to such contemporary trends in open-source publishing can risk further alienating Indigenous peoples from scholarly research. This is in part because such acts can be seen as prioritising natural science epistemic concerns that have been driven out of the United States and anglophone psychologies and in the process can displace localised Indigenous ethics that accompanies Indigenous knowledges. What is clear here is that there are competing tensions between global scholarly trends towards open science and localised ethics where the potential for harm is present and worthy of detailed discussion among Indonesian scholars.

In the following sections, we offer three key points regarding researchers reducing and transforming local cultural and medicinal knowledges and insights into something we call 'data'. Once such knowledge is transformed into data many researchers then take ownership of and exercise their prerogative to release these materials openly for other researchers who may have never met the people participating in the original research project, nor necessarily holding a vested interest in the collective wellbeing of the Indigenous groups concerned.

2. Some Areas of Improvements

2.1. The need to avoid commodification of Indigenous knowledge as 'data'

"The data collected was obtained from 161 informants each of Dayak, Malay, and Chinese using purposive sampling consisting of three informants, who is a Dayak, Malay, and Chinese community leader who is the leading actor who is directly involved in Indigenous knowledge of the tribe. ... Indigenous knowledge data sources, namely Dayak, Malay, and Chinese, are divided into 12 sections: history, language, literature, art, crafts, customary customs and laws, technology and tools, natural environment and ecosystems, medicines, food and beverages, clothing, and sports and divided into variables of which there are at least 105 variables". (1), p. 3).

Releasing this dataset of Indigenous knowledge invokes potential concerns regarding the commodification of Indigenous knowledge and is not in line with emerging paradigms in Indigenous scholarship [2,3,6,7]. In indigenised research practice, many Indigenous groups emphasise the important of their developing genuine relationships *with* the researchers who conduct research *within* local communities. Many are less open to researchers conducting research *on* rather than *with* them [8]. Further, the information and insights shared with researchers are often considered inseparable from the worldviews and cultural values of local groups that promote the forging of cooperative and mutually beneficial relationships with researchers with whom Indigenous people engage in dialogue [3].

Among Javanese families, for example, *tamu* (guest) including the researchers visiting a community should be treated well to preserve their dignity, through the practice of *suguh* (providing food and drinks), *gupuh* (feeling busy to ensure the guest's needs are fulfilled), and *lungguh* (to ask the guest to sit and talk comfortably) [9]. Sharing daily activities with the researchers, who are often outsiders to the community, is part to local efforts to *nguwongke wong* (humanising humans). The information gathered during such interactions and shared activities between the researchers and the researched, is therefore not simply given as data. Rather, it is produced and constructed through genuine relationships [10]. Processes of Indigenous leaders, elders, and community members sharing information is considered an act of intimacy that remains sensitive, inter-personal, and sacred. Such research engagements with Indigenous people need to involve some kind of ethical discussion that goes beyond institutional procedural ethics, and directly includes local ethical values in terms of how local data is used [11]. Among a number of possible considerations, these discussions should involve considering how information given will be used, who has access to it, and who benefits from its use [2,3].

Problems arise when the researchers treat the empirical materials generated with a local community as free floating 'data'. The use of this term shifts guardianship of the knowledge and insights from the Indigenous groups to the researchers who can then share the data with the broader research community who likely have no relationship or obligations towards the well-being of the Indigenous groups whose knowledge is being shared. Given the emphasis on relationships and knowing who one is engaging with among Indigenous communities, such use of 'data' as a commodity raises a series of ethical issues. A key question that should be asked here is were the Indigenous participants fully aware of how their knowledge would be shared publicly and used by other researchers with agendas these groups may not share? If the answer is no, then we would argue that their knowledge should not be deposited as open-source data.

In the manuscript we are commenting on, Gandasari and colleagues [1] did not really discuss the consent process for releasing the data publicly. The authors need to address this omission to ensure that all people involved, from those Indigenous people participating in the research to researchers who might want to draw on the 'data' understand the whole process of releasing this information and the ethics involved. Whilst the authors of the article stated that there are 161 informants consisting of 3 community leaders, it is unclear if the authors engaged with 161 informants directly or through 3 community leaders/elders. If the authors worked with 3 co-investigators to collect the accounts of the 161, there is an issue regarding whether or not these three leaders and/or the Indigenous group members provided informed consent and had the authority to give the tribes knowledge away. To be clear, we raise these issues not to accuse Gandasari and colleagues [1] of unethical practice. We are simply seeking to foreground tensions regarding knowledge guardianship in research with Indigenous groups. The work of Gandasari and colleagues [1] exemplifies some of the tensions around, and short comings of university driven or institutional procedural ethics, alongside the open-science movement, and regarding how Indigenous knowledge is currently being treated.

For some time, Indigenous scholars have argued that the pursuit of knowledge and understanding is often deeply layered in the imperial and colonial practices of extraction and unauthorised use [3]. Relatedly, if research with Indigenous peoples is for the well-being of Indigenous groups, then due consideration should be given to whether or not researchers should be giving Indigenous knowledge away and how such acts might actually contribute to the well-being of the groups who retain guardianship of their own knowledge. It can be argued that Indigenous knowledge should only be shared within the guidelines of the tribal groups' understandings and guardianship of their knowledge that often stems from their ancestors. Such decision making can also be guided by insights from frameworks developed by other Indigenous peoples who are also grappling with similar ethical concerns regarding data sovereignty [2]. These are complex relational issues, and what we are proposing is that if social scientists are to share Indigenous knowledge within research communities, then it is time that we develop guidelines for the use of such materials. The development of these guidelines should be led by the tribal groups concerned, rather than university ethics committees or the researchers who are wanting to take and use the knowledge. Such efforts would require the development and maintenance of genuine and meaningful relationships that persists across time and a commitment by researchers to mobilise their research efforts for the benefit of the tribal groups they work with.

2.2. Acknowledging the privilege to share Indigenous knowledge

"Open discussion for consultation using 105 main questions with the keyword "What do you know about..." followed by in-depth questions based on answers provided by informants". ([1], p.14).

Various Indigenous groups have varying experiences with and understanding of the larger ramifications that come with sharing their knowledge with academics and potential third parties when forming partnership with outsiders. The second concern we raise in this commentary relates to who should exercise the privilege of sharing Indigenous information with oth-

ers. Also relevant is how Indigenous communities with less experience of engaging with outside researchers might learn from more experienced groups. With more experience comes a deeper awareness of the issues around the sharing of cultural information and issues of data sovereignty. For example, Māori, the Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand, have had over 100 years of engaging with and developing capacity in European scholarship [3]. As a result, the potential risks and implications of sharing knowledge are very well known. There are now parameters that have been developed by Indigenous Māori themselves regarding who has guardianship of their information, how it can be used, and who stands to benefit from the collection wisdom of Māori. These parameters emerged and developed over a rich history of Māori scholarship relate to the notion of Indigenous data sovereignty [2], which is useful to protect Indigenous information from exploitation, misinterpretation, and misuse by external entities. Māori scholars and elders have worked extensively to build *Te Mana Raraunga* (<https://www.temanararaunga.maori.nz/>) to give a detailed orientation, laws, and principles around how information regarding Māori communities, cultures, and lands is kept and used. For other Indigenous groups, through no fault of their own, they may find themselves in a position where they are yet to have developed well-articulated principles for how they govern their knowledge and how it might be accessed by members of other groups. After all, it is unreasonable to expect Indigenous groups, particularly remote/isolated ones, to understand the ethical dilemmas and nuances of a global scholarly discipline without having participated themselves as active scholars within said discipline.

In working with Indigenous groups in Indonesia, we need to consider the issue of data sovereignty as a core component of our research activities. The process of sharing Indigenous knowledge needs to reflect the interests, values, and aspirations of Indigenous people. Indigenous groups have rights to hold control over all of their information, including how the data is shared, developed, disseminated, and constructed into research papers. Dayak, Malay, and Chinese respectively have a long history of collaborations and conflicts in Indonesia and scholars have documented the different capacities they have in articulating their expressions in various settings in everyday life [12,13]. The details surrounding how the authors ensured Indigenous data sovereignty of the three Indigenous groups involved was missing in their original article and should be discussed comprehensively. Furthermore, these are not discussions that can be had by outside scholars alone, nor through 'tokenistic' inclusion of Indigenous voices who are brought around an academic table. Scholars from these Indigenous community themselves need to be at the centre of these discussions. If no such scholars exist, the possibility of providing mentorship and support for such emerging Indigenous scholars so that this conversation can be had properly and ethically could be explored.

2.3. Discussing the Indigenous ethics point of view

"This research was declared ethically appropriate, following 7 (seven) WHO 2011 standards, (1) Social Value, (2) Scientific Value, (3) Equitable Assessment and Benefits, (4) Risk, (5) Persuasion Exploitation, (6) Confidentiality and Privacy, and (7) Informed Consent, referring to the 2016 CIOMS Guidelines". ([1], p. 15).

The last concern is how releasing Indigenous knowledge for use by other researchers is inseparable with the issue of ethics, particularly on what it means to be ethical from the point of view of Indigenous scholars and tribal groups themselves. As is evident from the quote above, Gandasari and colleagues [1] appear to have determined that the research project is ethical from the Western perspective that is enshrined in the procedural ethics that has been institutionalised in university and institutional ethical review boards. Procedural ethics in research refers to the set of principles, guidelines, and procedures that govern the ethical conduct of research activities involving human subjects [14]. The ethical conduct used to assess whether a particular research project is deemed ethical is based on what are often assumed to be universal guidelines

for governing the conduct of the good research practices that do no harm to the research participants. Accordingly, Gandasari and colleagues [1] pointed out that the research has followed seven points of WHO 2011 ethical standards. These are valuable standards, but do not offer a complete picture when it comes to research with Indigenous groups.

Whilst this universal ethical framework is important to give orientation to the researchers around how to ensure that the research practice is conducted as ethical as possible, what is missing is culturally informed ethical frameworks from the Indigenous groups themselves. What is needed is more engagement with the relational ethics involved that enables researchers to put close and cooperative human relations with Indigenous groups at the centre of their research practices [15]. Indigenous groups often have their own ethical frameworks [11], including how the information can be disseminated and this should be placed at the fore of the research practices. In this regard, adherence to procedural ethics within the context of research on Indigenous peoples could be seen as the bare minimal ethical standard, that is, from an institutional or perhaps legal perspective. Ideally, ethical standards should also include relational ethics that are negotiated through ongoing and meaningful relationships with Indigenous groups so that their concerns and values inform our research approach. Indigenous ethics is holistic in the sense that it has interconnectedness, reciprocity, and respect for the lands, and has a deep orientation to the community [16]. While Western research ethics framework might have invested efforts in minimising the risks on the individuals, Indigenous perspective of ethics often prioritises the collective well-being. This ethical obligation sits with the Indigenous group in question, and this understanding needs to be made clear.

We also suggest that the ownership of the information regarding Indigenous groups also should be made collective with the Indigenous groups. Involving the community elders to the authorships of this publication might be one way to develop a sense of collective ownership to the information. The research partnerships should be conducted to serve the need of Indigenous communities.

3. Concluding Remarks

In opening up the opportunity for scholars in Indonesia to consider the sharing of Indigenous knowledge, Gandasari and colleagues [1] have made an important contribution to the refinement of research processes in Indonesia. This commentary does not seek to provide a contra-argument for Gandasari and colleagues [1]. Rather, we offer a contribution to advancing our discussions regarding ethical practices in how we engage with and possibly share Indigenous knowledge and what implications our actions might have for the Indigenous communities involved in social science research. This commentary foregrounds how sharing Indigenous knowledge invokes ethical concerns and raises questions regarding the use of 'data' and the guardianship of Indigenous knowledge. As a nation in Southeast Asia, we have historically had a tendency to follow the scholarly norms of North America in a very trusting way. However, we need to be mindful of the ethical implications that emerge. Through meaningful dialogue with other Indigenous traditions [17], we are in a position to actively shape how research is conducted in our country that has our own peoples in mind. We just need to have the conversation.

Ethics Statement

The current work does not involve human subjects, animal experiments, or any data collected from social media platforms.

CRediT Author Statement

Jony Eko Yulianto: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft; **Pita King:** Writing – review & editing.

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Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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