












## COMMENTARY

# ICIRAS: Research and reconciliation with indigenous peoples in rural health journals

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## Abstract

**Aim:** We aim to promote discussion about an Indigenous Cultural Identity of Research Authors Standard (ICIRAS) for academic journal publications.

**Context:** This is based on a gap in research publishing practice where Indigenous peoples' identity is not systematically and rigorously flagged in rural health research publications. There are widespread reforms, in different research areas, to counter the reputation of scientific research as a vehicle of racism and

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discrimination against the world's Indigenous peoples. Reflecting on these broader movements, the editorial teams of three rural health journals—the Australian Journal of Rural Health, the Canadian Journal of Rural Medicine, and Rural and Remote Health—recognised that Indigenous peoples' identity could be embedded in authorship details.

**Approach:** An environmental scan (through a cultural safety lens where Indigenous cultural authority is respected, valued, and empowered) of literature was undertaken to detect the signs of inclusion of Indigenous peoples in research. This revealed many ways in which editorial boards of Journals could systematically improve their process so that there is 'nothing about Indigenous people, without Indigenous people' in rural health research publications.

**Conclusion:** Improving the health and wellbeing of Indigenous peoples worldwide requires high quality research evidence. The philosophy of cultural safety supports the purposeful positioning of Indigenous peoples within the kaleidoscope of cultural knowledges as identified contributors and authors of research evidence. The ICIRAS is a call-to-action for research journals and institutions to rigorously improve publication governance that signals "Editing with IndigenUs and for IndigenUs".

#### KEYWORDS

author credentials, cultural identity, cultural provenance, cultural safety, Indigenous peoples

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

"It is vital that Indigenous researchers are recognised and duly acknowledged, and that the research being published is culturally appropriate" (Professor Donald Warne, Oglala Lakota, International Adviser, *Australian Journal of Rural Health*, 2021).

### 1.1 | Background

In health research publication, it is difficult to distinguish authors who self-identify as Indigenous peoples; for example, as First Nations, Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, Māori, Pacifica, American Indian, Alaskan Native, Métis, Inuit, or as any of the 370 million Indigenous peoples worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Their invisibility is partly due to the lack of attribution in the publications; for instance, the author list—with first and last names only—restricts the conveyance of identity. Our goal as an academic community should be to expand the inclusiveness of research governance to include publication governance. Editorial rules stipulate publication of ethics approvals, statements of interest, organisational affiliations, declaration of funding sources and author contributions to the articles, but what about

#### Key Points

- The Australian Journal of Rural Health, Rural and Remote Health and the Canadian Journal of Rural Medicine, have committed to the editorial requirement that research published about Indigenous Peoples must also include Indigenous Peoples as authors, or that evidence is provided of Indigenous Peoples' genuine engagement in all stages of the research process, including crafting the manuscript
- This Commentary, published simultaneously in all three journals, takes the next step, proposing the development of an Indigenous Cultural Identity of Research Authors Standard (ICIRAS) for health research publications
- An ICIRAS would serve to embed the rights of Indigenous Peoples into academic publishing governance, aligning academic publishing with the movement for embedding human rights in research with Indigenous and Tribal peoples and working towards genuine truth-telling and reconciliation

Indigenous cultural identity? The issue of author identity is especially relevant for rural and remote health journals because Indigenous peoples living in rural and remote health locations experience health inequities linked to racism and cultural suppression. We, the editorial teams of the *Australian Journal of Rural Health (AJRH)*, *Rural and Remote Health (RRH)*, and the *Canadian Journal of Rural Medicine (CJRM)*, are changing our editorial rules so that research published about Indigenous peoples includes Indigenous peoples as authors, or evidence is provided of Indigenous peoples' genuine engagement in all stages of the research process, including crafting the manuscript.<sup>2-4</sup> Our next step is to propose the development of an Indigenous Cultural Identity of Research Authors Standard (ICIRAS, pronounced 'I-keye-ras', short 'I' sound in Indigenous, hard 'k' sound for Culture, and long 'eye' sound in Identity) (Figure 1).

## 1.2 | Environmental scan

Discerning the cultural provenance (a concept that signals the diversity of Indigenous peoples' cultural roots specific to local tribes, for example, Ngiyampaa is one of hundreds of tribes of Indigenous Australians) of the authors of a research paper involving Indigenous peoples is difficult. Published articles vary in how the Indigenous identity is flagged, and for most journals reporting the Indigenous identity of authors is optional and, therefore, often completely absent in many manuscripts. An environmental scan was conducted to detect the Indigenous cultural identity of authors using a novel method of hand searching author libraries, and scholarly databases, for example, where Indigenous author identity was explicit. The notation of cultural provenance was variable. It appeared in the byline of both the webpage header and in the pdf,<sup>5-7</sup> researcher positionality,<sup>8</sup> acknowledgements section,<sup>9</sup> ethics section,<sup>10</sup> methods section,<sup>11</sup> materials and methods section,<sup>12</sup> the introduction and preceding the methods,<sup>13</sup> citation format,<sup>5</sup> front page of author information on preprint,<sup>14</sup> and was indicated with additional author information symbols (\*, †, ‡, §).<sup>15</sup>



FIGURE 1 Flagging the Indigenous Cultural Identity of Research Authors Standard (art by Jason Lee, Larrakia)

## 1.3 | Definition

For the purpose of this standard, we specify Indigenous cultural identity as the self-identified Indigenous status of authors whose ancestors 'inhabited a country or a geographical region at the time when people of different cultures or ethnic origins arrived'.<sup>1</sup> Many Indigenous peoples have a shared experience of occupation, settlement, or colonisation. To align with current United Nations nomenclature, we use the term Indigenous peoples.

## 2 | WHY A STANDARD?

A Standard means setting a bar for equity, diversity, and inclusiveness. Currently, without any such agreed minimum, rural health research discourse reflects research colonialism and power imbalances. This history accords value to a degree, profession or organisational affiliation, but not deep cultural wisdom, and expertise. This must end, for example, by principles of:

1. aligning with current best practice in research with Indigenous peoples,
2. promoting culturally safe publishing,
3. acknowledging, including and respecting Indigenous researchers and participants,
4. promoting culturally appropriate positionality,
5. recognising Indigenous peoples' knowledge sovereignty,
6. respecting Indigenous peoples' cultural authority and expertise, and
7. amplifying Indigenous peoples' voices in research publications.

These points indicate the need to develop and enact a standard for all academic publishers, ethics committees and research institutions, so that Indigenous peoples are acknowledged, recognised and respected throughout academia and research. This would assist journal reviewers and readers alike in their appraisals of research.

### 2.1 | Aligned with current best practice in research

There are parts of the international research environment where publications proactively address systemic biases and structural racism.<sup>16-19</sup> However, there has been no standardised "flag" to signal that the terrain systematically includes the Indigenous cultural identity of authors. It was in 2007 that the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples, Article 2 stated 'the right to be free

from any kind of discrimination, in the exercise of their rights, in particular that based on their indigenous origin or identity'.<sup>20</sup> The ICIRAS would be a lever for embedding the rights of Indigenous peoples into academic publishing governance, as aligned to the movement for embedding human rights in research with Indigenous and Tribal peoples.<sup>21</sup>

## 2.2 | Promoting culturally safe publishing

Indigenous cultural identity is important in cultural safety because it promotes professional reflexivity about personal, professional, organisational and social biases.<sup>22</sup> The ethic of respecting identity and cultural diversity is part of many definitions of cultural safety.<sup>23–25</sup> Readers routinely search the name of authors, their organisation, the funding bodies, their qualifications and their background to help assess the research's integrity: what about cultural integrity? Academic journals need to do more to make Indigenous peoples' voices and cultural qualifications obviously visible because, 'By acknowledging not just the contributors to the piece but the standpoints, we take the conversations to a deeper and fuller level'.<sup>26</sup> The first step toward deeper conversations is being aware of an author's name, while the next step is to recognise their Indigenous cultural identity as a flag for their cultural worldviews and lenses.

## 2.3 | Inclusivity—'be it to see it'

An ICIRAS sends a strong message: '[Indigenous researchers] are pushing back against assimilation and attempts to hide our identities and our realities through terms and methodologies that ignore our distinctiveness'.<sup>27</sup> This sentiment also resonates with the non-Indigenous authors of this paper, who believe transparent authorship cultural provenance is important in assessing the integrity of research concerning Indigenous peoples.<sup>28</sup> The three journals championing this initiative have agreed to operationalise this position, but recognise that policy change requires consultation and co-design activities. The *Rural and Remote Health Journal's* policy, 'nothing about us, without us', means that 'an article about people in any country or region without authors from that country or region will not be published'.<sup>28</sup> The *Australian Journal of Rural Health's* Author Cultural Identity Matters statement urges that 'cultural identity as a component of an author's credentials could be a meaningful action to acknowledge and respect Indigenous authors involved in rural health research and manuscripts'.<sup>29</sup> The leadership of the *Canadian Journal of Rural Medicine*, in prompting the idea of the "Position Statement: Research and

Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples in Rural Health Journals",<sup>2</sup> has implemented screening questions for submitted manuscripts.<sup>30</sup>

## 2.4 | Promoting culturally appropriate positionality

The global movement toward cultural safety, led by Indigenous peoples and championed by non-Indigenous allies,<sup>31–35</sup> prompts journals and publications to reflect on their position in perpetuating the power structures of colonial processes. This is relevant to research journals 'because the academic publication process, from authors to reviewers to editors, has legitimized scholarship norms that obscure the role of racism in publishing practices'.<sup>36</sup> It means decolonising those norms by reflecting on the pattern of culturally dangerous research (which diminishes, demeans, and disempowers Indigenous cultural identity) and standardising ways of including Indigenous knowledge systems and intellectual sovereignty,<sup>37</sup> preventing human rights violations through unethical research,<sup>38</sup> building trust in academic research conduct,<sup>39</sup> acknowledging the authenticity of Indigenous scholarship,<sup>40</sup> preventing the cultural appropriation of knowledge,<sup>41</sup> and promoting the power of Indigenous writing styles.<sup>42</sup> We believe the ICIRAS would signal to Indigenous peoples that academia is a space for action on breaking down colonial research traditions and moving toward respectful, inclusive research practice.<sup>43–50</sup>

## 2.5 | Recognising indigenous peoples' knowledge sovereignty

Gamilaraay Australian scholar Bindi Bennett's seminal research 'regarding the practice of acknowledging Indigenous participants and knowledges in articles that contain Indigenous content'<sup>26</sup> found few examples of recognition despite the argument where 'some participants pointed out that by being able to indicate the author's own cultural heritage, this can then give the audience a better understanding of the origins of the author's perspective' (p. 177). She argued that the lack of acknowledgement of Indigenous Australians in published articles 'serves to reaffirm that possession of knowledge and knowledge production is controlled by others' (p. 168). Therefore, within our sphere of influence in rural health research publishing, we respect that Indigenous peoples' knowledge belongs to them, and we will work with Indigenous stakeholders to develop practical strategies, perhaps along the lines of Indigenous data sovereignty,<sup>51–53</sup> to ensure knowledge sovereignty.

## 2.6 | Respecting indigenous peoples' cultural authority and expertise

The ICIRAS would also link to cultural authority because power rests with Indigenous peoples to determine if cultural knowledge should be embedded in journal publications: 'One of the ways we acknowledge our worldviews and value is through our cultural worldview and lens'.<sup>26</sup> Our worldviews naturally inform the research evidence base and all aspects of the research process. For example, through Harfield et al.'s (2020) *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Quality Appraisal Tool*, researchers are asked: 'Did the research have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research leadership?'.<sup>54</sup> This question is difficult to answer when Indigenous status is hard to determine from the content and metadata of an article. Recently, several publications denoted Indigenous cultural identity of authors as: first name, last name (Indigenous Nation),<sup>5-7</sup> thus signalling the importance of cultural authority.

## 2.7 | Amplifying indigenous peoples' voices in research publications

An ICIRAS should reflect on findings of research from the sphere of Australian micro- and small presses. Professional Editor Jodie Lea Martire dug deeply into the publishing world: 'The acquisition and editorial stages of publishing beg the question of who has the privilege and power to edit whom'.<sup>55</sup> In order to support the voices of under-represented authors, Martire found that the small presses cemented specific steps into their publishing processes. Therefore, all the steps of the rural research publication process should be examined to determine the points and pathways through which Indigenous peoples' voices are constrained or enabled. As editors of research wherein messages live through academic discourse, we have a moral obligation to ensure those messages frame the cultural strengths of Indigenous peoples.

## 3 | IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

The environmental scan revealed some factors to consider for this commentary. For example, guidelines exist for inclusion of cultural identity in author lists,<sup>56</sup> but they need to be updated to enable authors to self-identify.<sup>57</sup> Several issues demand deep conversation: must authors self-identify or can it be optional? Note that the authors of this report were explicit in having our cultural identity included. What form of identity to

use? How do non-Indigenous authors identify? Should identification occur where Indigenous authors publish non-Indigenous and Indigenous content? Should cultural identity be noted in reference lists? And then there is cultural intersectionality (e.g., LGBTIQA+, gender diversity, multicultural and other forms of cultural expression). These, and no doubt other issues to be uncovered in our future systematic review, will require careful consideration to inform research publication governance, such as the peer review process.<sup>58</sup>

## 4 | DISCUSSION—TRANSLATING POLICY INTO ACTION

The intent of ICIRAS is to celebrate Indigenous cultural identity in academic discourse. This aligns with a key aspect of cultural safety—services are provided regardless of culture, identity, and difference.<sup>59-62</sup> This means that the editorial governance of journals should be geared to epitomise Indigenous peoples as a reconciliation indicator for 'unwrapping epistemic injustice and colonization' in public health scholarship.<sup>63</sup> According to Dr. Alika Lafontaine (the first Indigenous president-elect of the Canadian Medical Association), 'A big part of reconciliation comes with shifting what we think is normal, and that's going to require work from a lot of different sides'.<sup>64</sup> Is this an attitude that the worldwide research community can adopt for creating the Indigenous Cultural Identity of Research Authors Standard?

### 4.1 | Call to action—"Editing with IndigenUs and for IndigenUs"

In the spirit of cultural safety, there is an imperative to work toward a scholarly state where Indigenous peoples are 'assured that the system reflects something of you',<sup>23</sup> that there is 'shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience, of learning together with dignity, and truly listening',<sup>24</sup> and that employs ongoing critical reflection of power differentials.<sup>65</sup> This requires journal editors, managers as well as research committees, funders and publishers to work for genuine truth and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.

Our collaboration of rural and remote health journals, invites other academic journals to:

1. conduct an audit to baseline the status of Indigenous peoples at all levels of governance,<sup>66</sup> such as on Editorial Boards, publishing house governance structures and at all stages of publishing,

2. establish an editors' sub-committee or working party to discuss ICIRAS and consider implementation issues,
3. include manuscript submission questions about author Indigeneity and the participation of Indigenous peoples in the research,
4. include Indigenous identity of authors in the byline,
5. revise author guidelines for acknowledging contributions,
6. publicise their position on research and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples,
7. provide a journal-specific position statement about the ICIRAS,
8. monitor, evaluate, and report on the impact of ICIRAS for assessing inclusivity and visibility of Indigenous research authors.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

Research needs to evolve to achieve the best-quality evidence possible to support policy, advocacy and practice in rural healthcare reforms. However, academic publishing processes could be better geared to value the cultural voices of Indigenous peoples. In this way, research evidence would be clearer in its cultural authority, expertise, provenance, respect and sovereignty. With the Indigenous Cultural Identity of Research Authors Standard, a consortium of rural health research journals has committed to systematic reforms to translate hashtags into academic reality. #DecolonizePublicationGovernance, #PrivilegeIndigenousAuthors and #DecolonizeScholarlyDiscourse. The ICIRAS is a call to action for research journals and institutions to rigorously improve research governance and show leadership in amplifying the cultural identity of Indigenous authors in health research.

### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

This commentary extends the Position Statement: Research and Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples in Rural Health Research. The authors, many of whom are journal editors, acknowledged the need to signal to readers if authors or rural research articles are Indigenous, and/or if Indigenous peoples were genuinely engaged in the writing process. Conceptualisation by ML and RR, initial drafting by ML and RR. All authors genuinely contributed their cultural voices to the drafting, writing, and editing process.

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Collaboratively published in the Canadian Journal of Rural Medicine, Rural and Remote Health, and the Australian Journal of Rural Health. ML, FM, and ES are Associate Editors of the AJRH. RR is former Editor-in-Chief of AJRH. PHC is Scientific Editor of the Canadian Journal of Rural Medicine. PW is Editor-in-Chief of Rural and Remote Health.

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