

innovative methodology  
and researching  
disadvantaged, excluded,  
vulnerable and/or  
disenfranchised people or  
groups: Aboriginal  
Australia

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**Transcript**  
**Dennis Foley**

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Thank you very much. As you can see by the title, I sort of chopped and changed with a few concepts to cover.

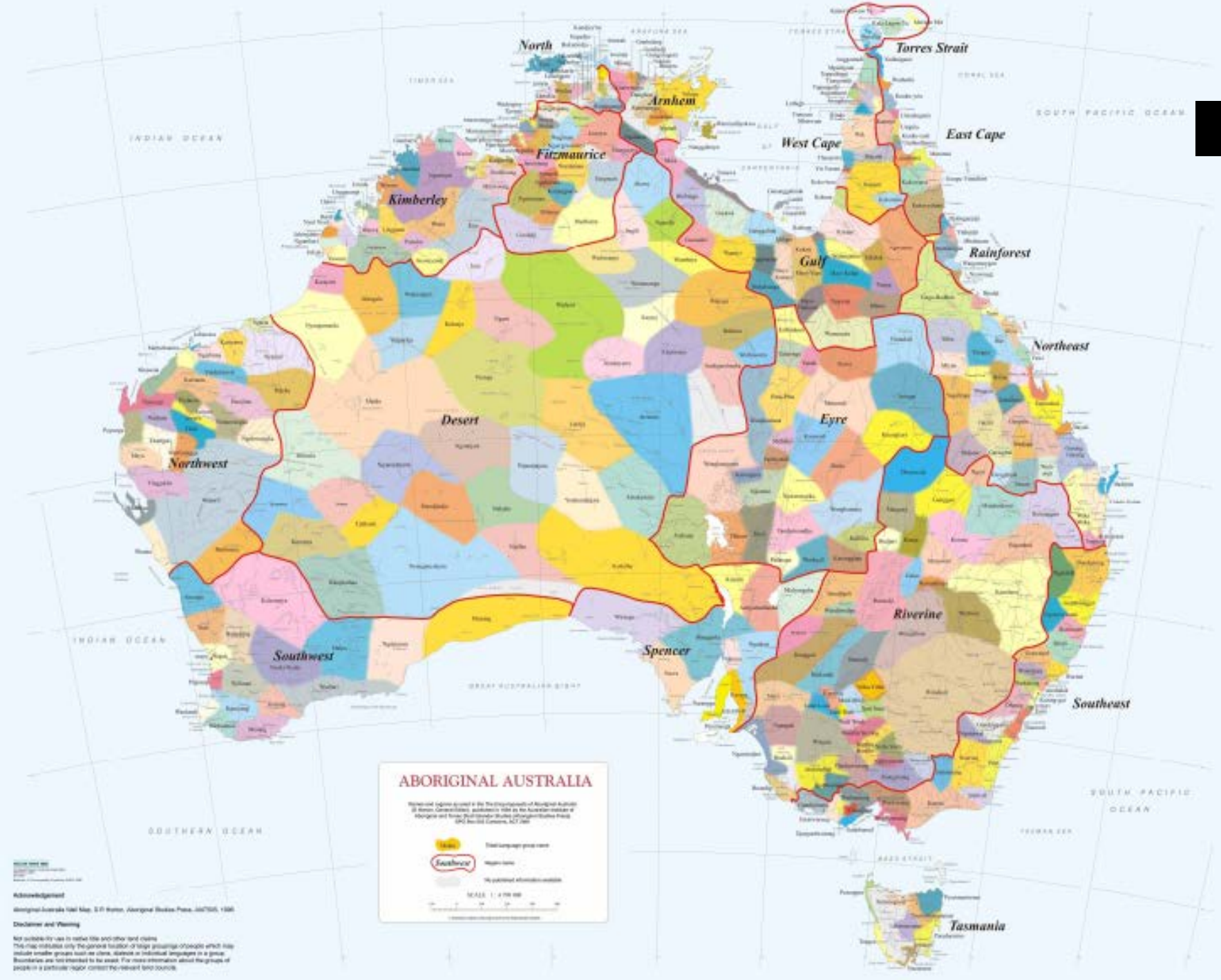
# Warami



Transcript continued.

2

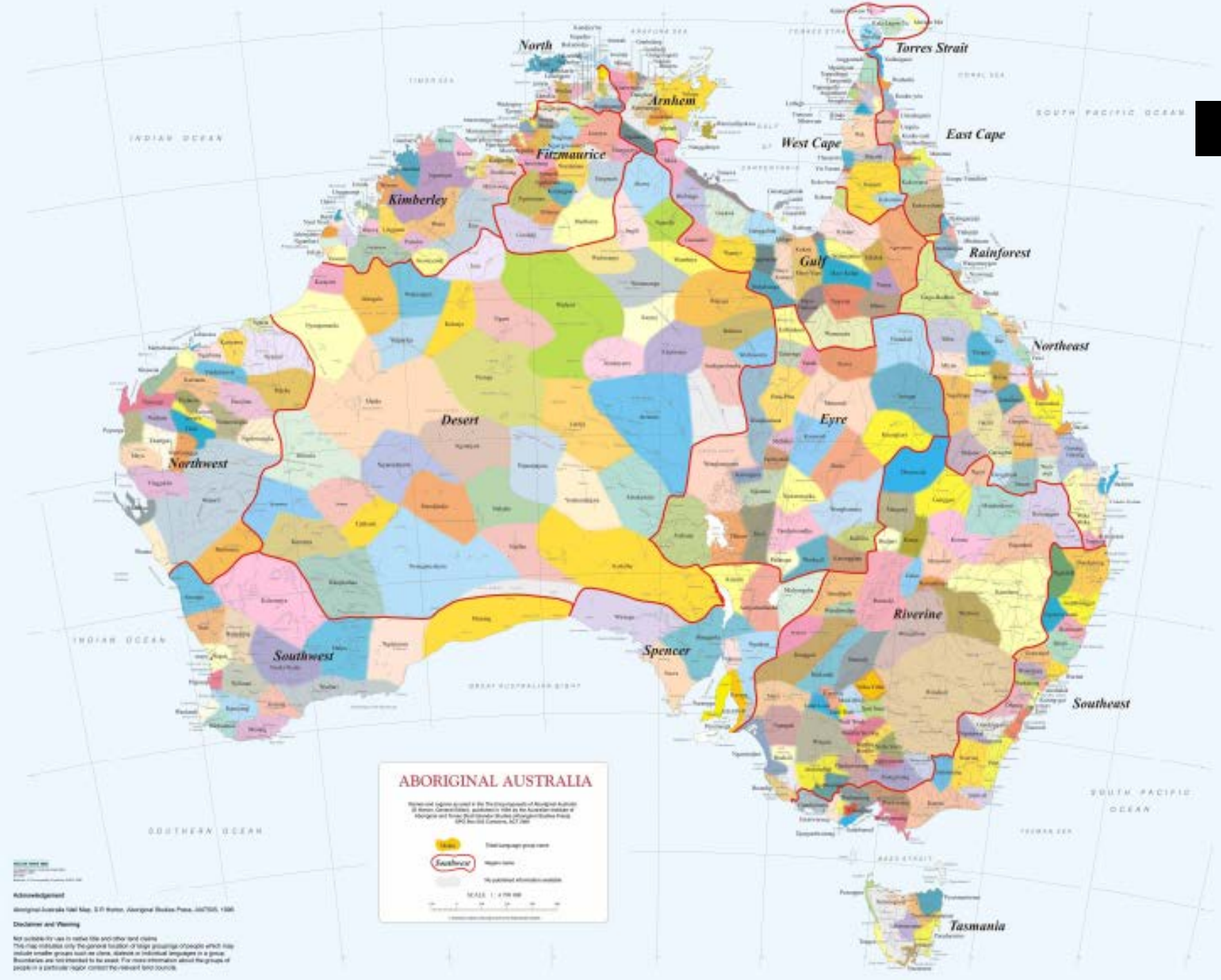
But firstly: warami.  
"Warami" in my language  
is "welcome"—and thank  
you again for coming here  
and coming out through  
the rain.



3

This is Aboriginal Australia. And quite often, as researchers, we forget the complexity and the number of the people that we're actually talking about. We are not talking about one race of people as such. Race concepts are not what we should even consider. We are many, many different groups: we have different languages, we have different backgrounds, we have different creation stories. We do have some similarities, but we are very different.





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As I said when I did the acknowledgement, I'm Gai-mariagal on my mother's side. I was born on my mother's country and therefore I follow my mother's law. My father is of Wiradjuri descent. I do not follow my father's law; however, I do respect it in many ways. I mainly stick with the matrilineal. So I've got a bit of a shift or a bit of a twist—or, as my supervisors said when I was doing my PhD, kind of a feminist perspective—and yes, in some ways I am, because my standpoint comes from feminist thinking. And we'll talk more about that later.

# What I was asked to do?

1. **Briefly discuss some of the key challenges to conducting research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians?**
2. **Following on from above, suggestions for 'best practice'. (Engagement, engagement, engagement?)**
3. **A brief overview of the 14 principles in the Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies (2012)**
4. **A couple of case studies**



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Okay. What I was asked to do was to briefly discuss some of the key challenges to conducting research, follow on from that to hit on what I would suggest for best practice, a brief overview of the 14 principles in the Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies, and a couple of case studies. Now—sorry, I ain't doing that.

# What I will do

- **Question why you want to research Aboriginal Australia?**
- **Key challenges culturally**
- **Some of the common theoretical approaches**
- **Sobering comments from the Indigenous perspective**

5

What I will do is question why people want to do research on Aboriginal Australia. I think that's far more important than those other academic questions. I'll discuss some key challenges culturally, some of the common theoretical approaches, and I think it's really important to understand some of the methodology that is used in Aboriginal research, and what I think are some of the better ones, what I do in my supervision, and what I come across in my work in ethics and other areas.



# What I will do

- **Question why you want to research Aboriginal Australia?**
- **Key challenges culturally**
- **Some of the common theoretical approaches**
- **Sobering comments from the Indigenous perspective**

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And some sobering comments from an Indigenous perspective. It's not meant to attack you; it's just meant to be a discussion point.





# 1. FIRSTLY ASK YOURSELF....

..... WHY?

WHY DO YOU WANT TO RESEARCH  
ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA?

WHAT ***RIGHT*** HAVE YOU GOT TO STICK  
YOUR NOSE INTO ABORIGINAL  
AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY?

BE IT AS A STUDENT OR AS A  
SUPERVISOR

..... AND RESEARCH IT?

6

So firstly, ask yourself why. Why do you want to do research on Indigenous Australia? Really ask yourself why. What is that burning need to do that research, if you are not Aboriginal? What right have you got to stick your nose into Aboriginal Australian society? And that's really important.





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6

Not so much today, but when I began my work in academia in 1991 it was different: the attitudes, the dominance. We talk about being in a post-colonial society: from an Aboriginal perspective, this is not post-colonial. It is still colonial. It was even more so back in 1991. So look at that, either as a student or a supervisor: why do you want to be involved in research with Aboriginal Australians?



# There is no pot of gold of easy money in the Indigenous research space

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Firstly: there is no pot of gold in Aboriginal research! In my current institution, I would probably be badgered at least once a semester by people in the accounting faculty, or somewhere else, with "let's do a project, you can access all this money!" Money to do Aboriginal research is just as hard to come by, if not harder, than other areas. It just amazes me that there's this fallacy within our academia that there's a pot of gold there to do Indigenous research. It does not exist.

# Researchers without the necessary skills run the risk of being seen in the eyes of the Aboriginal community as dumb and dumber!

8



Researchers without the necessary skills run the risk of being seen in the eyes of the Aboriginal community as dumb and dumber. Be it education, be it nursing, be it anthropology—or sociology, and I'll give them a hounding in a minute, because they probably deserve it the most—but that image tells it all. That's how Aboriginal people see you, trust me. And what amazes me is, I can go anywhere in Australia and get an ethics application signed. I can go to Uluru, I can go to the Kimberley, pull out an ethics ...



# Researchers without the necessary skills run the risk of being seen in the eyes of the Aboriginal community as dumb and dumber!

8



...application, and straight away the people know what it is, they know how it works, and they sign it. Go to the western suburbs of Sydney or Campbelltown and try and bring out an ethics application—you get a totally different response because they're under-researched, they don't know it. And it's a whole new area. Why has the largest population of Aboriginal people been overlooked? Ask yourselves that. You know why? They're not exotic. They're like me—they're fair. And it doesn't make good research.



# Or you run the risk of being another anthropologist who solves another Aboriginal myth!



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You can run the risk of being another anthropologist—or a sociologist—who solves another Aboriginal myth. You can get out there and copyright an Aboriginal song or a dance or a process or whatever, and you can kill that. I use that image of killing Santa Claus because quite often this is what's done. However, those two lovely men in central Australia—what was their name? One was the postmaster, and the other one was an insect guy. [audience interjection] Sorry? Spencer and Gillen. Thank you very much. Spencer and Gillen and some of those other guys, even though their work was like this, ??? from the Aboriginal perspective,

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their work is now invaluable for us to go back in time to look at what was recorded. However, we have got to put ourselves in the shoes of a nineteenth-century white man.

I gave a paper at Cambridge in the late 1990s, and when I got up on stage and said who I was and spoke language, one of the senior professors said "Oh my God, I thought you were extinct". He took me down to the zoology museum, he took me into a safe, and showed me the bones and the skeletal remains of my family. How do you think that made me feel? Not a human sciences museum. A zoology museum. My people, my family.

# Or you run the risk of being another anthropologist who solves another Aboriginal myth!



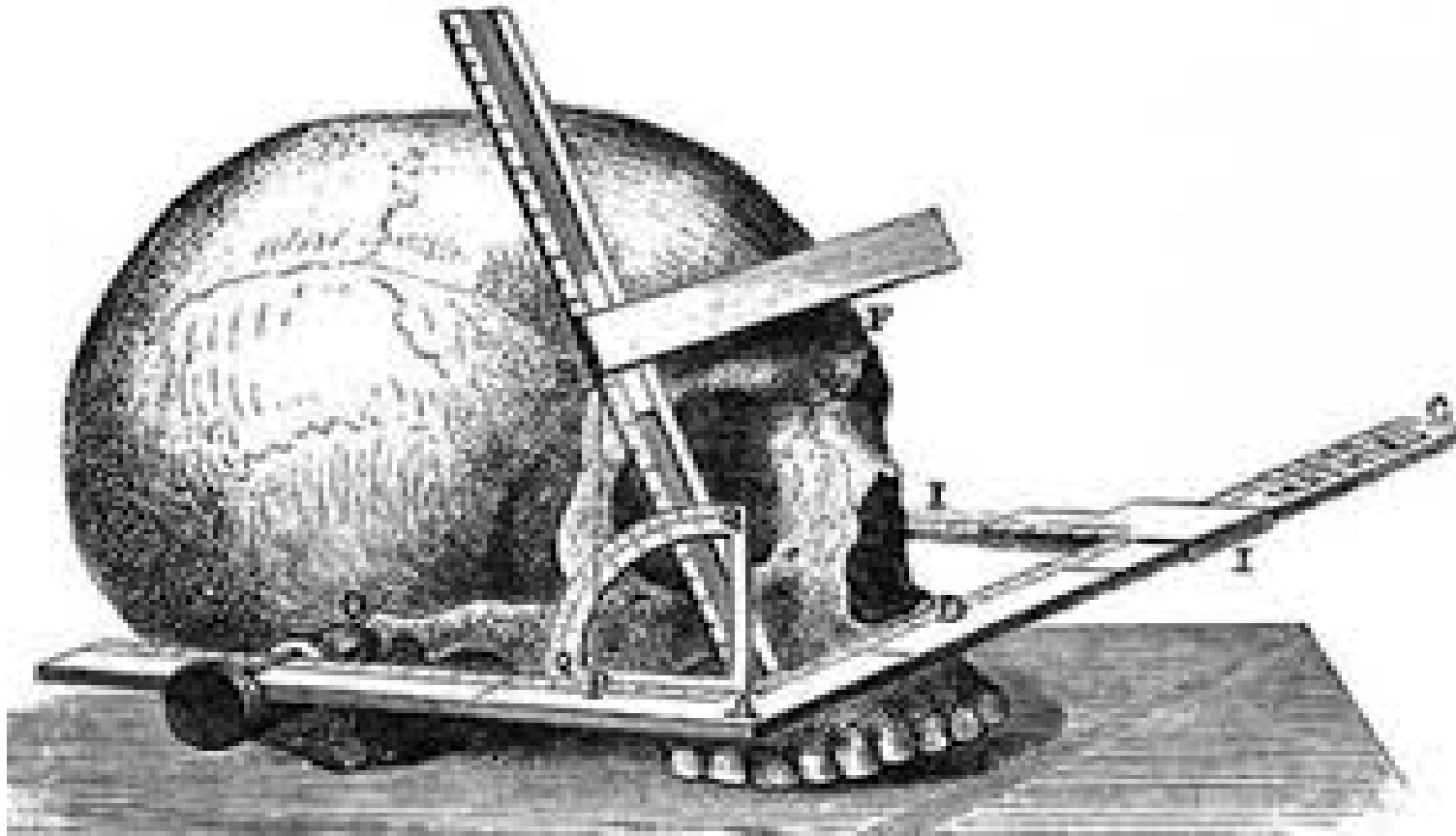
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These bones were gathered in the 1780s-1790s in Sydney, and they were in a zoology museum. God love him for showing it to me. We'll never get them back, but at least I went and I could say hello to them and put a bit of ochre on them.

We run the risk. If research is done wrong, we can kill Santa Claus again.



# Think about the intergenerational damage done by the humanities and social sciences on my people



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Think about the intergenerational damage by the humanities and social sciences on my people. When I was taken away from my mother at ten years of age, the first thing they did was measure the size of my cranium. Next thing they did, they put a colour chart across my arm of skin types, and then they shoved colour thingamajigs up my cuticles, and they said "You're an octoroon". A ten year old child, I had no idea what an octoroon is. And I'm still asking. Because to me it's just such a—it's something from outer space. So think about the damage, because it's still being done. It's still being done by researchers.





# Ask yourself what is the size of an average Australian family?



**4.2 (2 parents 2.2 kids)**

11

Ask yourself what is the size of an average Australian family.

If you don't know, it's 4.2.  
Two adults, 2.2 kids.



# What is the size of the average Australian Aboriginal family?

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What's the size of an average Aboriginal family?



**Aboriginal family?**

**6.2**

**2 adults, 2.2 kids**

**And an anthropologist and a  
sociologist!**

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...6.2! Two adults, 2.2  
kids, an anthropologist  
and a sociologist! It's a  
fact.







**We are not the exotic object of the colonialist academics gaze ... we are not the subject of your pity or fascination!**

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We are not the exotic object of the Colonialist academics' gaze. We are not the subject of pity or fascination. And far too often when you work in Ethics Committees, like I've done, or on different ARCs, that sort of stuff—I sit on the panel for Canada, and also for the one in New Zealand—and you see time and time again grant applications come across where the person's got no idea and they've got no Indigenous involvement. It's wrong. You can't do it. We are not the object. We are people.



# And above all?



**Never research in the  
name of religion  
..... esp Hillsong!**



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And above all: never research in the name of a religion. I've got a deep-set hatred against Hillsong. Because I saw how much money they got under the Howard government towards Aboriginal research, and hardly a cent of that was ever used on the Aboriginal community or on research. It disappeared into the Hillsong coffers. I've done there for my Muslim brothers. That's the first Muslim place of worship there, and I've never struck a Muslim yet to research us incorrectly. But unfortunately, Christianity, they've got bit of a bad track record.



# If you still have a valid reason

## The golden rules:

**1. Work with an experienced mature Indigenous co-researcher**

**2. Have an experienced Advisory group:  
gender equal / rich in cultural capital / sound  
academic experience / broad community  
experience / resources – and above all good  
communicators**

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If you still have a valid reason, the golden rules are: (1) Work with an experienced mature Indigenous co-researcher. I can't stress that enough. Or work with a really bright, up-and-coming young researcher who's got some great contacts. (2) Have an experienced Advisory group—that's an experienced *Aboriginal* advisory group. And the things they need to have: (i) it needs to be gender equal, for a start; (ii) it needs to be rich in cultural capital... and there's lots of Aboriginal elders out there, supposedly. But if you look at them, they are actually elderly Aboriginals. Don't get sucked in by the terminology "Aboriginal elders". There's very few Aboriginal elders, and there's a lot of elderly Aboriginals. Make sure they've got that cultural capital.



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(iii) Sound academic experience: if you want an advisory group, you've got to have a few of them at least with academic experience. Academic experience from the Aboriginal perspective can be in the real world. I used to have a guy called John Bugby. He didn't have a PhD. He was the greatest academic I've ever known for that capital that he had, that social capital; and that cultural capital, God love him. (iv) Broad community experience: you need that. You need that for your contacts. And they've gotta have access to those resources, those community resources.





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And there's just a picture of some of the people that are out there. I wouldn't go and annoy these people—they're kind of busy—but it gives you an idea of some of the brilliance that is out there. And there's thousands more: they're just the few that I picked up off the web that I thought would be good to show up there. The lady on your far right is as sweet as can be. Never be afraid of Marcia. Just treat her with respect – otherwise she'll bite your head off.



# Continued in Part 2...



*The recording of the second section of Professor Foley's talk is available on our website.*