

The Academic Echelon: Working-Class Research, First Nations Cultural Load and Relational Ethics in the Settler-Colonial University

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Abstract

Working-class and First Nations communities are among the most governed and researched populations in contemporary Australia. Criminological and socio-legal research routinely produces knowledge about policing, youth justice, child protection, welfare and poverty, yet pays less attention to the academic labour relations through which that knowledge is produced. Focused primarily on Australian universities, while drawing on patterns that also resonate in the United Kingdom and other neoliberal settler-colonial systems, this article argues that research on working-class and First Nations communities is structured by a racialised and classed academic echelon. By academic echelon, I mean the layered division of research labour through which professors and senior investigators, continuing academics, fixed-term researchers, sessional staff, doctoral candidates and community co-researchers are positioned differently in relation to authority, employment security, proximity to participants, cultural load, authorship, data control and aftercare.

Keywords

Working-class academics, First Nations research, cultural load, relational ethics, academic precariat, Indigenist methodologies, research labour, settler colonialism, Australia

Building on new working-class studies, scholarship on working-class academics and precarity, critiques of the neoliberal and colonial university, Indigenist methodologies, and recent work on cultural load carried by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, I treat the academic echelon itself as an object of ethical analysis. The article clarifies how methodological questions of distance and proximity are also labour questions: who remains close to institutions, contracts and public voice; who enters emotionally intense or culturally risky spaces; who is expected to translate, hold, repair and remain accountable once funding ends. Drawing on recurrent patterns observed across youth justice, child protection and labour-organising research, I propose a relational ethics framework organised around design, conduct and aftercare. The central claim is that research ethics in working-class and First Nations contexts must be understood as the organisation and contestation of labour, including cultural load, within the academic echelon, not only as individual virtue or compliance with institutional review procedures.

1. Introduction: Research, labour and the academic echelon

Research on working-class and First Nations¹ communities is often described as a question of method: how to gain access, recruit participants, build trust, collect data, interpret findings and produce impact. It is also commonly framed as a question of ethics: how to obtain consent, protect confidentiality, minimise harm and satisfy university review processes. These questions matter. Yet they are incomplete if they do not also ask how the labour of research is organised inside the university itself. This article examines how research on communities most exposed to policing, child protection, welfare conditionality and other forms of state surveillance is shaped by an unequal division of academic labour. I call that division the academic echelon. The academic echelon is the hierarchy through which secure senior academics, continuing staff, fixed-term researchers, casual teachers, doctoral candidates and community co-researchers are positioned differently in relation to authority, risk, recognition and responsibility. It is not merely a neutral ladder of expertise. In research on working-class and First Nations communities, it often determines who designs the project, who negotiates with funders, who gains authorship, who controls data, who sits with participants in distress, who is expected to translate institutional language into community language, who carries cultural load, and who remains accountable after the report has been delivered. These distributions are classed, racialised and colonial. They are also ethical.

The article is grounded primarily in the Australian settler-colonial university, while drawing on experience and scholarship from the United Kingdom and on patterns that resonate across other neoliberal higher education systems. I focus on First Nations peoples in Australia because the ethics of working-class research in this context cannot be separated from Indigenous sovereignty, colonial dispossession and the ongoing governance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families through policing, child protection, youth justice, welfare and prisons. At the same time, the argument also speaks to research involving other racialised and working-class communities who are positioned as policy problems, service users, risk groups or sources of data.

I use ethics in two related senses. First, I refer to formal institutional ethics processes: university review boards, consent forms, data-management plans and compliance procedures. Second, and more importantly, I use ethics to mean the ongoing organisation of responsibility, risk, consent, recognition, care and accountability across research relationships. My argument is that the second form of ethics is often constrained by the academic echelon, even where the first form has been satisfied. A project may have formal ethics approval while still relying on exploitative or unrecognised labour from those least secure in the research team. I write as a First Nations and working-class academic whose research is grounded in youth justice, child protection, carceral systems and community-led practice. My work often occurs in relation with First Nations communities, families, Elders, practitioners, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and working-class families who have been made knowable to the state through risk, removal, surveillance or criminalisation. This standpoint does not resolve the ethical tensions discussed in this article. Rather, it makes them more visible, because proximity to community, culture and institutional systems can generate both responsibility and risk. It also requires acknowledging that I now occupy a relatively secure position within the academic echelon, even while much of the research labour

¹ The term 'First Nations' is used in this paper to refer to First Nation people, groups and communities, who are sovereign people across colonial Australia or where possible the specific identified nations. The terms Indigenous, Aboriginal, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, is used to refer to First Nations peoples specifically from Australia, where used by the participants in the data or the literature.

that makes projects possible is carried by colleagues, students and community researchers whose employment is more precarious and whose cultural and relational load may be heavier.

Working-class studies emerged in part as a response to the distance between research about working-class life and knowledge produced from within working-class experience. Russo and Linkon (2005) argued that working-class people are not simply objects of analysis but producers of knowledge about their own lives, labour and culture. Fazio, Launius and Strangleman (2021) similarly foreground interdisciplinary work that connects empirical attention to working-class life with struggles for social and economic justice. In Australia, this orientation must be placed alongside Indigenist and decolonising methodologies that insist research with First Nations peoples be accountable to Indigenous sovereignty, governance, relationality and community-defined benefit (Rigney, 2006; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Together, these traditions challenge the idea that universities can observe working-class and First Nations life from a neutral vantage point.

The problem is that universities are not outside the relations they study. They are workplaces, employers, property holders, fund recipients, policy actors and colonial institutions. They are also places where cultural capital, job security, authorship conventions, audit cultures and impact metrics shape whose labour becomes visible and whose labour is treated as natural, informal or supplementary. The contemporary university may celebrate diversity, community engagement and Indigenous research, while still asking First Nations staff, working-class academics and community co-researchers to carry the relational labour that gives these claims credibility. Cultural load becomes especially important here. It is not simply extra work. It is the institutional expectation that First Nations staff will provide cultural knowledge, representation, mentoring, community liaison, racism response and pastoral care, often in addition to formal research duties (Diversity Council Australia & Jumbunna Institute, 2020; Universities Australia, 2022).

The sections that follow develop the argument in five steps. Section 2 clarifies terminology and positionality for an international readership. Section 3 situates the academic echelon within scholarship on working-class academics, precarity, the neoliberal and colonial university, diversity work and cultural load. Section 4 maps the relational field that connects communities, carceral and welfare systems, universities and funders. Section 5 reframes distance and proximity as differently allocated forms of classed and racialised research labour. Section 6 identifies recurring patterns across youth justice, child protection and labour-organising research and develops a relational ethics framework organised around design, conduct and aftercare. The conclusion argues that research ethics is also workplace politics: who does what work, under what conditions, with what authority, and with what responsibility after the project formally ends.

2. Terminology and standpoint

Several terms require clarification because they carry different meanings across national and disciplinary contexts. I use First Nations to refer to the sovereign peoples, nations, communities and families whose lands were invaded and colonised and whose sovereignty has never been ceded. In the Australian context, the terms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Indigenous and First Nations appear in policy, community and scholarly settings. I use the terms most appropriate to the source, context or community being discussed, while recognising that specific nation, language group or community names are preferable where known.

Mob is a widely used Aboriginal English term that can refer to family, kin, community, nation, place-based belonging or a wider Aboriginal collective.² It is relational rather than merely demographic. In this article, references to mob are not shorthand for an abstract population. They signal relationships, responsibilities and forms of belonging that are often flattened when institutional research describes First Nations people as participants, stakeholders, risk groups or service users. Settler colonialism refers to a continuing structure of invasion, land possession and institutional governance rather than a past event. In Australia, universities are located on unceded Country and participate in knowledge systems historically implicated in the classification, extraction and governance of Indigenous peoples. Moreton-Robinson's (2015, pp. xii-xiii) account of white possession is useful here because it names how property, sovereignty, institutions and knowledge are organised through claims of white ownership. Smith's (2012) critique of research as a colonial practice is equally important because it shows that knowledge production has often been inseparable from extraction, administration and control.

Working-class research refers here to research about, with and from working-class communities and people whose lives are shaped by labour, poverty, insecure work, welfare systems, housing insecurity, education inequality, carceral systems and classed forms of culture and belonging. It does not mean that class operates separately from race, Indigeneity, gender, disability, migration or colonial power. Rather, class is understood as a lived, cultural, relational and political formation, not simply an income category. I use Indigenist research to refer to research paradigms that centre Indigenous peoples, voices, political integrity, sovereignty and accountability to Indigenous struggles (Rigney, 2006). I use relational accountability to describe the obligation to conduct research as a practice embedded in relationships with people, place, ancestors, future generations, institutions and knowledge holders. Wilson (2008, pp. 69-77) describes research as ceremony in this sense: knowledge is not owned by the individual researcher alone but produced within a web of relations. Ali and Talbert's (2024, pp. 139-141) question - accountable to whom, and for what? - helps translate this obligation into the day-to-day ethics of social research teams.

Finally, cultural load refers to the additional and often invisible work carried by First Nations staff and community researchers when they are expected to provide cultural knowledge, educate colleagues, represent Indigenous perspectives, support students and participants, manage racism and hold community relationships beyond the formal requirements of their roles (Diversity Council Australia & Jumbunna Institute, 2020; Universities Australia, 2022). Cultural load is an ethical issue because the cultural knowledge, relational trust and community accountability that make research possible are often treated as informal or natural attributes of First Nations staff rather than as specialist labour requiring time, authority, recognition and resourcing.

3. The academic echelon in the neoliberal and colonial university

New working-class studies has long insisted that universities are themselves classed institutions. Narrative and autobiographical work by academics from working-class backgrounds describes the disorientation and ambivalence of entering spaces shaped by middle-class norms of speech, dress, taste, mobility and self-presentation (Dews & Law, 1995; Muzzatti & Samarco, 2006). Contributors often describe feeling

² 'Mob' is a colloquial term used in Australia to identify a group of Aboriginal people associated with a particular place, region or country. It is used to connect and identify who an Aboriginal person is and where they are from. Mob can represent your family group, clan group or wider Aboriginal community group. See Deadly Story, <https://www.deadlystory.com/page/tools/aboriginal-cultural-support-planning/cultural-planning---frequently-asked-questions/what-is-the-difference-between-mob-clan-tribe-language-group>

out of place, being asked to translate themselves into respectable academic forms, and managing a sense of distance from families or communities of origin. Attfield (2016, pp. 45-57) refuses this demand through an insistence on being unapologetically working class. Brook and Michell (2012) show that class continues to shape the lifeworlds of Australian academics even when class remains marginal in institutional diversity agendas. Crew (2020, 2021) and Oldfield (2023) further document how working-class academics navigate precarity, informal networks, cultural-capital expectations and subtle forms of exclusion.

This literature intersects with scholarship on the academic precariat. Burton and Bowman (2022) argue that fixed-term contracts, casualisation, performance metrics and audit cultures have produced an academic labour force structured by insecurity. Smyth (2017) characterises the contemporary university as toxic in the sense that managerialism, marketised outputs and reputational competition erode collegiality and narrow the purposes of higher education. Precarity, however, should not be treated as identical with working-class background. Not all precarious academics are working class, and not all working-class academics are precariously employed. The point is that precarity is experienced unevenly. Academics from working-class backgrounds are often less able to absorb unpaid labour, relocation, casual contracts, delayed payment, short-term appointments or reputational risks attached to refusing exploitative work. Figure 1 illustrates the academic echelon as a hierarchy in which authority and recognition tend to accumulate at the top, while proximity, risk, cultural load and aftercare are often concentrated among those in less secure or community-facing roles.

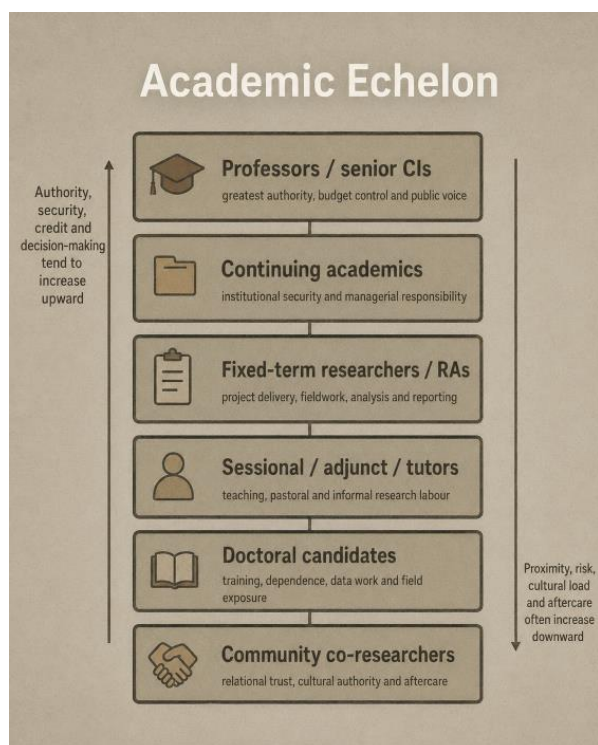


Figure 1. The academic echelon as a layered division of research labour in Australian universities. The figure is a heuristic developed for this article, not a universal career ladder.

In settler-colonial contexts, these classed hierarchies intersect with racial and colonial power. Moreton-Robinson (2015) conceptualises the Australian nation-state as grounded in white possession, a regime in which land, resources and institutions are claimed as white property while Indigenous sovereignty is disavowed. Universities participate in this possessive logic through

governance, curriculum, research agendas and institutional claims to expertise, even where they recruit Indigenous staff and students. Smith (2012, pp. 1-3) traces how research has historically functioned as a technology of colonisation, naming the ways Indigenous peoples have been made into objects of study for external purposes. Rigney (2006) responds by insisting on Indigenist research that centres Indigenous voices, political integrity and accountability to Indigenous peoples.

Ahmed's (2012) analysis of diversity work adds an institutional mechanism to this picture. Universities may adopt the language of diversity, equity and inclusion while resisting substantive change. Racialised staff are often asked to sit on committees, advise on policy, mentor students and symbolise institutional progress, yet encounter what Ahmed (2012, pp. 173-187) calls institutional brick walls when they challenge racism or inequity. In Australia, this dynamic is closely connected to cultural load. The Gari Yala: Speak the Truth report documents the burdens of racism, identity strain and cultural load experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers, including expectations to educate colleagues, represent Indigenous perspectives and carry community obligations into the workplace (Diversity Council Australia & Jumbunna Institute, 2020). Universities Australia's Indigenous Strategy 2022-2025 explicitly calls on universities to recognise and support this cultural load for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and students (Universities Australia, 2022).

These literatures clarify why the academic echelon matters for research ethics. The echelon is not a benign sequence from student to professor. It is a layered division of labour through which institutional authority, employment security, authorship, proximity, cultural load and risk are unevenly distributed. In the Australian context, the term professor also needs care. Unlike some systems where professor may refer broadly to university teachers, in Australia it usually indicates a senior academic rank. In this article, professors and senior chief investigators name those with substantial institutional authority, grant leadership, public voice and decision-making power. Figure 1 is a heuristic I developed to show how these roles often sit within research teams, not a universal map of all academic careers.

4. Mapping the relational field: communities, systems, universities and funders

Research on working-class and First Nations communities takes place within a relational field rather than between two separate worlds called the university and the community. In the projects that inform this article, research moved across at least three overlapping arenas: communities; carceral and welfare systems; and universities and funding bodies. The academic echelon sits within the university, but it becomes visible as it mediates movement, authority, risk and recognition across these arenas. Figure 2 shows that the academic echelon mediates relationships between communities, carceral and welfare systems, and universities and funding bodies, making research ethics a relational and institutional question.

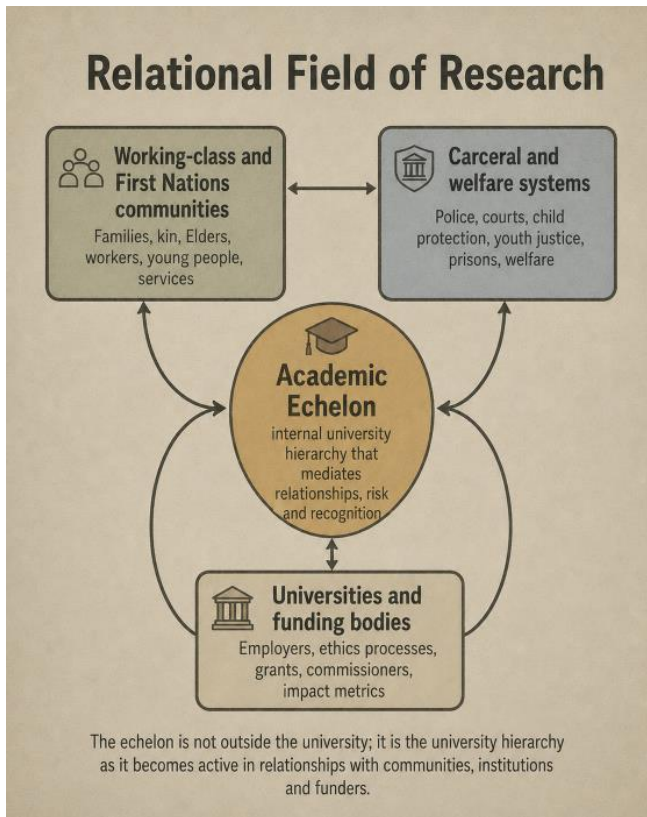


Figure 2. Relational field connecting working-class and First Nations communities, carceral and welfare systems, and universities and funding bodies, with the academic echelon mediating relationships, risk and recognition.

The first arena comprises working-class and First Nations communities: families, kin, Elders, young people, workers, neighbours, peer groups, unions, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, grassroots groups, youth services, sports clubs and informal networks of care. These communities are often described in institutional language through deficit categories such as disadvantage, vulnerability, complex need, non-compliance, risk or service dependency. Working-class studies and Indigenist methodologies challenge this framing by insisting that communities are not simply objects of research. They are producers of knowledge, sites of governance, and holders of cultural, political and relational authority (Fazio et al., 2021; Rigney, 2006; Russo & Linkon, 2005; Wilson, 2008).

The second arena is made up of carceral and welfare systems: police, courts, prisons, youth detention centres, child protection departments, housing authorities, welfare agencies, immigration and border regimes, and contracted service providers. These institutions are not merely background context. They often govern participants' lives directly, set the policy problems that research is asked to investigate, provide administrative data, act as funders or gatekeepers, and become audiences for findings. For example, a youth justice project may depend on access granted by a department whose practices are also being examined. A child protection study may ask families to speak about removal, surveillance or casework decisions while the same department retains statutory authority over their children. A labour-organising project may generate findings about employer surveillance while workers remain exposed to retaliation. In each case, the carceral or welfare system is both part of the research context and part of the risk environment.

The third arena consists of universities and funding bodies. Universities are employers, ethics authorities, grant administrators, public brands, landlords, knowledge brokers and colonial institutions located on unceded Country. Funding bodies, including government departments, research councils, philanthropic foundations and NGOs, help determine which questions are resourced, what kinds of evidence are valued, and how impact is defined. Impact can mean community benefit, but in university systems it is often

translated into metrics, policy influence, media visibility, contract renewals, citations, rankings and institutional reputation. These pressures shape what research teams are encouraged to ask, how findings are framed and how quickly reports are expected to move from communities into policy circuits.

Figure 2 clarifies that the academic echelon is not outside the university. It is the university hierarchy as it becomes active in relationships with communities, carceral and welfare institutions, and funders. A senior academic may spend much of their time negotiating contracts, advising departments, preparing reports and speaking in policy forums. A fixed-term research fellow may travel between campus offices, youth centres, courts, prisons or community organisations. A doctoral candidate may be embedded in a union, legal centre or field site while also needing to satisfy supervisory and institutional expectations. A community co-researcher may hold the trust that makes participation possible, while having the least formal control over budget, authorship and data governance.

This relational field produces conflicting accountabilities. A community co-researcher may feel accountable to Elders, families or young people who participated because of personal trust. A fixed-term researcher may feel accountable to participants but also to a principal investigator whose reference, contract renewal or future collaboration matters. A First Nations academic may feel accountable to mob, to younger Indigenous staff carrying cultural load, to university ethics processes and to funders. A professor may feel accountable to communities, but also to management, commissioners and deadlines. These accountabilities are not always compatible. The ethical problem is therefore not only whether an individual researcher has good intentions. It is whether the research structure gives those carrying the greatest relational risk enough authority, time, security and recognition to act ethically.

5. Distance and proximity as classed and racialised research labour

Debates about social research method often contrast distance and proximity. Quantitative and policy approaches are associated with distance, abstraction and scale. Qualitative, ethnographic, participatory and Indigenist approaches are associated with proximity, relationship and situated knowledge. Critical traditions often value proximity because it can counter extractive or detached research. Yet proximity is not automatically ethical. It becomes an ethical question when the academic echelon determines who must be close, under what conditions, and with what authority.

Distance-based labour is frequently concentrated toward the top of the echelon. Senior academics and chief investigators often secure grants or contracts, frame research questions, design methodology, negotiate ethics approvals, manage institutional relationships, supervise teams, interpret findings and present results to policy or academic audiences. Much of this work involves administrative datasets, de-identified transcripts, policy documents, strategy meetings and performance indicators. Distance can be narrated as the capacity to see the bigger picture. It also brings protection. Those who are less present in field sites are often less exposed to immediate participant distress, community criticism, frontline hostility or the consequences of mistrust.

Proximity-based labour is frequently carried by those lower in the echelon or closer to community: fixed-term fellows, research assistants, doctoral candidates, casual staff and community co-researchers. They arrange interviews, conduct yarning sessions, meet families in homes or community rooms, sit in institutional waiting spaces, accompany participants through bureaucratic encounters, manage disclosures of harm, and respond to anger, grief or suspicion. In a youth justice project, the person most likely to sit with a young person after a distressing interview may not be the chief investigator named on the grant,

but a fixed-term Aboriginal researcher, doctoral student or community co-researcher whose relationship made participation possible in the first place. In a child protection project, the researcher who hears a parent's account of removal may also be the person approached months later when that parent wants to know what the report achieved.

This division of labour intersects with classed and racialised inequalities. Working-class academics are often concentrated in teaching, pastoral, community-facing or precarious roles (Brook & Michell, 2012; Crew, 2020, 2021; Oldfield, 2023). Racialised staff are drawn into diversity work (Ahmed, 2012). First Nations staff are asked to carry cultural load through cultural education, community liaison, student mentoring, ethics advice, protocol work and responses to racism (Diversity Council Australia & Jumbunna Institute, 2020; Universities Australia, 2022). Research teams can reproduce these patterns when they assume that working-class, racialised or Indigenous researchers are naturally better suited to connect with participants and therefore should carry more proximity-based labour.

Proximity can be politically and ethically valuable when chosen, resourced and governed by those to whom the research is accountable. Indigenist and decolonising methodologies insist that research grounded in relationships, community authority and Indigenous epistemologies can challenge extractive knowledge production (Kovach, 2009; Rigney, 2006; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). However, proximity becomes exploitative when institutions retain control over resources, data and authorship while asking precarious or culturally burdened researchers to contribute trust, cultural authority and emotional labour. Community co-researchers may be asked to mobilise relationships for projects they did not design and cannot control. Early-career researchers may accept unsafe or emotionally overwhelming fieldwork because their contract, scholarship, reference or future employment depends on being seen as committed.

The risks associated with proximity are embodied and cumulative. Repeated exposure to accounts of police harassment, incarceration, poverty, child removal, racism, family violence, grief and institutional betrayal can produce exhaustion, vicarious trauma and identity strain. For researchers who share aspects of participants' histories, community ties or cultural responsibilities, these accounts are not easily compartmentalised. Institutional responses tend to individualise the problem through self-care advice, optional counselling or informal debriefing. A relational ethics approach treats these risks as predictable outcomes of how research labour is organised. Safety, supervision, debriefing, cultural support and authority to pause or refuse unsafe demands should therefore be designed into the project rather than added after harm occurs.

Distance is also not neutral, as senior academics may be deeply committed to social justice, but their positions often afford protection, credit and public voice. They may publish, present and advise on research made possible by the proximity, trust and cultural work of others. Authorship conventions can recognise intellectual leadership while under-recognising relational labour. Reports can cite consultation while obscuring the people who carried the work of making consultation possible. Figure 3 therefore reframes distance and proximity as differently located forms of labour. The ethical question is not whether proximity or distance is better, but how each is allocated, resourced, recognised and governed. Figure 3 shows how proximity and distance operate as differently valued forms of research labour, with community-facing and cultural work often carrying greater relational and emotional demands.

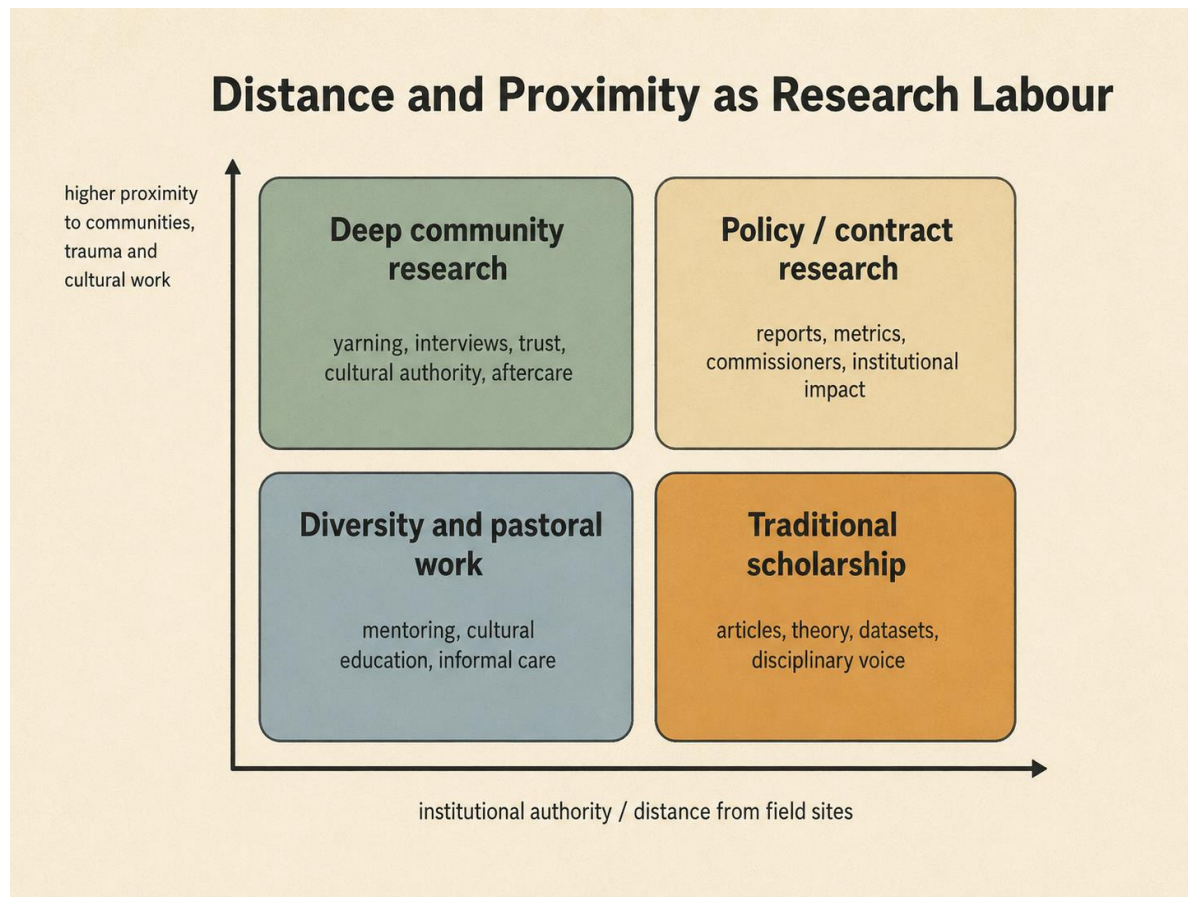


Figure 3. Distance- and proximity-based research as differently located forms of academic labour within the academic echelon.

6. Recurring patterns and a relational ethics in practice

The patterns discussed in this section are drawn from recurrent configurations observed across youth justice, child protection and labour-organising research in Australia and the United Kingdom. I do not present project-level or participant-level data. Instead, I identify patterns that help explain how the academic echelon shapes research ethics in practice.

The first pattern is the concentration of proximity, cultural load and risk among those with less security. Across projects, the people spending the most time in community spaces, institutional waiting rooms, frontline services and emotionally intense interviews were rarely those with the greatest institutional authority. Fixed-term researchers, doctoral candidates, casual staff and community co-researchers were often the first point of contact for participants. They managed disclosure, suspicion, grief and anger. They explained consent forms, translated institutional language and reassured participants about what would and would not happen to their stories. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, this proximity-based work often overlapped with cultural load inside universities: mentoring Indigenous students, advising colleagues, sitting on committees, responding to racism and acting as an informal point of contact on Indigenous matters. The ethical issue is not simply that this work is difficult. It is that it is often necessary to the integrity of research while remaining poorly counted in budgets, workload models, authorship decisions and ethics applications.

The second pattern is conflicting accountability. Research teams often hold relationships with communities, carceral and welfare systems, universities and funders at the same time. Those closest to communities tend to prioritise relational safety: whether findings could identify people, damage trust, reproduce stereotypes or expose participants to retaliation. Those closer to institutional centres of power may focus on deliverables, timelines, policy influence, contractual obligations and reputational impact. These differences are not merely personality differences. They reflect different locations within the relational map and the academic echelon. A community co-researcher may resist including contextual detail that could expose a small community. A commissioning agency may request more specificity to make recommendations actionable. A fixed-term researcher may see the risk but feel limited in challenging the principal investigator or funder. A relational ethics framework must create structures in which those carrying relational risk have authority in decisions about interpretation, reporting and data sharing.

The third pattern is the unequal distribution of data futures and aftercare. Research generates materials whose lives often extend beyond the moment of collection: audio files, transcripts, fieldnotes, consent forms, administrative datasets, workshop notes, photographs, reports and publications. Institutional consent processes may make storage, retention or secondary analysis technically permissible, but participants do not always understand how long material may remain accessible, who may use it later, or how future publications may reanimate stories they believed belonged to a completed project. This is especially sensitive in First Nations contexts where Indigenous data sovereignty and community governance are central ethical concerns.

Aftercare is the work of remaining accountable after data collection and formal reporting, including returning findings in accessible forms, explaining what changed and what did not, responding to community concerns, managing media or policy consequences, supporting community partners, protecting data from harmful reuse and ensuring that relationships do not simply end when funding ends. Yet aftercare is often under-resourced compared with recruitment and data collection. The burden falls on those who did the proximity work: community researchers, First Nations staff, doctoral students or early-career academics who are approached by participants months or years later. Senior academics may remain involved where they have long-standing relationships, but institutional attention often shifts to the next project once contractual obligations are fulfilled. This tapering is itself a feature of the academic echelon.

These patterns point to a relational ethics framework organised around design, conduct and aftercare. In the design phase, teams should map the academic echelon explicitly. This means asking who is shaping the research questions, who holds budget and data authority, who will carry cultural load, who will enter emotionally intense spaces, and what forms of community governance will have decision-making power. Red lines around data sharing, participant protection, community representation and authorship should be discussed before funding obligations or partner expectations harden. Cultural work, safety, supervision, community engagement and aftercare should be costed as core research labour.

In the conduct phase, teams should pay attention to how proximity and distance are allocated. Intensive fieldwork should not default to the most precarious or culturally burdened researchers simply because they are trusted by participants or more available. Those undertaking proximity work need time, debriefing, cultural supervision, psychological support and authority to pause, change or refuse unsafe research activities. Relational ethics here includes care for participants and care for colleagues. It also

requires channels for disagreement that do not punish early-career, casual, community-based or First Nations researchers for raising ethical concerns.

In the aftercare phase, teams should plan for the continuing life of research relationships and data. This includes accessible community feedback, plain-language summaries, community presentations, co-authored outputs where appropriate, data-governance agreements, clear limits on reuse, and workload recognition for those who remain accountable after formal funding ends. Authorship and public voice should be treated as ethical matters. If a community co-researcher or First Nations staff member contributed relational trust, cultural interpretation and aftercare, that labour should be recognised in authorship, remuneration or other forms determined with them, not merely acknowledged in a report.

Figure 4 summarises this framework. Its purpose is not to replace institutional ethics approval, but to reveal what institutional ethics often misses: the internal labour relations through which research becomes possible. A project can meet formal ethics requirements while still reproducing classed, racialised and colonial hierarchies within the team. A relational ethics attentive to the academic echelon asks whether the people carrying risk, cultural load and aftercare also hold authority, security, recognition and protection.



Figure 4. Relational ethics across design, conduct and aftercare, showing how labour, risk, cultural load, governance and recognition need to be organised across the life of a project.

7. Conclusion: ethics, echelon and working-class struggle

This article has argued that research ethics in working-class and First Nations contexts cannot be reduced to individual good intentions or compliance with university ethics procedures. Ethics must also be understood as the organisation of labour within the academic echelon and the wider relational field in which research takes place. By bringing together new working-class studies (Fazio et al., 2021; Russo & Linkon, 2005), scholarship on working-class academics and precarity (Brook & Michell, 2012; Crew, 2020, 2021; Oldfield, 2023), critiques of the neoliberal and colonial university (Ahmed, 2012; Burton & Bowman, 2022; Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Smith, 2012), Indigenist and relational methodologies (Kovach, 2009; Rigney, 2006; Wilson, 2008), and research on cultural load (Diversity Council Australia & Jumbunna Institute, 2020; Universities Australia, 2022), I have treated the academic echelon itself as an object of ethical analysis.

The central contribution is to show that methods are also labour relations, including research questions, ethics approvals, fieldwork, data analysis, reporting, authorship, impact and aftercare are distributed through hierarchies of authority, security and recognition. Those at the top of the echelon often hold design authority, budget control and public voice. Those lower down, or those closer to communities, often carry the proximity work, cultural work, emotional labour and relational accountability that make research possible. This division is not accidental. It reflects broader patterns of class, race, Indigeneity, precarity and colonial power in the university.

For working-class studies, the argument is that universities are not only places where working-class lives are studied. They are also workplaces in which class relations are reproduced. For First Nations research, the argument is that cultural load must be treated as central to ethics, not as a marginal workload issue. The cultural knowledge, community trust and accountability carried by First Nations researchers and community co-researchers are forms of expertise and labour. When universities rely on that labour without redistributing authority, time, remuneration and recognition, they reproduce the extractive relations that decolonising methodologies seek to challenge.

The relational ethics framework proposed here asks research teams to attend to design, conduct and aftercare. In design, the team should map labour, risk, cultural load, authority and data governance before the project begins. In conduct, proximity work should be resourced and supported rather than naturalised as the responsibility of working-class, racialised, Indigenous or precariously employed researchers. In aftercare, the continuing life of data and relationships should be planned, funded and recognised. These are not only methodological questions. They are workplace questions, authorship questions, governance questions and questions of justice.

Changing these structures requires more than better consent forms or more reflexive paragraphs. It requires universities, funders and senior academics to treat community engagement, cultural work, relational trust and aftercare as core research labour. It also requires working-class, First Nations and community-based researchers to have authority over the conditions under which their labour is used. If class is understood not only as a subject of research but as a relation that shapes who does what work, under what conditions and with what recognition, then research ethics must encompass the hierarchies through which our own labour is organised. Attending to the academic echelon is one way for working-class studies, First Nations research and critical university studies to take up that challenge.

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