

Indigenous Worldviews, Knowledge, and Research: The Development of an Indigenous Research Paradigm

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Abstract

This article presents the initial development of one Indigenous research paradigm. The article begins with an overview of worldviews and Indigenous knowledge before addressing how these perspectives have been blinded by Eurocentric thought and practices. These sections set the background for the focus of the article, namely the development of an Indigenous research paradigm. This paradigm is based upon the framework shared by Wilson (2001), who suggested that a research paradigm consists of an ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology. By presenting Indigenous perspectives on each of the framework components, an Indigenous research paradigm that was used for research with Indigenous Elders and Indigenous social workers who are based within Indigenous worldviews and ways of being is presented.

Things are changing in the realm of research. While at one time, we, as Indigenous peoples, were faced with leaving our indigeniety at the door when we entered the academic world, several of us are now actively working to ensure our research is not only respectful, or “culturally sensitive,” but is also based in approaches and processes that are parts our cultures (for further discussion see Meyer, 2008; Steinhauer, 2001; Wilson, 2008). It is in light of this change that I outline how I approached research with Cree peoples in north central Turtle Island, also referred to as North America. This experience had me contemplate several areas that I thought were pertinent to social work practice from a Cree perspective and which are addressed in this article. These areas include worldviews, Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous knowledge of helping, and research from an Indigenous stance, namely radical Indigenism. I began with worldviews as I felt that understanding worldviews is necessary given Honore France’s (1997) statement that our worldviews affect our belief systems, decision making, assumptions, and modes of problem solving. I also started with worldviews as I agree with several authors (Bishop, Higgins, Casella, & Contos, 2002) who stated, “understanding worldviews of both the targeted community and ourselves is imperative if we are going to do more good than harm” (p. 611). From here I focus more on Indigenous worldviews and knowledge as I have come to understand them. I then move to address how our views and ways of helping have been blinded through the colonial



process of marginalization before discussing how I attempted to move away from this marginalization in my research with Cree Elders and social workers who follow Cree ways of helping in their practice. One perspective of an Indigenous research paradigm is then outlined that relies on Shawn Wilson's (2001) framework of ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology. I close with a summary that considers some future steps.

WORLDVIEWS

The concept of worldviews has been described as mental lenses that are entrenched ways of perceiving the world (Olsen, Lodwick, & Dunlap, 1992). Worldviews are cognitive, perceptual, and affective maps that people continuously use to make sense of the social landscape and to find their ways to whatever goals they seek. They are developed throughout a person's lifetime through socialization and social interaction. They are encompassing and pervasive in adherence and influence. Yet they are usually unconsciously and uncritically taken for granted as the way things are. While they rarely alter in any significant way, worldviews can change slowly over time. A worldview can hold discrepancies and inconsistencies between beliefs and values within the worldview. Hence, worldviews often contain incongruencies.

It also has been suggested that in any society there is a dominant worldview that is held by most members of that society (Olsen et al., 1992). Alternative worldviews do exist, but they are not usually held by a majority of a society. In light of these points, I suggest that work with Indigenous peoples will often require us to act outside of the dominant worldview found in social work internationally and particularly in fourth world territories.

At the same time, I recognize limitations to discussions of worldviews. In particular, most discussions are focused on cognitive processes as the determining factor for worldviews. These processes tend to ignore others' dynamics of being in the world, including feelings and intuition on one hand and discourses, discursive structures, and practices (Kuokkanen, 2007). I also think it is pertinent to remember that "it is very possible for individuals from different cultural groups to be more similar in worldviews than those from the same culture" (Sue & Sue, 2003, p. 287) and that individuals can adapt and use behaviors associated with another worldview (Sue & Sue, 2003) or express them in entirely personal ways (Fitznor, 1998). Thus, it is in a wider explanation of worldviews that I am reflecting in this discussion.

INDIGENOUS WORLDVIEWS

There appear to be many commonalities between Indigenous worldviews (Fitznor, 1998; Gill, 2002; Rice, 2005). McKenzie and Morrissette (2003) explained that Indigenous worldviews emerged as a result of the people's close relationship with the environment. They outlined six metaphysical beliefs of Indigenous peoples that have shaped this relationship:

All things exist according to the principle of survival; the act of survival pulses with the natural energy and cycles of the earth; this energy is part of some grand design; all things have a role to perform to ensure balance and harmony and the overall well-being of life; all things are an extension of the grand design, and, as such, contain the same essence as the source from which it flows (*Gitchi-Munitou*); and this essence is understood as “spirit,” which links all things to each other and to Creation. (p. 259)

Leanne Simpson (2000) outlined seven principles of Indigenous worldviews. First, knowledge is holistic, cyclic, and dependent upon relationships and connections to living and non-living beings and entities. Second, there are many truths, and these truths are dependent upon individual experiences. Third, everything is alive. Fourth, all things are equal. Fifth, the land is sacred. Sixth, the relationship between people and the spiritual world is important. Seventh, human beings are least important in the world.

It is apparent to me that these and other discussions of Indigenous worldviews highlight a strong focus on people and entities coming together to help and support one another in their relationship. This has been called a relational worldview (Graham, 2002). Key within a relational worldview is the emphasis on spirit and spirituality and, in turn, a sense of communitism and respectful individualism. Communitism is the sense of community tied together by familial relations and the families’ commitment to it (Weaver, 1997; Weaver, 2001). Respectful individualism is a way of being where an individual enjoys great freedom in self-expression because it is recognized by the society that individuals take into consideration and act on the needs of the community as opposed to acting on self-interest alone (Gross, 2003). I found that this relational worldview is carried forward in discussions on Indigenous peoples’ knowledge.

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

Mahia Maurial (1999) defined Indigenous knowledge as “the peoples’ cognitive and wise legacy as a result of their interaction with nature in a common territory” (p. 62). Joey De La Torre (2004) defined Indigenous knowledge as the established knowledge of Indigenous nations, their worldviews, and the customs and traditions that direct them. This last definition demonstrates the close connection between Indigenous knowledge and worldviews. The connection is further evident when looking at the characteristics of Indigenous knowledge. Castellano (2000) described the characteristics of Indigenous knowledge as personal, oral, experiential, holistic, and conveyed in narrative or metaphorical language. Maurial (1999) identified three characteristics of Indigenous knowledge: local, holistic, and oral.

While these definitions are useful in shaping an understanding of Indigenous knowledge, I believe Marie Battiste and Sakej Henderson's (2000) commentary on defining Indigenous knowledge warrants attention. They stated that attempting to define Indigenous knowledge is inappropriate because such efforts are about comparing knowledges and that there are no methodologies existing to make such comparisons. Battiste and Henderson suggested that, instead of trying to define Indigenous knowledge, the process of understanding would be more important. They explained that understanding requires the inquirer to be open to accepting different realities, regardless of how one uses this term.

BLINDING INDIGENOUS WORLDVIEWS

Several authors emphasized that Indigenous worldviews are vastly different from the dominant cultural worldview in Western societies (Little Bear, 2000; Pichette, Garrett, Kosciulek, & Rosenthal, 1999; Walker, 2004). Despite the differences in worldviews and the need to support such differences, Gill (2002) noted that many scholars are hesitant to address comprehensive concepts such as worldviews. He suggested that "it is frequently claimed by philosophers that Native Americans and other nonliterate peoples do not really have a coherent view of the world because they have not yet conceived of the possibility and/or necessity of sequential and critical thought" (p. 18). Thus, when most professors describe the "world," they describe Eurocentric contexts and ignore Indigenous perspectives and understandings. "For most Aboriginal students, the realization of their invisibility is similar to looking into a still lake and not seeing their image" (Henderson, 2000, p. 76). Indeed, Eurocentric thought has come to mediate the entire world to the point where worldviews that differ from Eurocentric thought are relegated to the periphery, if they are acknowledged at all (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Blaut, 1993). When they are acknowledged, Indigenous worldviews are analyzed most often through a Eurocentric point of view.

This marginalization or blinding of Indigenous worldviews "has been and continues to be one of the major tools of colonization" (Walker, 2004, p. 531). Indeed, Amer-European educators, regardless of program level, ask daily that Indigenous peoples acquiesce to or fit within Amer-European versions of the world while ignoring their Indigenous perspectives. Society demands that we either achieve within this Eurocentric model of education or live a life of poverty and welfare as the uneducated and unemployed or unemployable. Thus, in one way or another, we are regularly forced to validate the colonialists' mythology. We are being forced to sacrifice Indigenous worldviews and values for norms outside traditional cultural aims (Henderson, 2000, p. 59).

MARGINALIZATION OF INDIGENOUS WAYS OF HELPING

While it has been suggested that Indigenous concepts and practices are beginning to be accepted within social work (McKenzie and Morrissette, 2003), it has been noted that “too often these are marginalized or viewed as secondary to the strategies and techniques emerging from the dominant paradigm” (p. 262; see also Walsh-Tapiata, 2008; Yellow Bird & Gray, 2008). This concern of marginalizing is heightened when we acknowledge the extent to which our teaching and learning in mainstream social work education programs is based on dominantly held, middle-class, patriarchal, and white values (Faith, 2008; Mawhiney, 1995; Weaver, 2008). Sinclair (2004) presented an example of such colonial influence in social work education where Indigenous social work students are expected to learn about cross-cultural practice, which Sinclair explains is ludicrous:

The cross cultural or minority ‘client’ is automatically labelled as the ‘other.’ This forces the [Indigenous] student to take a dominant subjective stance with respect to issues of diversity because they are never requested to examine their work with ‘white’ individuals as cross-cultural. They are required to perceive themselves and their people as ‘other’ who is in need of assistance. (p. 52)

In other words, Indigenous social workers are expected to take a particular cultural conceptualization of the person that is based on the dominating Eurocentric perspective, which has associated values of individualism and self-efficacy. The approaches stemming from this perspective at best do not fit well either with Indigenous cultural values or the realities of Indigenous life (Gone, 2008; Kirmayer, Brass, & Tait, 2000; Weaver, 2008) and at worst are at the heart of psychological and philosophical imperialism (Calabrese, 2008; Duran & Duran, 2000). In light of this form of oppression, Kirmayer et al. (2000) and I (Hart, 2003) have suggested that there is a need to rethink the applicability of such modes of intervention. We need to consider the perspective of local community values and aspirations and recognize that family and social network approaches that emphasize the relational self may be more consistent with Indigenous cultures. In turn, we needed to approach research of these interventions in a manner that is at least consistent with Indigenous worldviews. It was this recognition that drove me to seek out Indigenous means of research.

RESEARCH PARADIGMS

To find an Indigenous means of research, I first determined the orientation and paradigm that best suited my research. To help me make this determination, I paid attention to the ideas expressed by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), who identified

the need for a modern Indigenous peoples' research project that resists the oppression found within research, and Eva Marie Garroutte (2003), who argued for an approach to research that stems from Indigenous peoples' roots and principles. I was driven to develop an Indigenous research paradigm to act as the foundation for my research design. To develop this paradigm, I first looked to some basic definitions of a research paradigm and relied on the definition provided by Cree scholar, Shawn Wilson (2001). He stated that a paradigm is "a set of beliefs about the world and about gaining knowledge that goes together to guide people's actions as to how they are going to go about doing their research" (p. 175). He focused on four aspects that combine to make up a research paradigm:

Ontology or a belief in the nature of reality. Your way of being, what you believe is real in the world...Second is epistemology, which is how you think about that reality. Next, when we talk about research methodology, we are talking about how you are going to use your way of thinking (your epistemology) to gain more knowledge about your reality. Finally, a paradigm includes axiology, which is a set of morals or a set of ethics. (p. 175)

Clearly, these concepts are not rooted in Indigenous worldviews since they have evolved elsewhere. However, because an Indigenous research paradigm had not been fully outlined at the time of my doctoral research and because I could not think of an alternative framework on which to base an Indigenous research paradigm, I used these concepts.

AN INDIGENOUS RESEARCH PARADIGM

Eva Marie Garroutte (2003) presented an approach to American Indian scholarship that she named "radical Indigenism." She explained, "It argues for the reassertion and rebuilding of traditional knowledge from its roots, its fundamental principles" (p. 101). Radical Indigenist scholars resist the pressure to participate in academic discourse that strips Indigenous intellectual traditions of their spiritual and sacred elements. It takes the stand that if the spiritual and sacred elements are surrendered, then there is little left of our philosophies that will make any sense. I believe Garroutte's call for radical Indigenism has to be reflected in an Indigenous research paradigm in order to be considered Indigenous. Indeed, several Indigenous scholars have been moving towards the development of such Indigenous research paradigms (for a more thorough discussion, see Wilson, 2008). My initial understanding of such a paradigm is as follows.

ONTOLOGY

This Indigenous research paradigm is based upon aspects of a particular ontology. Given Wilson's (2001) definition of ontology, I am struck by the apparent inter-relationship between ontology and worldview. How people see the world will influence their understanding of what exists, and vice-versa. From this perspective, there are many views of being. For example, Hallowell (1975) outlined aspects of Anishinaabe ontology where one particular focus was on how dreams were perceived by the Anishinaabe people he addressed. He stated,

Although there is no lack of discrimination between the experiences of self when awake and when dreaming, both sets of experiences are equally self-related. Dream experiences function integrally with other recalled memory images so far as these, too, enter the field of self-awareness. (p. 165).

In other words, for the Anishinaabe, *ätisókanak* exist. Similarly, *átajókanak*, or “spirit beings, spirit powers, spirit guardians, spirit animals” (Wolvengrey, 2001), exist for the Muskéko-Ininiwak. Recognizing that there are many worldviews and, in turn, understandings of what exists and recognizing that there are directly related, indirectly similar, and completely diverging perspectives, it appears that there would be overlaps and divergences in ontologies. A case in point is the shared understanding between the Muskéko-Ininiwak and the Anishinaabek that *átajókanak/ätisókanak* exist and that this understanding diverges from the mainstream Amer-European lack of acceptance, philosophically, of such entities.

This last point leads me to suggest that the divergences between a generalized mainstream Indigenous ontology and a generalized mainstream Amer-European ontology is significant enough to give a different base for an Indigenous paradigm. However, I am only identifying those aspects of an Indigenous ontology that seem prevalent to me. One dominant aspect that has been noted amongst some, if not many, Indigenous people is the recognition of a spiritual realm and that this realm is understood as being interconnected with the physical realm (Cajete, 2000; Meyer, 2008; Rice, 2005). With such a connection, it is accepted that there are influences between the spiritual and physical. For example, Gregory Cajete (2000) has explained that Indigenous science integrates a spiritual orientation, that human beings have an important role in perpetuation of nature processes in the world, and that acting in the world must be sanctioned through ceremony and ritual. Another dominant aspect is reciprocity, or the belief that as we receive from others, we must also offer to others (Rice, 2005). Reciprocity reflects the relational worldview and the understanding that we must honor our relationships with other life.

Since all life is considered equal, albeit different, all life must be respected as we are in reciprocal relations with them. These factors, spirituality and reciprocity, are two key elements of an Indigenous ontology and are key in this Indigenous research paradigm.

EPISTEMOLOGY

This Indigenous research paradigm is framed with a specific epistemology. Maggie Kovach (2005) presented the thoughts of several Indigenous authors who noted some characteristics of Indigenous epistemology. These thoughts are that an Indigenous epistemology is a fluid way of knowing derived from teachings transmitted from generation to generation by storytelling, where each story is alive with the nuances of the storyteller. It emerges from traditional languages emphasizing verbs, is garnered through dreams and visions, and is intuitive and introspective. Indigenous epistemology arises from the interconnections between the human world, the spirit, and inanimate entities.

Another aspect of Indigenous epistemology is perceptual experiences. However, an Indigenous definition of perception is relevant. While perception has been defined as “the extraction and use of information about one’s environment (exteroception) and one’s own body (interoception)” (Dretske, 1999, p. 654), perception is considered more inclusively within Indigenous epistemology to include the metaphysics of inner space (Ermine, 1995). In other words, perception is understood to include a form of experiential insight.

Willie Ermine (1995) outlined that an Aboriginal epistemology is a subjectively based process described by the Cree term *mamatowisin*, which is “the capacity to tap the creative life forces of the inner space by the use of all the faculties that constitute our being—it is to exercise inwardness” (Ermine, 1995, p. 104). Through inward exploration tapping into creative forces that run through all life, individuals come to subjectively experience a sense of wholeness. This exploration is an experience in context, where the context is the self in connection with happenings, and the findings from such experience is knowledge. Happenings may be facilitated through rituals or ceremonies that incorporate dreaming, visioning, meditation, and prayer. The findings from such experiences are encoded in community praxis as a way of synthesizing knowledge derived from introspection. Hence, Indigenous peoples’ cultures recognize and affirm the spiritual through practical applications of inner-space discoveries. Key people for this process are Elders and practitioners who have undergone processes to develop this ability. Thus, an Indigenous research paradigm is structured within an epistemology that includes a subjectively based process for knowledge development and a reliance on Elders and individuals who have or are developing this insight.

METHODOLOGY

Indigenous methodologies are those that permit and enable Indigenous researchers to be who they are while they are actively engaged as participants in the research processes (Weber-Pillwax, 2001). This way of being not only creates new knowledge but transforms who researchers are and where they are located (p. 174). Shawn Wilson (2001) suggested that an Indigenous methodology implies talking about relational accountability, meaning that the researcher is fulfilling his or her relationship with the world around him or her. It requires researchers to be accountable to “all my relations” (p. 177). Wilson shared his thoughts on relationality:

An Indigenous paradigm comes from the fundamental belief that knowledge is relational. Knowledge is shared with all creation. It is not just interpersonal relationships, or just with the research subjects I may be working with, but it is a relationship with all of creation. It is with the cosmos; it is with the animals, with the plants, with the earth that we share this knowledge. It goes beyond the idea of individual knowledge to the concept of relational knowledge . . . [hence] you are answerable to all your relations when you are doing research. (p. 177)

Another key characteristic of Indigenous methodology is the collective. As explained by Maggie Kovach (2005), there is a sense of commitment to the people in many Indigenous societies. Inherent in this commitment to the people is the understanding of the reciprocity of life and accountability to one another. A final point is the emphasis on practicality where “one seeks knowledge because one is prepared to use it” (p. 114). In turn, an Indigenous methodology includes the assumption that knowledge gained will be utilized practically.

AXIOLOGY

It is difficult to completely determine how an Indigenous axiology informs and guides an Indigenous research paradigm since there are many values, ethics, and principles that have been identified and outlined. However, some of these values, principles, and ethics that have been noted in relation to research warrant attention. Building on Shawn Wilson’s (2003) outline of Atkinson’s identification of certain principles for Indigenous research, I have identified some values to be held and the actions that would reflect these values:

1. Indigenous control over research, which can be demonstrated by having Indigenous people developing, approving, and implementing the research;

2. A respect for individuals and community, which can be demonstrated by a researcher seeking and holding knowledge and being considerate of community and the diversity and unique nature that each individual brings to community;
3. Reciprocity and responsibility, which can be demonstrated in ways a researcher would relate and act within a community, such as a researcher sharing and presenting ideas with the intent of supporting a community;
4. Respect and safety, which can be evident when the research participants feel safe and are safe. This includes addressing confidentiality in a manner desired by the research participants;
5. Non-intrusive observation, where one, such as a researcher, would be quietly aware and watching without interfering with the individual and community processes;
6. Deep listening and hearing with more than the ears, where one would carefully listen and pay attention to how his/her heart and sense of being is emotionally and spiritually moved;
7. Reflective non-judgement, where one would consider what is being seen and heard without immediately placing a sense of right or wrong on what is shared and where one would consider what is said within the context presented by the speaker;
8. To honor what is shared, which can be translated to fulfilling the responsibility to act with fidelity to the relationship between the participants and the researcher and to what has been heard, observed, and learned;
9. An awareness and connection between the logic of the mind and the feelings of the heart, where both the emotional and cognitive experiences are incorporated into all actions;
10. Self-awareness, where one would listen and observe oneself, particularly in relation to others during the research process; and
11. Subjectivity, where the researcher acknowledges that she or he brings her or his subjective self to the research process and openly and honestly discusses this subjectivity.

Weber-Pillwax (2001) reflected some of these values when she addressed a particular one that must be considered for Indigenous research, a value that is directly related to the methodological importance of relationships. She stated,

I could make a value statement and say that whatever I do as an Indigenous researcher must be hooked to the 'community' or the Indigenous research has to benefit the community. . . . The research methods have to mesh with

the community and serve the community. Any research that I do must not destroy or in any way negatively implicate or compromise my own personal integrity as a person, as a human being. (p. 168)

I believe at least one other value strongly merits attention. Respect is perhaps one of the most cited values of Indigenous peoples. While I have noted several definitions of respect (Hart, 2002), Ida Moore (nee Brass, 2000) has explained that respect is described in the Muskéko-ininiw term *kisténitámowin*, or “to take care to never mistreat any form of life” (p. 79).

SUMMARY

Our worldviews continue to be subverted by the nations that dominate our territories. Yet our knowledge of the world continues to exist, as well as our ways of living in the world. In acknowledgement of the clash of worldviews noted by Little Bear (2000), we as researchers need to thoroughly review our processes so that we can at least be consistent with our worldviews. Otherwise, we potentially end up straining our knowledge for only those pieces that fit the dominating perspectives. I recognize that worldviews are not binary consisting of Indigenous and non-Indigenous, but more fluid between various peoples of the world with strong overlaps and great chasms. However, without working to reflect Indigenous peoples' understandings, we may be unconsciously, perhaps consciously in some cases, leading other Indigenous peoples down the path of internalized oppression.

To carry the Indigenist project into research, we need to outline a wide picture of what research is from Indigenous perspectives. I have relied on Shawn Wilson's fundamental framework of ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology for a guide and shared my perspective of how Indigenous peoples' worldviews seep through these concepts. Through this perspective I have come to consider the following points in my research with Cree Elders and social workers who are based in our Cree ways of helping: 1) I recognized the potential influences of the spiritual through other than conscious means. In other words, such events as dreams, day visions, and ceremonial experiences are part of my research using this paradigm. 2) This also means that I incorporated my subjective insights, meaning that I will self-reflect, analyze, and synthesize my internal experiences in relation to the research that I am partaking. 3) I included ceremonies as a means to developing insight and connection. 4) I relied on Elders as key informants. 5) I maintained particular values that reflect Indigenous worldviews such as sharing and respect. 6) I included the participants' understandings of the context we shared in the research process as well as my own subjective understanding of the context of the research processes.

This included influences from my life experiences with Elders, ceremonies, and traditional Indigenous means of living, through to the completion of the research. In a broader sense, I also recognized that I was significantly influenced by the perspective of anti-colonialism and Fourth World Indigenism.

However, I recognize that even these concepts of ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology may be acting as a strainer. Thus, it is likely that, as we continue to more accurately reflect ourselves, we are likely to raise our own concepts, and in turn our practices, to the forefront of how research should occur with Indigenous peoples. This brings me to thoughts about future steps. While further detailed discussion is warranted on how I implemented this paradigm in my research, such a discussion is beyond what can be properly addressed here. Hence, one step is the need to share my practical research experiences with this paradigm, my reflections on its adequacies and inadequacies, and discussions on any changes, additions, or deletions that are needed. This reflects another step that we can all take in regards to this paradigm, that is to review its relevance with other Indigenous-based research projects, particularly with other Indigenous peoples. By sharing our thoughts on such Indigenous-based endeavors, we will be acting to strengthen our Indigenous knowledges and practices. Surely, such acts will positively serve us in our decolonizing efforts as Indigenous peoples.

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