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The breath of life versus the embodiment of life: indigenous knowledge and western research

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Introduction

The Peacemaker used as a symbol for our [Iroquois] Confederacy, not a flag but a tree, the great white pine. The Tree of Peace. And at the base of that tree grow four white roots in the four cardinal directions of the earth: north, south, east and west. And any nation that can embrace the concepts of peace, power and righteousness, can follow back one of those roots to the tree of peace and join there with us G. Peter Jemison, Faith Keeper, Cattaraugus Reservation, Seneca Nation (Public Broadcasting System, n.d. P.2)

Aboriginal peoples have lived in the lands now known as North America for at least 20,000 years (Assembly of First Nations, 1993), and yet Aboriginal¹ child caring knowledge struggles for recognition alongside the relatively infantile western² social work epistemologies³ (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP], 1996; Smith, 1999; Kovach, 2005; Bennett & Blackstock, 2006). Western based child welfare practice has been imposed on First Nations⁴ children for over 50 years and the outcomes have been far from impressive. There are more First Nations children in state care today than at any time in history – including during the residential school era (McDonald & Ladd, 2000; Blackstock, Prakash, Loxley & Wien, 2005). These poor results have revitalized calls from First Nations for traditional knowledge, values and customs to be placed at the center of the child welfare enterprise (Blackstock, Cross, Brown, George, & Formsma, 2006; Blackstock, Bruyere, & Moreau, 2006). Many have assumed that Aboriginal child welfare research approaches are needed to inform this process (RCAP, 1996, McDonald & Ladd, 2000, Absolon & Willet, 2004, Kovach, 2006). I agree and argue that re-centering child welfare on Aboriginal epistemologies is the first step in establishing any meaningful Aboriginal research practices. Despite the diversity of Aboriginal cultures, there are several common fundamental differences between Aboriginal and western epistemologies: 1) Aboriginal peoples believe their ancestors were right on most things and western peoples believe their ancestors were either mostly wrong or their ideas could be improved upon (Assembly of First Nations 1993; Auger 2001) 2) Aboriginal peoples believe they hold the land and life knowledge in a sacred trust for the generations to follow whereas many western peoples believe they can own land and knowledge and use it for individual benefit with little concern for future generations (RCAP, 1996; Pinto, in press) and 3) Aboriginal knowledge is situated within more expansive concepts of space and time (Auger, 2001). From these differences, flow very different concepts

¹ Aboriginal is used to describe Métis, Inuit and First Nations peoples in Canada

² western is used to describe those who have allegiance to European or Non Aboriginal North American systems of thought and culture which are typified by a preference for individual rights and determinism

³ Epistemology is used to describe how knowledge is shaped and validated

⁴ First Nations describes people who self identify as Indians pursuant to the Constitution Act

of life, morality that shape the role, construction, and processes of knowledge informing all dimensions of experience, including child welfare.

After hundreds of generations of children, Aboriginal people feel that there is very little “new” knowledge when it comes to kids and thus the gold standard of Indigenous⁵ social work research involves re-researching the past in the literal sense paying particular attention to the content, values and process of knowledge passed from one generation to another. In contrast, western social work privileges contemporary knowledge about children and parenting and this is reflected in the social work research methodologies which primarily test, or develop, more myopic phenomena. This paper introduces the implications of placing Aboriginal epistemologies at the center of child welfare social work by contrasting differences between Aboriginal and western knowledge before exploring reconciliation as an epistemological approach to re-center Aboriginal knowledge in child welfare.

The Breath of Life versus the Embodiment of Life

In most Pacific cultures, there is a word for well being, a desirable state of existence for people and the environment. My own research on Indigenous Fijian epistemology identifies SAUTU (state of well being) as the ultimate stage of development. Sautu has equivalents in all indigenous Pacific languages. Sautu is the condition and state of being wealthy, healthy and wise. Where ones relationships with others in her clan and community is good and where ones achievement is recognized in terms of wealth it brings but also in the ability of the person to distribute that wealth for the welfare of her people. (Nabobo -Baba, 2006)

Time is timeless and knowledge priceless if you believe you are the breath of life versus the embodiment of life. As Aboriginal peoples, we rely on those who came before us to be right on most things –to have passed on to us the essential knowledge of what it is to be human and to be a member of our group (RCAP, 1996, Auger, 2001; Pinto, in press). We believe in reliability over millennia versus in one experimental trial and our test of rigor is whether children, who are the generation to follow us, can understand our teaching of the essential knowledge of life (Assembly of First Nations, 1993; Smith, 1999, Auger, 2001). We are trustees of knowledge not the holders of knowledge, owners of knowledge or creators of knowledge just as we are the trustees of the land that are bound up in our identity (Australian Government, 1996; RCAP, 1996; Carriere, 2005).

As knowledge trustees, whose job it is to understand and relay knowledge which has been passed down by generations before us, we pay great attention to the detail of the knowledge and the values and spirit embedded in it so that we can pass it on (Auger, 2001; Bennett & Blackstock, 2006). Because knowledge needs to echo across lifetimes and generations, multidimensional standards of rigor are needed to ensure knowledge is understood within the four dimensions of learning: spiritual, emotional, physical and cognitive and that each teaching is situated within an interconnected knowledge web (RCAP, 1996; Auger, 2001).

Learning begins at birth when babies first hear the stories and teachings of their ancestors (Auger, 2001; Abosolon & Willett, 2004). You will be “told” these stories through voice, dance, music, and role modeling throughout your lifetime so that you can explore different dimensions of the same concept across the life stages (Assembly of First Nations, 1993; RCAP, 1996). As

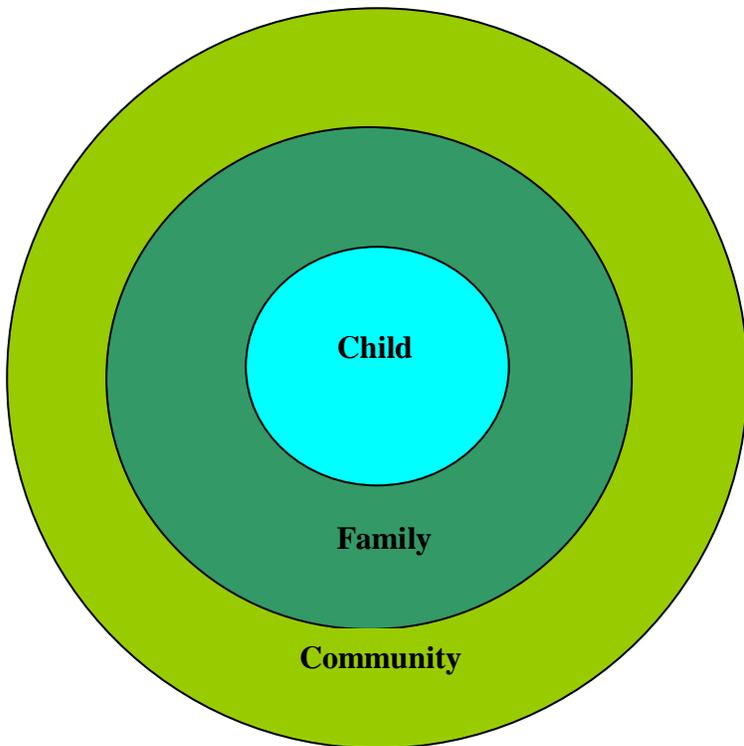
⁵ Indigenous is used to describe the universal experience of Aboriginal peoples

Aboriginal peoples, our understanding of knowledge only reaches maturity at the end of life when we fulfill the two most important functions of our lifetime – passing the knowledge to children and mentoring the middle aged as they transition to be the next generation of Elder teachers (Assembly of First Nations, 1993). For Aboriginal people the future is predictable, we will survive to the extent that we believe we are the breath of life and thus hold the essential knowledge of living in a sacred trust for those that follow. There are many Aboriginal legends and teachings cautioning us against believing we are the embodiment of life. The stories vary but the general theme is the same – a community member becomes arrogant and self satisfying resulting in the subjugation of communal well being and survival across generations placing future generations at risk (Pinto, in press).

From a western epistemology – the world looks much different. In western ideology contemporary and futuristic knowledge are highly valued and ancestral knowledge is usually only relevant as a starting line for creating better knowledge (Friedman, 2000; Wright, 2005; Postman, 1993). They ask a lot of questions because they feel the past provides few answers – but curiously they never answer one of the most important questions, at least from an Aboriginal viewpoint, what questions should you ask but never answer?

The western bias towards individual rights also translates into an epistemological segmentation of western knowledge into a series of different epistemologies that often do not have obvious connections with one another with little tolerance for a plurality of perspectives (Lather, 2000). For example, feminism, critical theory, positivism and modernity all explore reality using different lenses but they exist like single flashlight beams in a dark room. Sometimes the beams cross each other but little attention is paid to the intersections or unlit areas. Instead, the holder of the flashlight tends to see only those things enlightened by their narrow epistemological beam of choice. There are a few epistemological approaches in social work that acknowledge epistemological interconnections such as the ecological model and structural theory but even they bracket the time frames and dimensions from which they view reality. Figure 1 demonstrates how differences in time, value of ancestral knowledge, values and beliefs play out when the ecological model is viewed from western and Aboriginal viewpoints.

Western Ecological Approach



Ecological approach centered in Aboriginal Epistemology

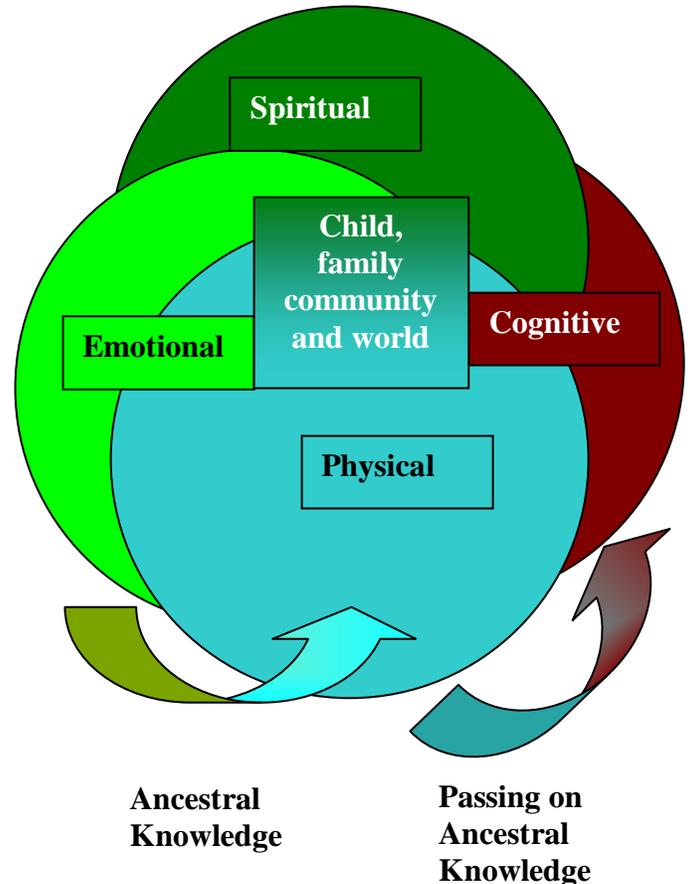


Figure 1: Contrasting epistemological approaches in Ecological Theory

The child is seen in a fixed moment in time within a larger context of family and world and there are interconnections between these dimensions that shape the reality of the child. If an Aboriginal epistemology is applied, the child, family, community and world are wholly affected by four interconnected dimensions of knowledge -emotional, spiritual, cognitive and physical informed by ancestral knowledge which is to be passed to future generations (Assembly of First Nations, 1993; RCAP, 1996). Despite the differences evident in this example, too often social workers negate the importance of ontology and epistemology in shaping our understanding of theoretical approaches (Kovach, 2006). A recent teleconference I participated in provides a good example of how differences in epistemology play out in real world child welfare research situations. There were about six non Aboriginal experts on the call and two Aboriginal experts, including me. We were grouping child welfare research questions under themes to inform a redevelopment of child welfare services in a region where Aboriginal children represented the largest portion of children in care. The non Aboriginal people had 23 themes grouped under four broad headings based loosely on an ecological model- child, family, process and child rights. Several of the non Aboriginal people made the comment that they really liked this approach because it was “child centered.” The Aboriginal people had five interconnected themes – self-determination, holism, structural interventions, culture and language and non-discrimination drawn in a circle enveloping the child, family, community and world. Interestingly, a couple of the non-Aboriginal participants said the Aboriginal themes, although simpler, were “too Aboriginal” but there was not a similar reflection that their 23 themes might be “too western.”

The non-Aboriginal people said well everything the Aboriginal people had come up with fits under the 23 themes they identified so we should all agree to use their themes and move on. We, the Aboriginal people on the call, didn't and instead used this as an opportunity to show how the epistemological differences in world view led us to organize these themes very differently.

I use this example because it shows how nuanced differences in epistemological differences might first appear (in this case in different ways of organizing research questions) but how critical it is to take the time needed to understand what drives these differences and how one way of doing things can often roll over alternative, and perhaps even more appropriate, ways of understanding.

Western science has arguably outstripped the western humanities when it comes to exploring the interconnections between phenomena, time and knowledge. The most progressive interdependent models of western thought are complexity theory (Zimmerman, Linberg & Plsek, 1988), the theory of everything and David Bohm's concept of the implicate order of wholeness in physics which emphasized the process of interconnection between explicate and implicate orders of life (Pratt, 1993). All of these theories attempt to situate knowledge within complex and interconnected systems but the time frames in which they situate knowledge are still bracketed according to achieving certain criteria. For example in complexity theory, time and knowledge are bracketed by phenomenon running the life cycle from birth (known in the model as exploitation) to the reincarnation phase (known in the model as the creative destruction phase) (Zimmerman, Linberg & Plsek, 1988). There is no conception of ancestral knowledge and the model is usually localized within one aspect of society (i.e.: an organization or system) in a bracketed period of time. Complexity theory does acknowledge that multiple life cycles within organizations and societies are possible and the passage of some information likely but decision making and knowledge building across life cycles are not anchored by any set of values or principles to preserve integrity of phenomenal essence. Aboriginal peoples would view these areas of under emphasis as critical oversights as they are fundamental to ensuring the transmission of knowledge across generations.

Western thought places importance on individuals and the fulfillment of individual rights. Being important legitimizes the journey from need to want and sets in play the whole industry of what Thomas Berry (2000, P32) calls "outsmarting the planet" in order to satiate our wants. The unfortunate side effect of outsmarting the planet without understanding the interconnections of all things has often lead to a mass reproduction of problems as scientists, trying to solve one problem, give birth to a plethora of unexpected consequences (Wright, 2005). Industries of want rely on the scientific method to test rigor and entrusts researchers with owning new knowledge as they produce papers based on it. But researchers must only deliver their papers to their peers and be judged favorably by them to be seen as valid holders of good knowledge and when they become old, they retire and are replaced by new people (Powell, 2000) with better ideas that create a new improved and progress filled reality. For Aboriginal peoples, who draw a correlation between being elderly and wisdom, setting aside the Elderly in favor of the less wise young and middle aged would be unthinkable (RCAP, 1996).

The western cultural system results in a high standard of living for some and not so high standards for most - just like those who were left behind by the "chosen ones" on Noah's Ark

(Provoost, 2004). There is really only fleeting pity for those who get left behind because the pervasive western idea that if people try hard enough they will “succeed.” In the real world- it was easier for Noah’s sons to get aboard the Ark than for others as even back then connections and nepotism made a difference.

The differences between Western and Aboriginal worldviews are vast in dimension, scope and value meaning that although they can be complimentary they can not be substituted for one another.

Epistemology: Something you put on or who you are?

It is not enough to be conscious of the problems of the world, how we involve ourselves in their solution is the most important thing. Rhigoberta Menchu Tum, Indigenous Rights Advocate and Nobel Laureate

An Elder once advised Rene Dussault, Commissioner for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, that “eloquence is when words are backed by commitment” (Dussault, 2005, P.7). Many of the western epistemological approaches impressed me with the complexity of thinking about knowledge, time and reality but in all this complexity discussions of commitment to the values underpinning the epistemological approach were absent, assumed, or bracketed as being important only to the professional role. Occam’s razor⁶ does not prevail as a gold standard in western epistemology but Occam would look favorably on Aboriginal epistemologies which usually manifest as a series of interconnected principles usually numbering no more than seven (Black Elk, 1984) embedded in a process of thought. The complexity of language used in western epistemology is evident in this passage in an academic journal where author Marilyn Ray (1994) has to translate the taxonomy for the reader “Within the transcendental (descriptive) and hermeneutic (interpretive) traditions the consequences of both descriptive and interpretive approaches to phenomenology are clarified” P. 117. Western academics might argue that more complex words are sometimes needed to describe complex thoughts but in this case Ray was able to identify adequate and more accessible language to describe what she was saying - so why not use it? An Aboriginal person would argue that if epistemology is so critical to the shaping of research that is done for the benefit of the public then the language of epistemology must be accessible to the public.

By contrast, Aboriginal epistemologies might seem simple such as in the case of the seven Ojibwe grandfather teachings: respect, wisdom, love, honesty, humility, truth and bravery (Maar, Sutherland & McGregor, 2005). They are simple – by design to ensure commitment and accountability (Auger, 2001). The whole community in which we exist as Aboriginal peoples know the seven principles we must live and do research by. We only get to use this type of Aboriginal epistemology when we have earned it – not necessarily through university degrees or through self- proclamation but by demonstrating these values in all aspects of our life (Assembly of First Nations, 1993; Auger, 2001; Kovach, 2006). Straying from ethics is not limited to consequences for one person – we are ambassadors of our house and family and thus they too are held accountable for mistakes of members of their group (Auger, 2001). Accountability means public accountability and we are only forgiven once we demonstrate learning and take actions to redress our wrong (Blackstock & Bennett, 2006).

⁶ Occam’s razor is often paraphrased as “All things being equal the simplest solution tends to be the best one” (Wikipedia, 2007)

In western research you need only demonstrate consistency in your research or within your profession— there is no requirement that you live it. Because western epistemology is something that “resembles who you are” - more than “is who you are” Allen (2005) poses important questions as to how much, or how little, pressure needs to be exerted before western researchers disrobe their epistemological stance exposing what Allen (2005) calls “research docility.” So what does it mean when epistemology is role related instead of identity related – can knowledge created in this way ever be “eloquent?” An Aboriginal epistemologist would say no, but how do epistemological and moral differences such as this one get recognized and examined?

Indigenous Knowledge: Measuring Legitimacy by whose ruler?

Our songs, our spirits, our identities are written on this land, and the future of our peoples is tied to it. It is not a possession or commodity for us- it is the heart of our nations. In our tradition, it is our Mother. We are passionate about this land, and we want you to understand that passion is not about power and individual wealth. It is reflective of the strong spiritual teachings which our nations share, or respect for Mother Earth and all Creation. It is our life. (Assembly of First Nations, 1993, P. 1)

In some ways it is not surprising that when the first Europeans arrived in North America they could not comprehend the knowledge of Aboriginal peoples given the vast differences in epistemologies and the colonial track record of disregarding other forms of knowledge (RCAP, 1996). What is surprising is that despite westerners proclaiming a higher civility and intellect (RCAP, 1996; Kovach, 2006) they lacked the confidence in their own systems of knowledge to make space for a plurality of ways of knowing (Lather, 2006). Instead they defaulted to the “power over” assimilation approach of the colonial office in Britain - take over the lands, using force if necessary, and take over the knowledge at any cost (RCAP, 1996). They had, and continue to have, almost no concept of what knowledge they denied themselves when they forcibly imposed their own systems of knowledge relegating other ways of knowing to the sidelines of what became known as Canada (RCAP, 2006; Blackstock, 2003). Social work follows in the footsteps of its colonial forefathers as evidenced by its unearned arrogance - it feels that after one hundred years its child safety solution outstrips those practiced by Aboriginal peoples for millennia (Blackstock, 2003; Blackstock & Bennett, 2006). Western social work struggles to understand Aboriginal ways of caring for children - because it has not in most cases even acknowledged that Aboriginal peoples have well-developed knowledge on the subject let alone invested any time learning about it (Cross & Blackstock, 2005). By assuming vacancy of knowledge in Aboriginal cultures - western based social work proceeds status quo - applying its distorting concepts on Aboriginal peoples and wondering why they are not working - must be, they think, because Aboriginal people are failing to take advantage of the good help offered (Blackstock & Bennett, 2006).

Given the graphic evidence that western child welfare approaches have, and are, failing Aboriginal children (RCAP, 1996; McDonald & Ladd, 2000; Trocme, Knoke & Blackstock, 2004; Absolon and Willett, 2004; Blackstock, Prakash, Loxley & Wien, 2006) but continue to be imposed by the western based child welfare profession, how do Aboriginal epistemological approaches get re-centered in child welfare? It begins by challenging assumptions that Lather

(2006) typifies in her description of non western epistemologies as “born of the interstices of dominant discourses (P.45). There are two problematic assumptions here: 1) that “undiscovered” epistemological approaches are “new” instead of “newly recognized” by Western dominated knowledge and knowledge institutions and 2) that these “new” or “newly recognized” only fill in the gaps of Western knowledge versus setting out a whole new process of knowledge, or emphasis on a dimension of knowledge, that Western epistemology has not considered. This type of epistemological bracketing would admonish Aboriginal epistemologies to filling in the gaps in social work knowledge. The significance in differences between Aboriginal and western epistemologies suggest differences in the dimensional scale not at the shorelines and by confining what she terms “new” epistemologies Lather misses an opportunity to explore multiple epistemological positions that go beyond the shorelines of western thought. Fawcett and Hearn (2004) also try to describe the challenges of researching the other but they do not necessarily introduce a strategy for understanding the epistemologies of the other on their own terms rather they introduce western based critical theory as a framework for building this understanding. In effect, they advocate using an outsider epistemological framework to understand the insider. Something they discuss in other parts of their article as being problematic as it distorts understanding.

To her credit, Lather (2006) acknowledges that western society and institutions have not created much space for the recognition of other epistemological approaches – including in academia. Paul Houston (2006) of the American Association of School Superintendents says that education expands difference and training creates sameness. If Houston is right, then how do Canadian universities, and by extension schools of social work, measure up on the education front in terms of welcoming non western ways of knowing?

Canadian universities generally hold that they value academic freedom and encourage originality of thought. The problem is that much of the educational content of universities is confined to western knowledge and the academic systems. Universities talk about the need to diversify knowledge and explore alternative epistemologies but there is no process in place to actively recruit new epistemologies and establish them on equal footing in academia. Alternative epistemologies get recognized despite the university system not because of the system. Take for example the standard in academic writing suggesting that the more an author cites peer reviewed literature the more reliable the arguments of the paper (Banton, 2005). It is unthinkable to write a paper for academic review without including references - but what if you truly are introducing alternative epistemologies or knowledge into academia which have not previously been explored in peer reviewed literature - who do you cite? (Banton, 2005; Kovach, 2006). In practical terms this can pose a real problem for Aboriginal students or researchers who want to work or study within non western paradigms.

The predominance of western research methods also limits the recognition of Aboriginal knowledge. As outlined earlier –western thought, and thus research method, is preoccupied with exploring single or bracketed phenomena in a moment of time whereas Aboriginal thought emphasizes exploring interconnected phenomena over generations. These epistemological differences suggest that distinct research methods are required – the reality is that given the lack of recognition of Aboriginal research methods such as storytelling and oral history in academia, Aboriginal students in social work and other disciplines wanting to achieve academic recognition

must draw from the western method tool chest even when studying Aboriginal peoples (Kovach, 2006).

The cultural mismatch between epistemology and method is fraught with problems (Smith, 1999). For example, when the “gold standard” of western research, the randomized control trial, is applied to Aboriginal knowledge- it fails. At best, randomized control trials describe a phenomenon in relation to a bracketed number of variables and in a bracketed period of time. Even when replicated, the control trial is usually limited to exploring relationships between variables identified in the source research study and thus may miss the influence of unexplored variables or changes of context over time. Qualitative measures offer some more similarity but they too are imbued with western concepts of limited time and scope of interconnection. Similarly, Aboriginal methods of storytelling would not necessarily be the best approach for understanding truly new phenomena for which no prior history or knowledge can be drawn.

It is important that we avoid putting western and Aboriginal epistemologies on a hierarchy – better they be explored on equal footing, understanding that they reflect very different world views and contexts. Currently, Aboriginal epistemologies and research methods are either not covered or are covered only in elective courses in most Canadian schools of social work. Even when Aboriginal epistemologies are presented in social work academia and research they are too often bracketed as only being relevant to Aboriginal peoples. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) argued that reconciliation was a prerequisite to remove Aboriginal knowledge out from the colonial cloud to be acknowledged on equal footing, appraised on its own merits, and studied in accordance with its own methods, and used as a preferred approach for matters affecting Aboriginal peoples.

Reconciliation: Piloting our Own Canoe

In our canoe is our way of life, our language, our law, our customs and traditions. And in the boat likewise are the European language, customs, traditions and law. We have said please do not get out of your boat and try to steer our canoe. And we will not get out of our canoe and try to steer your boat. We are going to accept each other as sovereign - we are going to travel down this road of life together - side by side. (G. Peter Jemison, Faith Keeper, Cattaraugus Reservation, Seneca Nation Public Broadcasting System n.d. P.1)

The problem is that western thought still tries to steer the Aboriginal canoe - reconciliation is about putting non Aboriginal people back in their own boat but creating space for us to travel down the river learning together from our differences. Seems simple, but it is not. My own experience suggests that many Canadians feel a need to steer the Aboriginal canoe – maybe they are afraid we will crash or worse - crash into them if left to our own devices.

When it comes to child welfare social work, non Aboriginal researcher Andrew Armitage (1996) optimistically proclaimed that Aboriginal peoples were in the post colonial period - many others disagree (RCAP, 1996: McDonald & Ladd, 2000; Blackstock, 2003; Milloy, 2005; Kovach, 2006). It is still a western captain steering the Aboriginal child protection canoe in social work epistemology, education, law and practice.

What has been surprising is how intransigent western colonial social work knowledge is even when it faces overwhelming evidence of failure when it is applied to Aboriginal peoples. As I have systematically reviewed the literature to explore why western social work holds so tightly to its epistemological framework in terms of its work with Aboriginal peoples, a number of things became clear 1) western epistemological child welfare approaches have substantially failed to benefit Aboriginal children over five decades even when measured by western standards (Armitage, 1996; RCAP, 1996; Trocme, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004; Milloy, 2005) 2) there is increasing evidence suggesting that western child welfare approaches themselves pose a risk to Aboriginal families by negating the effects of structural risks that lie outside of what families alone can influence (Bambllett, 2005; Cross & Blackstock, 2005; Milloy, 2005; Blackstock & Trocme, 2005) and 3) there is increasing evidence that the most promising interventions in child welfare are designed and implemented by Aboriginal peoples (Cornell & Kalt, 1992; Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; McDonald & Ladd, 2000; Blackstock, 2005; Blackstock, Prakash, Loxley & Wien, 2005; Carriere, 2005). So why does western social work hold so tightly to its imposition of knowledge on Aboriginal peoples? This is a complex issue embedded in concepts of colonialism, racism, power, oppression, economic gain, fear, and also, I believe, a bracketed sense of reality that creates a white noise barrier that limits westerners from seeing and valuing knowledge different from their own.

What is needed to center Aboriginal knowledge in social work? In 2005, over 200 experts in Aboriginal child welfare came together to set in place a new set of principles to guide a process of reconciliation in child welfare which would center Aboriginal ways of knowing and being (Blackstock, Cross, Brown, George & Formsma, 2005). Consistent with Aboriginal epistemological approaches - five principles (called touchstones) were identified:

- ✚ Self Determination - Indigenous peoples are in the best position to make decisions for Indigenous children
- ✚ Culture and Language - there is no culturally neutral social work practice or practitioner and when working with Aboriginal children - Aboriginal ways of knowing and being need to be driving the approach.
- ✚ Holism - addressing the needs of the child within his/her interconnected reality with due consideration to the generations to follow
- ✚ Structural Interventions - addressing structural risks - including those sourced in social work itself
- ✚ Non Discrimination- ensuring Aboriginal children have equal opportunities and placing Aboriginal child welfare knowledge on an equal footing with Euro-western social work (Blackstock, Cross, Brown, George & Formsma, 2005).

The touchstone principles are constitutional in nature similar to the seven grandfather teachings, in that they are intended to be interpreted within local culture, context and time thus respecting diversity and difference. These principles are intended to affect all aspects of social work including the epistemological approaches that frame it and the universities which serve to legitimize and propagate knowledge in Canadian society. The implementation of the touchstones is in the very initial stages and thus the long term success of this reconciliation model remains unclear. Nonetheless, it is encouraging that the touchstones have created a sustained space for Aboriginal and Non Aboriginal social workers to explore cultural and epistemological

differences with the hope of developing a system of child welfare that improves the outcomes for Aboriginal children.

Conclusion

Contrasting Aboriginal and western knowledge should not be mistaken for a rank ordering of different ways of knowing. I argue that the differences between western and Aboriginal epistemologies, research and methods are so significant that they likely represent entirely different dimensions of knowledge and thus can not be compared to one another. Rather the great unexplored opportunity lies in understanding how Aboriginal and western social work epistemologies can coexist respectfully along side other ways of knowing. Co-exist in a way that respects our differences instead of trying to overcome them – to view epistemological differences as a chance to enlighten our individual and collective cultural ways of knowing. Before this type of potential can be fully explored, there is a need for the type of reconciliation that RCAP (1996) called for: 1) telling the truth as experienced from multiple perspectives of Canada's colonial history with Aboriginal peoples, 2) acknowledging and learning from that history and then 3) rebuilding a relationship based on mutual respect and recognition. The truth telling phase of reconciliation makes visible the forces that continue to subjugate Aboriginal peoples and Aboriginal knowledge – in Canadian society and in social work as well. In making these forces visible we have an opportunity to rout out colonial residue in social work and create safeguards against its future recurrence. It also recognizes that non Aboriginal peoples are in the best position to make decisions affecting them – just as Aboriginal peoples are in the best position to make decisions affecting them. Once we are back in steering our own canoes – Aboriginal and non Aboriginal peoples can bring the richness of their different approaches to benefit all children, youth and families. Reconciliation is not a panacea – it will not resolve all the problems in social work or in Aboriginal and Non Aboriginal communities and it is not an easy or perfect process for establishing respectful relationships- but we must move forward anyway. The record numbers of First Nations children in child welfare care and the failure of western approaches to protect Aboriginal children – demands that we do all that we can.

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