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Decolonizing Research

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Abstract

Indigenous Knowledge systems, given the space and opportunity can make a valuable contribution to western pedagogy. However, in the realm of academia, western knowledge has been privileged and is the most accepted way of thinking, knowing and doing. To incorporate Indigenous Knowledge, researchers must decolonize their research. Acknowledging and incorporating Indigenous ontology, epistemology and methodology, or decolonizing research, results in research findings that are more reflective of the current Canadian reality.

Introduction

Research is an idea, process and an act that can leave many people suspicious, angry and in some cases harmed. This is particularly true of Indigenous peoples. In the past, research that involves Indigenous people has more often been “done to the people” rather than “with the people”. It has been conducted from a colonial perspective, laced with patriarchy and paternalistic ideas. Many Indigenous peoples feel that researchers have misinterpreted and ignored Indigenous methodologies, ontology and epistemologies, disrespected Indigenous protocols and have wrongly claimed ownership of Indigenous knowledge. The stolen knowledge is then used for the advancement of their colonial nations with no regard for its original owners (Smith, 1999:1). There has been little or no consideration for the use of Indigenous knowledge systems including their methodologies, ontology and epistemologies.

In Canada this injustice can be linked to imperialism and colonization. European imperialism subjugated Indigenous peoples for their own economic expansion, and ignored and discredited the legitimacy of Indigenous knowledge systems (Smith, 1999: 21). Colonization involved recreating the imperial culture, politics and economy. To help achieve this they attempted to overthrow and erase Indigenous knowledge systems (Smith, 1999: 21-22). Indigenous knowledge systems were reduced to being used only in localized settings by local people. They were not given the space or supports to grow and flourish. This is a loss, not only for the Indigenous Nation, but for Canadians and humanity in general. Indigenous Nations can make a unique and valuable contribution to pedagogy because of their intimate knowledge of their landscape and wealth of experiences. Today we are witnessing the beginnings of a resurgence of Indigenous knowledge systems. Indigenous peoples are working to restore and utilize their Nations unique ways of being, knowing and the related processes for acquiring knowledge. Academia is also beginning to create space for Indigenous knowledge systems to be restored and utilized. Indigenous scholars are using their Indigenous epistemologies, ontology and methodologies when doing research. Non-Indigenous scholars and researchers can benefit from decolonizing their research as well. The result is research that is more sensitive, relevant and informed.

I am a non-Indigenous researcher trying to find ways to decolonize and make better the research that I do with Indigenous peoples. Decolonizing is a difficult process as it challenges the very foundations and assumptions from which Canada has attempted to formulate our reality. My reality is very typical of most western Canadians. I was born and raised in rural Saskatchewan. My father was a farmer, my mother a teacher. In my childhood my introduction to Indigenous peoples was through Eurocentric text books and the occasional road trip that would take us through the reserves. Indigenous people and their experiences were foreign and distant to me even though geographically they were much closer than the European foundations with which I was raised. I had no

understanding of Indigenous reality or their interpretation of history. The underlying values, assumptions, and ways of being and knowing of their culture were completely foreign to me even though I was living on their lands.

In my mid 20's I relocated from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan to Wekweètì, a small remote community on the traditional territory of the Tłı̨chǫ Dene, in the Northwest Territories, to take a position as Band Manager for the Dechi Laot'ı First Nation. What began as a tentative approach to a 1 year contract turned into 10 years. I now have family and close friends that will always keep me connected. Although a lifetime of experiences shapes how I approach my research today, it is the years I spent living and working with the Tłı̨chǫ people that most deeply informs my work.

While my experiences in the North have overall been great, the first few years in Wekweètì were difficult at times. Attitudes and assumptions about Indigenous peoples that I had heard as I grew up were challenged. The people of Wekweètì were supportive and encouraged my personal growth. They told me if I were patient and listened more, I would do well and accomplish good things. Once I was able to let go of the assumptions I had been raised with, although even as a child I never fully accepted these prejudices, I was able to experience and appreciate a new and different way of viewing the world. I continued to work in Wekweètì, open to the idea that my way was not necessarily the right way. I built relationships in the community. These relationships allowed me to trust the people and for the people to trust me. I gained a greater understanding of their ideologies and way of life. I started spending time on the land and I learned, witnessed and lived the importance of the land and all of its inhabitants. I learned about community life and how the welfare of every individual is connected with the well-being of the community. Although I will always be a settler Canadian, and I can never fully appreciate and understand what it is to be an Indigenous person, through these experiences I have been given the gift of appreciating the inherent value of Indigenous peoples, their cultures and their ways of knowing. This marked the start

of my decolonization.

The research I am currently undertaking looks at Tłı̨chǫ self-governance and self-determination. In August 2005, after 13 years of negotiating the Tłı̨chǫ Agreement (“the Agreement”) became effective. The Agreement transfers control and ownership of 39,000 km² of land, management of renewable and non-renewable resources, and allows for Tłı̨chǫ authority of Tłı̨chǫ language and culture education. (Tłı̨chǫ Government & Government of Canada, 2005) The newly created Tłı̨chǫ Government can collect taxes, pass and enforce laws, enter into contracts, hold resources and manage the rights and benefits of the Tłı̨chǫ people. (Tłı̨chǫ Government & Government of Canada, 2005)

The Tłı̨chǫ Nation now faces the challenge of finding ways of implementing their self-government powers that reflect their expectations and goals for self-determination. Although it is recognized that self-government is not equivalent to self-determination, several of the Dene Nations in northern Canada view self-government as a tool to achieving self-determination (Irlbacher-Fox, 2009: 163). My research project explores and identifies some of the Tłı̨chǫ Nations expectations for self-government through the implementation of the Agreement. The focus will be on lands and environment, or *de* in Tłı̨chǫ. *De* is an area that was of paramount concern during the Berger Inquiry¹. Testimony suggests that the Dene identify *de* as important to the preservation of their culture and the achievement of self-determination (Berger, 1988).

Research that involves Indigenous peoples can only be strengthened when approached from an Indigenous or decolonizing perspective. Research can be a powerful tool for resistance. (Smith, 1999: 2) By affording Indigenous and decolonized research the space and attention it opens the world up to an alternative story. This opens up humanity to a perspective, knowledge and truth that can benefit other Nations. This truth has been silenced for far too long. To continue to deny this viewpoint would result in only a lack of awareness of what shapes our reality today.

It is particularly important to decolonize this research because the Agreement was negotiated to protect and promote Tłı̨cẖ language, culture and way of life (Zoe, 2008). By approaching this from a decolonizing perspective and seeking to understand and respect the Tłı̨cẖ perspective it will provide an alternate way to make sense of the realities of Tłı̨cẖ self-governance that is sensitive to and reflective of Tłı̨cẖ culture. To approach this project from a typical western approach would be contrary to the very foundations and purpose of the agreement. A western approach to this research would bring with it the assumptions, motivations and values of European imperialism and colonization. The result therefore would also be colonial and not reflect the reality that is both informed by a Canadian and Tłı̨cẖ perspective. To discover what the Tłı̨cẖ expectations and goals are the research must recognize the Tłı̨cẖ assumptions, motivations and values from which they negotiated the Agreement.

Ontology

The starting point of all research is ontology. Norman Blaikie defines ontology as ‘claims and assumptions that are made about the nature of social reality, claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with each other. In short ontological assumptions are concerned with what we believe constitutes social reality (Blaikie, 2000, p. 8). To approach research from Tłı̨cẖ ontology requires a personal transformation away from a western colonial approach. The western colonial approach separates humans from their surroundings positioning them as superior and full of life and spirit while everything around them is spiritless (Kincheloe, 2). Tłı̨cẖ ontology positions man in a reciprocal relationship with all living and inanimate objects. It is accepted that all elements of the ecosystem have life and spirit. In *Yamoria – The Lawmaker* George Blondin defines the Dene people as ‘people of the land’. He goes onto say, “we see ourselves as no different than the trees, the caribou, and the raven, except we are more complicated” (Blondin, 1997: 18).

A collection of Tłı̨chǫ teachings and history is currently being recorded in written form. This collection, called the Tłı̨chǫ cosmology, provides the ontological basis for the research project. The cosmology is Tłı̨chǫ understanding of their relationship to the earth, other creations, and other peoples. The cosmology is divided into a number of eras. In each era a significant conflict occurred, followed by resulting agreement and a set of values and principles that carry forward. This shapes the ontological assumptions from which this research project is informed.

The first era in Tłı̨chǫ cosmology is floating time. In this era animals and people could communicate and values and principles are taught through stories. The stories contain teachings of how to live well and reflect the culture and strong values of the Tłı̨chǫ.

The next era in the cosmology is marked by the conflict between humans and animals. Yamoozhah² was sent to Denendeh by the Creator to establish order because there was great conflict between the people and the animals. Yamoozhah, using his great medicine power, facilitated the division of animals and people. Yamoozhah gave the Dene people the law of co-existence. Through the laws he gave to the people as a result of his great medicine power he was able to bring peace throughout the land and the people understood the reciprocal relationship they had with the animals.

The next era in Tłı̨chǫ history is marked by a great conflict between the Tłı̨chǫ and the Yellowknife Dene. Edzo is credited with creating peace and establishing respect between the two groups.

After living under the threat of attack, Edzo who thought only of peace finally decided to confront the warring tribe. When he got to the camp of the enemy, Edzo talked with his sister, who was married to K'atehwhii. Together they made a plan for Edzo to enter the camp. The next day, Edzo and his brothers entered the camp. They used their power to control things such as the enemies' minds and the metal in the camp. It is said that when Edzo

spoke of peace, his words were so strong that the trees started to shake and they cracked. Finally, Akaitcho agreed with Edzo and peace was made. The agreement was celebrated with a dance of three days. It is to this day that Tłı̨chǫ people live under the *nàowó*³ of Edzo which is to live peacefully with neighbors. (Zoe, 2006)

The arrival of the fur trade marked another era where an agreement had to be established for the optimal relations between groups. The fur trade shifted the economy of the Tłı̨chǫ from one of subsistence to one characterized by the acquisition of externally produced good by means of trade. The leaders knew that if the Tłı̨chǫ acted as individuals they would be vulnerable to exploitation by fur traders. A new agreement was established with the fur traders that dictated trade to occur through a *donek'awi*⁴ (Helm, 2000:185). Individuals had a choice of which *donek'awi* they would go with. Once they forged these alliances with a *donek'awi* they would hand over all their furs to this individual for trade with the Hudson's Bay Company (Helm, 2000: 186). John B explains how this occurred:

So then you get into this fur trade era and that was the collective period. Collective means that we do it together, we do it as one. And we not only do it as one but we have a leader that does the same thing. The fur trade brought people together yearly at the forts to trade furs and meet with the *ek'awi* (the Hudson's Bay Trader). The *ek'awi* build their stone chimneys, still seen in the communities, where people would go into meet them. As we approached a fort we would shoot bullets up into the air to announce our arrival. On arrival a dance would always happen and tea would be drunk. This is the start of the tea dance. Through trade, we got good fishnets, bullets and knives. In this period we began to explore the area more and names of the people began to appear on the land. (Zoe, 2006)

The signing of Treaty 11 marked another era in the Tłı̨chǫ cosmology marked by an agreement and related laws. In this time period one individual was chosen to speak on behalf of the

Tłıchǫ people. Until this time period “decisions that had ramifications beyond a single task group were made by a group of elders in meeting based on discussion and consensus agreement with no one leaders prevailing” (Gibson, 2008: 69). However, the negotiations with the Government of Canada for Treaty 11 marked a shift in the politic of the Tłıchǫ as they had to choose one leader to speak on their behalf. Men who had served as *donek’awi* were chosen to be spokes person or *Kw’ahtia*⁵ and the biggest man of them all Monfwi became the head leader or *kwahti’dee*⁶ (Helm, 2000: 186). The resulting law that came out of this time period is one of unity. Zoe (2006) speaks of how Monfwi was chosen as a leader for the Tłıchǫ.

Close to 1921, people said, well the treaties are going to be here, we need somebody to talk for us. And so that was the first time they selected Yameeneeko. They said: you talk for us over here, so he took it and said well, I’m a little too old now, I’m not as young as I used to be but there is Monfwi who is a lot younger, he’s a lot more outspoken and he knows everything about his history so I’m going to now give it to him. So the collective gave leadership to Monfwi and Monfwi represented us. So now he’s going to speak on behalf of everybody. A representative means that he is going to represent the collective.

Epistemology

Epistemology is concerned with the theory of knowledge, in particular the nature and scope of knowledge or ways of knowing. Blaikie (2000) defines it as assumptions about what is assumed to exist can be know (8). The foundations for Indigenous ways of knowing are the self, the spirit and the unknown. (Ermine, 1999: 108) The acquisition of knowledge must be grounded in the spirit and knowledge is only available to those who are receptive to knowing. (Ermine, 1999: 108)

Tłıchǫ oral history suggests that Tłıchǫ epistemologies are closely linked with the metaphysical. *Nahwit’in* meaning “I dream” is a place where people go when they need to look outside themselves to gain knowledge of see the solution to a

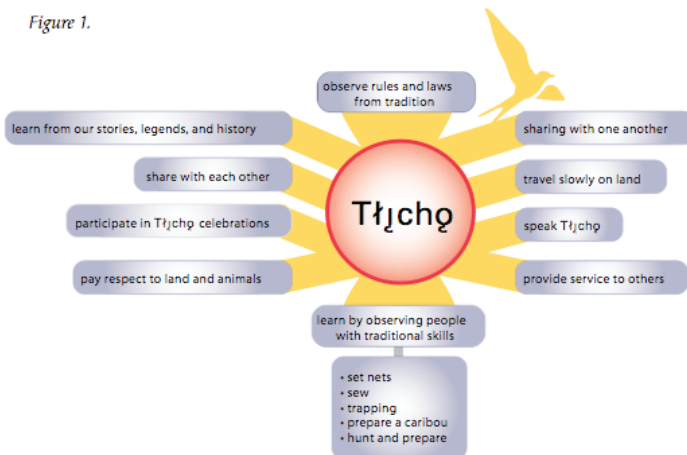
problems that is *goʔaanile* or a little bit hidden. (Helm: 1994, 158). When a person says *Nahwit'in* they mean they have received a special gift of knowledge (Helm: 1994, 158).

Another method for acquiring knowledge is through *Ik'óó*. *Ik'óó* is described as a special kind of knowing. In history there are several examples of these people often described as prophets or medicine people. They have a very special gift that allows them to have personal experiences with non-human forms (Helm, 1994:68). The term has been related to fusion⁷ or syzygy possibly referring to their ability to make a connection between the metaphysical world and the physical world.

Methodology

Methodology, underpinned by and reflecting ontology and epistemology, is the way in which a researcher goes about acquiring knowledge. The methodology for my research is informed by the guidelines that the Elders and leaders identified as required to live in a Tłıchǫ way shown in Figure 1 (Gibson, 2008: 41). These criteria were identified in a workshop with Elders and leaders who were trying to identify Tłıchǫ indicators of a good life.

Figure 1.



The data for my research project is found through attendance at meetings, the analysis of oral histories, observing and working with elders in traditional settings, and my interaction

with community members in a humble and respectful way. While acquiring this knowledge the project will be guided by the Tłı̨chǫ elders suggestion to travel on the land slowly. Elders said it was important to, “learning the place names that guide people from one place to the next and visiting sacred sites” (Gibson, Martin, Zoe, Edwards & Gibson, 2008: 43). The Tłı̨chǫ attribute traveling on the land and taking time to learn the place names and related stories as a way of seeking knowledge (Andrews & Zoe, 2007: 23). Conducting research is a way for academics to seek out knowledge. In this research project the knowledge is held by the Tłı̨chǫ people. Therefore to follow the elders advice of traveling slowly the research schedule is dictated by the pace that the people are willing to share their knowledge. This means listening patiently and thoughtfully to those who share their wisdom. As the elders suggest the research process should be dictated by acquisition of knowledge rather than by personal schedules (Gibson, Martin, Zoe, Edwards & Gibson, 43).

Conclusion

Decolonizing research is a difficult task, but it is one that is not only beneficial to research but necessary to humanity. The realities in Canada today are informed by imperialism, colonization, multi-culturalism and by the relationships with and experiences of the Indigenous people of these lands. It is important that all of these realities are recognized and appreciated if we are to acquire knowledge that helps us to make sense of our current reality and put it into perspective. Although academia is beginning to carve out a space for Indigenous ways of thinking where Indigenous ontology, epistemology and methodologies are utilized, the work is far from complete and must continue. The knowledge born of Indigenous ways of knowing holds a valuable place in pedagogy as all of humanity can learn from their experiences.

Decolonization is a personal journey that for me means understanding the effect imperialism and colonization has had on our (I refer collectively to Indigenous and non-Indigenous

peoples) reality. It requires reflecting critically on the assumptions, motivations and values that inform our existence. Once we begin to understand the effects of imperialism and colonization it becomes apparent that there exists alternate ways of being, knowing, and doing that have equal, if not more validity on these lands. By peeling away the colonial mindset it is revealed that there is an Indigenous history, an Indigenous way of knowing and being and Indigenous ways of theorizing that are valuable to the creation of knowledge. By decolonizing my research I attempt to be mindful and respect of this alternative perspective. When I encounter and analyze data and information I am thoughtful of the assumption, values and motivations that inform the knowledge. I make every attempt to center my research from the Indigenous perspective and worldview while still acknowledging that my worldview as a non-Indigenous person informs my research as well. To mitigate the problems associated with a non-Indigenous person attempting to do research from an Indigenous perspective, elders and community members always closely monitor my work, including the analysis and results. These individuals guide and mentor me as I continue the process of decolonizing my research and at the same time decolonizing myself.

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Endnotes

1. The Berger Inquiry traveled to every community in the NWT Mackenzie Valley to hear from the people their concerns with the development of a pipeline through the Mackenzie Valley corridor.

2. Depending on the Region Yamozhah maybe referred to as Yamoria. Yamozhah is the name typically used by the Tłı̨chǫ people.
3. *nàowo* is defined as idea, society, culture, custom, way of life, conduct behaviour, deeds, perspective, law, attitude. (DDBE, 78)
4. *donek'awi* is defined as the peoples trader, this was a very high man in Tlı̨cho society at the time of the fur trade (Helm, 2000: 185)
5. Kw'ahtia is Tlı̨cho for chief (DDBE, 66)
6. –dee is a suffix meaning great or big. (DDBE, vii)
7. In a personal communication with John B Zoe on March 24, 2010 he related the meaning of Ik'oo to one of fusion.