

## Guest Editorial: What is an Indigenist Research Paradigm?

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The guidelines for authors (and for reviewers) to the edition of the *Canadian Journal of Native Education* that is edited by the Indigenous Peoples Education Program at the University of Alberta states, "although all submissions will be considered, preference will be given to articles that are written from within an Indigenous paradigm." Understanding some guidelines and principles that underlie an Indigenist paradigm will help as academics, graduate students, researchers and authors write from that base. We have invited Shawn Wilson, Cree scholar and author of *Research is a Ceremony* (in press) to answer our editorial question.

Attempting to articulate just what an Indigenist paradigm is has occupied much of my time and energy for the past decade or more. I suppose that I have built up a pretty good relationship with the whole idea of what paradigms are and why it is so important to have and use an Indigenist one. The work that was done to further advance and clarify my ideas on the topic earned me a doctorate. Just as important, the discussion and experiences I have had with other Indigenous scholars and traditional knowledge-keepers from around the world have helped me to become a better researcher and ultimately a better person. And yes, the two can coincide.

Because the editors of *CJNE* have asked for a response to the question "What is an Indigenous paradigm?" I need first to provide a context by saying why I attempt to answer the question in the first place.

The whole concept of Indigenous Knowledge (or traditional knowledge) as a component of Indigenous human rights has come to the fore not only in Canada, but on the international stage as the United Nations debated and adopted the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. It is important for me to step in and say, *Well, how did we go about gaining all this Indigenous Knowledge?* Of course, it came about through millennia of interaction and relationships with our environment, as well as through painstaking research. This research was conducted in an Indigenist research paradigm. It is part of what makes us Indigenous peoples, and its philosophy is reflected in everything that we do, think, and are.

I use *Indigenist* to name or label the paradigm that I am talking about rather than *Indigenous*. It is my belief that an Indigenist paradigm can be used by anyone who chooses to follow its tenets. It cannot and should not

be claimed to belong only to people with “Aboriginal” heritage. To use an analogy, one does not need to be female to be a feminist. Researchers do not have to be Indigenous to use an Indigenist paradigm, just as researchers do not have to be “white” to use a Western paradigm. Nor do Indigenous researchers have to use an Indigenist paradigm. It is the use of an Indigenist paradigm that creates Indigenous knowledge. This knowledge cannot be advanced from a mainstream paradigm. That would simply be mainstream knowledge about Indigenous peoples or topics. It is the philosophy behind our search for knowledge that makes this new knowledge a part of us, part of who and what we are. And it is then the choice to follow this paradigm, philosophy, or world view that makes research Indigenist, not the ethnic or racial identity of the researcher.

It is important for Indigenist scholars to discuss and continually refine this understanding of an Indigenist paradigm. We need to do this in order to ensure that research that is conducted in our communities is of the highest standard. Indigenist research is not frivolous, nor does the use of one or two (or 10) talking circles as research tools suffice to make a research project Indigenist. It is not sufficient for researchers just to say that they are Aboriginal and are therefore using an Indigenist paradigm. We must explain the paradigm clearly so that we can make sure that good work is being done. For me it is a part of my relational accountability to ensure that research conducted in the name of an Indigenist paradigm lives up to the title.

We need to articulate what we mean by an Indigenist paradigm without comparing it with other paradigms. To do so would mean falling into a mainstream, positivist trap by creating a binary. Although additional paradigms may be used to support our stance, any comparisons will inevitably lead to judgment and subjugation, an *us and them* dichotomy. More important, accountability in describing an Indigenist paradigm leads in turn to interesting pedagogical issues. How do I teach this paradigm to others such that it is true to the world view? Often formal academic writing cannot be used to bolster the teachings because they are too removed from context to be of use.

So in order to describe and use the paradigm, researchers and authors need to place themselves and their work firmly in a relational context. We cannot be separated from our work, nor should our writing be separated from ourselves (i.e., we must write in the first person rather than the third). Our own relationships with our environment, families, ancestors, ideas, and the cosmos around us shape who we are and how we will conduct our research. Good Indigenist research begins by describing and building on these relationships.

Then, borrowing liberally from the *Proposal to Host Universities* written by the International Indigenous Graduate Institute (2004) and framed by Indigenous scholars such as Cora Weber-Pillwax, Judy Atkinson, Karen

Martin, Fyre Jean Graveline, Stan and Peggy Wilson, Peter Hanohano, and myself as well as other well-known Indigenous scholars, the following principles must guide the research and any resulting documents or actions that arise as a result.

- Respect for all forms of life as being related and interconnected.
- Conduct all actions and interactions in a spirit of kindness and honesty; compassion.
- The reason for doing the research must be one that brings benefits to the Indigenous community.
- The foundation of the research question must lie within the reality of the Indigenous experience.
- Any theories developed or proposed must be grounded in an Indigenous epistemology and supported by the Elders and the community that live out this particular epistemology.
- The methods used will be process-oriented, and the researcher will be recognized and cognizant of his or her role as one part of the group in process.
- It will be recognized that transformation within every living entity participating in the research will be one of the outcomes of every project.
- It will be recognized that the researcher must assume a certain responsibility for the transformations and outcomes of the research project(s) which he or she brings into a community.
- It is advisable that a researcher work as part of a team of Indigenous scholars/thinkers and with the guidance of Elder(s) or knowledge-keepers.
- It is recognized that the integrity of any Indigenous people or community could never be undermined by Indigenous research because such research is grounded in that integrity.
- It is recognized that the languages and cultures of Indigenous peoples are living processes and that research and the discovery of knowledge is an ongoing function for the thinkers and scholars of every Indigenous group.

Let me say that this is simply a beginning answer to the question "What is an Indigenist research paradigm?" The answer must be developed further by all those whose world view and existence originates in this domain. If we profess to use the paradigm, we must articulate and honor its components.