Oral Conference Presentations

Coming to an Understanding: A Panel Presentation
What is Indigenous Research?

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Indigenous research requires a context that is consciously considered and purposefully incorporated into the research by the researcher. At least this was one of the findings in my research. To contextualize my contribution to this discussion, I want to tell you two short stories about my grandfathers. The first story goes back to my first year in graduate studies. I had been teaching for quite a number of years. One day when I was reading in an anthropology section of the library, I came across an article by an anthropologist. It was a description about a Cree man, his home, his ways, his words. Like the fog that creeps over the lake on a summer evening, a sense of disbelief slowly clouded my comprehension as I came to the rather sickening realization that she was talking about my grandfather. I could feel myself moving into a place of terrible stillness. After a while I took the book, checked it out of the library, and returned to my home community for the weekend.

I read the article to my mother (who did not read in any language), discussing one particular section with her in great detail because I felt that our lives had been assaulted and violated. I wanted her reaction to the situation. She didn't get as upset as I did, at least not as visibly, and I understood that as simply an indicator of her normally calm and thoughtful response to life in general. But she was not happy about the writing either. We talked and spent the whole weekend immersed in this experience of responding to what the anthropologist had written about our family. In the end I decided that some day I was going to do something about this. Several months later, I had vision about something I was to do, a vision that has not been completely fulfilled, but is still unfolding.

The article was a description of my grandfather in his home along with a verbatim transcription of his Cree words shared in an interview with her. Then followed the translation of the Cree into English. The English was not an accurate translation or interpretation of what my grandfather had said in Cree and this was the primary source of my anger.

Over the weekend, my mother and I talked a lot about the language and the translation and other things related to communication in this particular case. Aside from that, we also talked about my grandfather as a person and about his whole life. In other words, we talked about family history, and lived through many years

A number of people have asked us to publish conference presentations. Although these would not usually find a place among refereed articles, we believe that they are important, particularly to those who follow an oral tradition.

and generations in that weekend. In one way it was a wonderful experience, having my mother share this part of the family history with me. The history helped me to contextualize the pain and humiliation and shock that I had felt on seeing my grandfather and his way of being objectified by this anthropologist. In another way it was very distressing because I was still left with the problem of figuring out where I fitted into this situation as a graduate student and as a member of the family that had been placed under a microscope by what I perceived to be an arrogant and aggressive stranger.

What, then, are the principles of Indigenous research that are reflected here? It was clear to me that I had dug the information out, that it was about my family, and that now I had the responsibility to do something about it. I carried that sense of responsibility away with me after that weekend, and it is still with me. The need to do something is not as pressing as it was then, but it is still there.

The second story was an event that occurred while I was working in the central office of a public school system in northern Alberta. We provided opportunities for workshops and training sessions two or three times a year for Native language instructors from the schools. These sessions would be conducted over two or three days, and Elders would be brought in to guide and assist in the work. Two Elders, a couple, had come down from a northern lake. During the coffee break, a friend of mine who was helping to host this couple, brought them into the staff room to introduce them to me. Although I didn't have a direct and active role in the sessions, my friend wanted us to meet. I felt honored and very happy to meet them because I had already heard that they were to be at the sessions.

My administrative position had given me many opportunities to meet Elders, but often we would be strangers to each other. These introductions, then, were usually quite formal situations without much openness, especially at first. In this case, we were being introduced in the coffee room of a large bureaucratic organization, and I was being introduced as a part of that system. This would not be the typical site for Elders from the more remote northern communities to feel welcome and at ease, and understandably the exchange of greetings was rather formal on their parts. Then my friend said in reference to me, "She's the granddaughter of _____." With these words, he placed me solidly within the relationship and kinship network of their own northern community. My grandfather, whom they knew very well, had married into a family of that community. Their response was the sun breaking out over me, and immediately everything about the introduction was totally different. They hugged me warmly and looked at me directly in conveying their respect for this man who had been my grandfather. Then they talked briefly about him, sharing and bringing him into the present moment with us. It was a wonderful experience for me that took place in a matter of a few minutes.

The experience had a powerful impact on me. It was a personal validation of kinship and relationship, and at the same time it was a validation that our lives were being lived informally day after day in exactly the same way. These people had come from a seemingly totally different kind of world, but their responses and ways of being in the world were no different than mine. I understood the reality that these relatives and I simply lived out our beings and that we were bound

together in those significant ways that overshadowed external differences. Our lives, in short, were understandable to each other despite any geographical, physical, or other differences.

Because I am an Indigenous researcher, all existing research methodologies are available to me. This has always been one good reason to encourage my students to go to university. I would tell my students that if they were at all interested in thinking, in philosophizing, in wanting to make sense of the world intellectually, then they would have to go and figure out what everybody else was saying about that. I would emphasize that they could not simply focus on the thinking and teachings of the western world, but that they would have to be open to the thinking and teachings of every culture, of everyone they could access, of every kind of thinking system in the world. They would hear and, I hope, realize that the more awareness and knowledge they have about those kinds of things, the richer their own experiences became. They would learn that the more they knew and understood about other world cultures and ways of being and thinking, the more they would be able to contextualize their own experiences as healthy social and cultural beings, without a sense of isolation or disconnection from the rest of the world.

A significant element in my childhood experiences was a strong sense of family closeness and unity. In later years I could realize and understand that such powerful family closeness was built on and reflected a vital integration of values and cultural aspects of both European and Indigenous ways of being and knowing. From these personal experiences have come many of the messages to my students. I believe that without a strong family and/or community base, as individuals we are weakened psychologically in our abilities to situate ourselves respectfully and comfortably in a world of many cultures, societies, and nations. We are unable to break our own sense of isolation because we are unable to identify and describe the source of such isolation consciously.

Writing a paper on Indigenous research methodologies raised an obvious dilemma for me. I had trouble getting past the idea that "I'm an Indigenous person; therefore, what I'm doing is going to be Indigenous research." Beyond that statement, it seemed that I could only say that "straight-line, cognitive, intellectual exercises can be very exciting and challenging." But I could also 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.'" This last element is as critical to my research plan as understanding the knowledge base that I am working from or knowing what research methods I'm going to use. 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. This integrity is based on how I contextualize myself in my community, with my family and my people, and eventually how I contextualize myself in the planet, with the rest of all living systems and things. Without personal integrity, I would be outside the system. If I am outside the system, I don't survive. I destroy myself. I am isolated. All these are important aspects connected to research in general and would almost certainly be an important consideration of anything I would be claiming as Indigenous research.

When we look at statistics for and about Indigenous people, our survival is on the line. What I grapple with intellectually and what I have realized is that when we are based in Indigenous reality and Indigenous ways of thinking, we start out with synthesis. We look at the world from a position of synthesis. This includes our intellectual and cognitive processes. We start out with synthesis, and as we move through the university system, we end up with deconstruction. Many Indigenous scholars are pushing the deconstruction approach to analysis, suggesting that we need to deconstruct all or most systems that affect our lives, and ultimately to deconstruct a particular way of looking at the world. In addition, there is all the new poststructural and postmodern language or terminology. The new language is probably not that new any more to most academics. But it is new to most people, and perhaps the implications inherent in the adoption and application of such concepts are new even to most academics. The point is that this is where we end up—with deconstruction and poststructuralism discourses—unless we choose our thoughts, words, and actions carefully and deliberately, because we do not want to end up there.

As Indigenous scholars, we want to end up and stay in synthesis. Deconstruction, poststructuralism, and postmodernism are concepts and discourses that are simply other topics and steps along the way in our analysis of the thinking, English-speaking world. We want to study and know this world and these topics, primarily because this is where we are immersed. The knowledge that we acquire from our studies is there for our own purposes, Indigenous purposes, derived from Indigenous thinking and ways of being. Unless we realize that knowledge in actuality through integration into our own ways of being and knowing and doing, our studies have no life. They become those empty practices of the teacher who cannot be a teacher but who purports to act as a teacher. Like empty practices, academic discourse by itself will not support the life of the individual, the family, or the community. As we integrate new knowledge, it is we who give it life that it may sustain life.

The meaningful integration of new knowledge happens in the day-to-day events, sitting around the table with people whose lives are being affected in concrete ways by "self-government" or "education." Here deconstruction can have a context and a purpose that moves it beyond the abstraction of a concept and into the practicality of action. The abstraction of the concept is excellent fodder for generating excitement in the discourse of Indigenous university students thinking about home. The excitement of such discourse is inspiring and can sustain the student through much hardship during the years of required study. Such inspiration must be maintained in order eventually to be at "home" and turn that powerful knowledge into action.

If my work as an Indigenous scholar cannot or does not lead to action, it is useless to me or anyone else. I cannot be involved in research and scholarly discourse unless I know that such work will lead to some change *out there* in that community, in my community. This is the most important aspect of research to me, and I don't waste my time on anything that doesn't go there for me. When I gave the grandfathers' stories, they were a part of my journey. Since the days of those experiences, I have collected new stories: stories about my children, stories of my

classroom children, of my friends, my communities. All of these are part of my research today.

Deconstructing and decolonizing will serve some purpose, but I don't think these processes will necessarily bring us to a better state of existence as Indigenous people. Although they may be necessary discourses and practices for western or non-Indigenous researchers, deconstruction and decolonizing discourses or practices on their own will not lead us as Indigenous researchers to where we want to be. One significant reason is that we have to maintain consistently a sense of relationality and accountability to our communities in order to maintain our own integrity as researchers. This relationality and accountability means we cannot limit our involvement or participation in discourse. If, for example, we are going to deconstruct a policy in a room of academics, remember that this is quite different from deconstructing that same policy out there with the community council. Not only would we not be using the same language of deconstruction, more significant to my point is that in the community it is not "a discourse about deconstruction," it *is* deconstruction. Out there in the community, they are deconstructing, and they don't need the language of deconstruction to do it. It seems that it is we who need this language, we who need the words and the discourse. My experience has convinced me as an Indigenous researcher that it is only from within the Indigenous communities and only by means of those perspectives that we will move beyond the compelling but relatively hopeless paradigms of deconstruction and decolonization, whether in discourse or action.

To address methods in the framework of Indigenous research, I share some points on one practice that I follow in doing my research. I talk to people all the time, purposefully and with as much awareness as I possess. I could refer to my method as interviewing so that it might be more easily recognized. Interviewing, however, is to be seen as a process of total involvement. I connected with people that I had known for years, not in terms of knowing their personalities, but knowing their connections. They also knew my connections. We were part of a network that was safe and trusted and established. The trust in some cases was not necessarily vested in me as an individual, but in me as a part of my family. For example, a person would talk with to me on the basis of an established relationship of trust with a member of my family. This family member would be in an uncomfortable position if I did not honor that relationship in my words and actions, because she or he would be held responsible and accountable for my actions and indeed my attitudes. I met a lot of people, but a meeting with one Elder provides a good demonstration of the process that I followed in my work. To meet this Elder and to have him share with me, three people spoke for me, indicating to him that it was all right for him to talk to me. Further, they advised me and supported me by active participation in the planning and carrying out of a particular event. If something had occurred to put anyone in the community in a "bad" position, I would have been held accountable, and rightly so. However, the three people who stood beside me would also have been held accountable, whether in fact they had been responsible or not.

Trust is crucial to this method, and the researcher must have a deep sense of responsibility to uphold that trust in every way. In this example of one event, I

prepared and served a full meal, as well as getting the house ready for the guests who had been invited. The people arrived, bringing along other guests. Gradually the shifts occurred, and we moved from informal to formal contextualizing of the event. The evening session was about three hours long, and when it was over, everyone seemed to be happy and inspired with what had been shared. Everyone had contributed to the discussion, and everyone had learned from the sharing. I was thankful for a tremendous learning experience.

I took a trip with a friend from that community who gave me a history of the land area during three hours of driving. I saw where people had lived, and learned who they were and how they fitted into the lives of the people who still lived there. The history of the land became alive with people and their stories. It was critical stuff, not necessarily because I use it in my research, but because it helps me to establish and maintain the relationships I have with the people who live there. It also helps me to contextualize and understand the information and the stories that I am given as I get to know more people and make deeper connections in the community.

One of the steps that I have sometimes taken in preparation for interviews is to select specific excerpts from relevant literature that I feel would speak to the person with whom I will be working. I would make these excerpts available to the people involved in my work by reading aloud or having them read on their own, and then giving a brief interpretation of what I thought the author was saying. I would then contextualize the focus of our work together and put my ideas forward as to how this selection fitted or raised questions. Their contribution to the discussion would flow easily from this introduction. I have found that all the Indigenous people with whom I have chosen to share such relevant texts have been interested and appreciative of hearing the words of other thinkers, especially those from other cultures. I recognize the limitations inherent in making judgments about what another person might wish to hear or know. In fact the exercise is not really so subjective, because each time I share with someone in this manner, the sharing is a direct outcome of previous sessions and interactions. In some ways this has been an excellent way for me to give back to people, as well as to receive from people. The process is one where Indigenous people, many of whom are not able to read the English-language texts, can participate in the direct analysis of written knowledge and world views from other cultural groups and also be active partners in the co-creation of contemporary Indigenous knowledge. I believe that this seemingly simple yet intricate and complex exercise has potential for ensuring the vitality of the intellectual contributions that Indigenous Elders are making in the area of Indigenous scholarship. Again, the responsibility lies with Indigenous scholars to recognize and acknowledge such sources of knowledge.

This approach to research is one that I would follow if I were going out to talk to anyone; it has nothing to do with the culture of the person that I am approaching. It has everything to do with my own culture and my own personal values. I know that I don't and cannot know everything. I also know that nobody can be objective in the true sense of being objective and detached. Because I know that I cannot be totally objective, I also recognize that I cannot know my own limitations of knowledge. In other words, it's the famous "I do not know what I do not know."

This awareness is my constant reminder always to make my research process as broad as I can, to talk to many people, to form many relationships, and to go on many trips.

The deepening of specific relationships is often a natural outcome of the research process. A friend invited me to come out to her community and to join her in making a summer residence. My research antenna signaled a significant point. Within a few months, at least six people had already told me in different words, "I'm going to go make a summer place this year." I started to think about why this summer place might be so important to so many people. And why would such a place be necessary up here, in the middle of natural forests? My friend and I had an inspiring conversation about summer places and their relevance in the lives of Indigenous peoples. The discussion was rich and meaningful to both of us; our interaction had led us into a deeper sense of knowing and understanding an ordinary practice.

In my community, as a young girl and then as a young adult in high school, I watched the disintegration of my community as all-weather roads and new forms of housing and land tenure came in and displaced Indigenous forms of housing and Indigenous arrangements of living space. The efforts to rebuild and reclaim our community have raged and died by turns. To many community members the efforts seem to have stopped a long time ago; to others they will never stop.

One of the most visible signs of the government's "modernization" movement was row housing. Row housing in a townsite with lots and services patterned after those in small-town North America is not reflective of how the northern Indigenous bush peoples would arrange their living spaces. How these peoples have learned to cope with such foreign impositions on their physical spaces is a story laden with courage, despair, and ingenuity.

For many years people have been building summer places in the bush near and around their houses. These summer residences are not like row housing. These are the places where the family and social groups congregate to share in ceremonies, make dried meat, smoke fish, share in the storytelling, and in general feel alive and touch the sacred earth.

We know what we need to sustain ourselves, to support our own well-being. We know and we hold it all within ourselves. At the same time, we reach out to others like ourselves and to our young people who may not have those connections that sustain them.

How to describe a methodology as Indigenous is somewhat problematic for me, and I think that perhaps this is not the best way to formulate the issue. Any methodology will suit my purposes in research if it permits a fluidity that can encompass any social or cultural context that I choose to work in without breaking the boundaries of personal integrity. I use the practices and principles of methods and methodologies that seem to fit with and balance my own ways of being and looking at the world. I try to ensure that there will be no conflict between my ways of being and doing if I should decide to do research with a particular methodology or method. In my graduate program I have had no problems in completing my academic research in the manner that I find most comfortable and acceptable. Producing a written text does present a much larger challenge, however.

I think it is unfortunate that whole areas of Indigenous thought are being edited out or deliberately left out of the scholarly writings of some, if not most, Indigenous scholars. Much of the process or ways of creating Indigenous knowledge is simply not being shared or explained. Such explanations, I believe, would enrich the world, and maybe those explanations should be provided where it is possible to do so. On the other hand, maybe we do this in other, less explicit ways. I share most of my research process in other ways, and it is probably not going to be presented in the text of my dissertation. Nonetheless, that particular process of knowledge-creation is what gives me life and sustains me in my work. It includes the "intuitive stuff" and having a vision that empowers the unfolding of the process. Living that way presupposes very little need for explanation and description. That way is natural: it is always there because it is a part of who I am. It would be hard to know what to include if I were to try to explain my own process of knowledge-creation. It would mean engaging myself in a whole new process of spiritual discernment before I could begin the intellectual process of deconstruction or dissection of myself for the purposes of academic analysis. This is not to say that these processes would not be worthwhile or to suggest that they are not ongoing, parallel, and continuing processes. Adapting this very personal spiritual and intellectual reality to contemporary research and scholarship is an everyday task for Indigenous scholars.

You can live and talk about the bush and never have set foot on a trail. My father was a trapper, and I lived in that lifestyle. However, until I personally went to the trapline and stayed there for three weeks, I didn't really know the context or the connections between the trapper and the land, or the trapper and the animals, or the trapper and the weather, or the trapper and 100 other things. Being there for enough time was necessary for the learning to be integrated into my being. Perhaps it is like writing *bread* on a piece of paper and then eating the paper instead of eating the bread.

Intellectualization of Indigenous ways of being and knowing can inhibit and/or distort opportunities for Indigenous people to experience connections and personal transformations. Aboriginal culture classes for Indigenous children who have never had an Indigenous experience of themselves are no more meaningful than Chinese culture classes would be to them. It is in the invisible but central integrity of the Indigenous person that lies the strength of Indigenous identity. In the larger society where we find ourselves as contemporary Indigenous people, it is this inner core of the person that we need to nourish. Dancing and the ceremonies can help, but they also must be placed within and learned from within a much larger, richer, more ancient, and more intensely personal framework.

In concluding I refer to the importance of words in research and scholarship. Sometimes it's really important to know exactly what a word means, and sometimes you just put it on the shelf until it becomes necessary to know. I learned quickly the power of a word as I watched the people with whom I lived and whom I loved struggle to deal with an English-speaking world. Many had no solid knowledge base of any language. It is good to remember here that Indigenous people who lost their language had it taken away from them by force, and at the same time were denied the opportunity to learn a second language. Unfortunately

for such persons, languages and words are only powerful or useful to the degree that the speaker has command over them. Also unfortunate is that opportunities for people to learn languages and words is and has always been connected to the political agendas of those in power. The power of the word then was magnified when used in conjunction with a foreign language to control and manage Indigenous peoples over the centuries. Today we recognize that Indigenous research holds the capacity to break the silence and bring forth the powerful songs of long-imprisoned Indigenous voices using their own languages.

Indigenous research methodologies are those that enable and permit Indigenous researchers to be who they are while engaged actively as participants in research processes that create new knowledge and transform who they are and where they are.

What is an Indigenous Research Methodology?

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For my research I began looking at Indigenous psychology and what an Indigenous psychology is. Part of my work involves talking with Indigenous people here in Canada and also in Australia. I am interested in some of the similarities in our ways of thinking and ways of being in the world. A big part of this has been looking at people's epistemologies or how they think, and how this affects how things are in their world. Specifically, I'm looking at Indigenous graduate students and how we are able to be successful at university, but at the same time maintain our culture and maintain a strong Indigenous identity; maintain our identities as Cree people or Bundjalung people or from wherever we come. How is it possible for us to live in both worlds, and what is the thinking behind what makes it possible? This thought process is indicative of an Indigenous epistemology, which is really tied to Indigenous methodology. So how those two, epistemology and methodology, interplay with each other has been a focal point of my research.

I have looked at various research paradigms and at the differences between research paradigms and research perspectives. We now need to move beyond an "Indigenous perspective in research" to "researching from an Indigenous paradigm." Before I go any further I should define some words. To me a paradigm is simply a label for a set of beliefs that go together that guide my actions. So a research paradigm is a set of beliefs about the world and about gaining knowledge that go together to guide your actions as to how you're going to go about doing your research. When I was thinking about this, I focused on four aspects that combine in the makeup of different paradigms.

One is ontology or a belief in the nature of reality. Your way of being, what you believe is real in the world: that's your ontology. 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 ways 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. Cora spoke about this; how research has to do something beneficial in this world: that is part of the axiology of an Indigenous research paradigm. The axiology, the ethics and judgment of which research is worthy of doing is different for different research paradigms. These four—ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology—go together to make a research paradigm. In the dominant, Eurocentric way of doing research there are four, maybe five, major paradigms that are used most of the time.

Positivism and postpositivism are two paradigms that are based on the similar ontological foundation that there is only one reality. There is one real world out there, and our job as researchers, then, is to explore that one reality. A