

What is an Indigenous Perspective?

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I started this project when I was about 10 years old. I mean really looking, fundamentally knowing in my heart, intuitively, that there was something totally different about an Aboriginal world view. As I grew and explored, I realized that there was a depth and scope to the world view that needed to be articulated.

I began to realize in particular the depth of this world view to our belief systems. One is foundational, the platform from which the culture grows. Added to that platform is your reality, your own personal experiences. My understanding is that it is called phenomenology. Your experience in life, how your culture and your foundational world view has created you, has shaped you, has influenced you. At this particular university we have about 70 different Aboriginal cultures and societies. How do we deal with everyone in a format that is welcoming and embracing?

I have discovered that there are commonalities among the 200 million or 300 million Indigenous peoples left in this world. And *Indigenous* has to be understood: first of all, what does it mean? In Latin it means "born of the land" or "springs from the land," which is a context. We can take that to mean "born of its context," born of that environment. When you create something from an Indigenous perspective, therefore, you create it from that environment, from that land in which it sits. Indigenous peoples with their traditions and customs are shaped by the environment, by the land. They have a spiritual, emotional, and physical relationship to that land. It speaks to them; it gives them their responsibility for stewardship; and it sets out a relationship.

This foundational world view has not been talked about or analyzed at any length. We have generally been looking at each other as fundamentally different people. But if you look at mythology, which is an interesting route to take, you will see that there is a strong common thread that pulls humanity along: and that is through our mythologies. So many symbols, circular Indigenous symbols used in mythology, are found throughout the world. The circle, then, is a human cultural expression of nature, of the natural and supernatural experience: the universe. We have been so far removed from our Indigenous foundations that we have forgotten that this foundational platform exists, and we need to go back there to examine it. What does this mean in terms of research today? Well, my question is how do we apply these foundations in a contemporary context? How do we go back to the foundation of our Indigenous world view, bring it forward, and implement it?

A whole base of research tools and methods for Indigenous people have yet to be realized and incorporated into the hunt for truth, the hunt for knowledge. Many of the stories, much of the evidence I'm getting comes directly from Elders. From the early 1970s to the mid 1970s several Aboriginal "Elder Think Tanks" were held by the Indian Association of Alberta. Fortunately, at that time I was allowed to be

with my father to help to organize some of these where Elders would come and talk about issues and policies. I would watch these events, usually held outdoors or sometimes in hotel conference rooms. The Elders used methods I had not seen elsewhere. They would come into dialogue about a policy, for example, whatever policy was coming down from the Indian Act or Department of Indian Affairs at the time. They would argue for or against, and they would go around the circle, each speaking in turn. They practiced exquisite listening skills, where they would even paraphrase what the previous Elder had said to make sure that the information was correct. And then they would come to a point perhaps where they could not decide what they were going to do or what recommendations they would make. They would then say, "Let's sleep on it," and the meeting would end. They would then have their personal ceremonies, maybe go into a sweat lodge, or a pipe ceremony. Early the next morning, by 6 o'clock they would already be meeting while the government officials were trying to get themselves organized.

The Elders would talk about their dreams. They would say something like, "I saw this bear walking around the mountain and I was standing there and he took me by surprise," and so forth. The other Elders would listen closely, trying to understand what this could mean. Then they compared information from their dream or vision work. They realized that the various symbols were dictated to them from a different part of their being. And suddenly they would come up with an answer. This whole process of Circle work and Dream work are methods: Indigenous methods that speak clearly to an Indigenous perspective, an Indigenous world view. Today we know that 65% of our communication is nonverbal. We take in a lot of information in a deep subconscious place and then in dreams and in dream work. This information communicates with our conscience: our subconscious communicates with our conscious. It uses symbols, and those symbols are usually personal. All the bureaucrats from Indian Affairs saw was some old people talking about their dreams.

I have not seen a lot of work that talks about Indigenous research methods or research methodologies. Linda Smith's book *Decolonizing Methodologies* does a good job in saying that there is obviously a difference here (between Western and Indigenous methodologies). When she says that Indigenous methodology is community-oriented, she touches on a part of the definition of Indigenous research methods and research methodologies. This is a great place to start the dialogue. I think that as Indigenous or Aboriginal scholars, we need to dialogue: exactly what is it that we are talking about, how big is it, how dimensional is it? And as we continue this dialogue, we are not professing that there is only one way, but we are sharing our relationship to what we are seeing, feeling, or knowing. It is true that we have many different depths in our relationship to knowledge. These include our environment, our land, and our ancestors. This is a very, very important aspect.

According to Statistics Canada, 54% of First Nations do not live on reserves. This raises the question of acquiring a cultural foundation. If you have not been raised in or with it, can you retrieve your cultural foundation or learn an Indigenous cultural world view? No longer are reserves necessarily bastions of cultural knowledge and tradition. Many do not have a foundation in their own

cultural beliefs and may actually shun those beliefs; certainly they do not fully embrace them. One thing we all have in common, however, is our intuition. Lionel Kununwa spoke of this as molecular or cellular memory. I have met many young Native people who have come to me and said, "You know, I've always felt different, but not in the sense that I was an Indian and I looked different from the rest, but there is something different deep down inside." I think as human beings we have a deep connection to our Indigenous roots. Young people in the cities or even on the reserves who do not have connections to their culture and traditions look for these connections.

My father took me out hunting and trapping when I was young, and from this I still have powerful memories: the experience of being in the bush for a month. I remember how time slows down and how you develop a relationship with a blackbird or a bear that you know is in the area, and suddenly the whole reality is different. You feel plugged in; you feel a part of everything. This is what you need to do with your research ideas. As Shawn Wilson says, "You need to develop a relationship with your research ideas." Essentially, I am saying that Indigenous research methods and methodologies are as old as our ceremonies and our nations. They are with us and have always been with us. Our Indigenous cultures are rich with ways of gathering, discovering, and uncovering knowledge. They are as near as our dreams and as close as our relationships.

Situating Myself in Research

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I am a member of the Saddle Lake Cree Nation, which is located two hours northeast of Edmonton. I am the middle child of five. My parents are Walter and Genevieve Steinhauer. For as long as I can remember my parents owned the local convenience store in the small village of the reserve. As a child I was immersed in this reserve setting where social interactions were varied and many. When I was 6 years old my parents relocated our family to a new house six miles north of the village. We began to live a more isolated life in the reserve. With this move my parents chose to send us to an off-reserve school that was located in a small farming village about 20 miles away. When I think about what motivated them in sending us to this off-reserve school, I remain uncertain. It could have been a number of things. For both of them their residential school experiences were positive. I think that based on those experiences they thought it would be in our best interests to send us to an off-reserve school.

My initial experiences of elementary school were quite positive. However, by junior high things began to change. I began junior high with average and some above-average grades. However, by grade 9 I had taken a downward slide and was failing miserably in most subjects. At that time I did not realize I suffered from an identity crisis, but I knew that I had become too disconnected from my community. So I decided to return home and attend the high school in Saddle Lake. My intent was to take my grade 10 year there and then head back to the off-reserve school. I was convinced the education offered at the reserve school would be substandard and that the school I left offered a better education. I did not realize at that time how I had taken on this oppressive behavior and how I suppressed the many positive memories of those initial formative years when I lived in the reserve village community. I give credit to my parents for how they nurtured and raised us. We were given a good childhood. In particular I am appreciative that they raised us to have open minds and to make decisions by ourselves. Although they had been schooled in the residential school and accepted a lot of the religious practices from there, as a family we were encouraged to respect our traditions and were exposed to all those practices throughout our childhood. I am grateful now that I had that exposure. It is the force that provides strength and protection when I feel most weak.

When I decided to move back to the reserve high school, it was the turning point in a positive and meaningful educational experience. In that high school I met my first Native teacher, who put things into perspective for me and convinced me that postsecondary education was within reach. It was a year of growing, as I was involved in all kinds of educational initiatives, and more important, I was included and acknowledged as a member of the school community. I had not felt that sense of inclusion in a long time. In return I worked hard because I now felt