Non-Indigenous Researchers in Indigenous Contexts

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Abstract

Indigenous peoples have been historically *othered* by non-Indigenous researchers who used to devalue their ways of being, undermine their worldviews, and send their children to residential schools to be deculturated from their Indigeneity. As a result, a mistrust has been created among Indigenous communities towards non-Indigenous research and its lack of consent from their participants. This, however, has been changing, and researchers increasingly explore *other* ways of knowing in higher education and establish their research from the lens of their *Indigenous* participants. Although it is the right path to take, there are challenges that non-Indigenous scholars encounter when they conduct research in such contexts. This paper aims to highlight such challenges and groups them under research methodologies, worldviews, and participants in the hopes of helping like-minded researchers keen on exploring other ways of knowing.

Keywords: Indigenous Peoples, Non-Indigenous Researchers, Methodologies, Indigeneity, Relational Knowledge

Introduction

The encounter of Indigenous peoples and western colonizers has had long-lasting impacts on both sides. Indigenous peoples came into contact with a colonizing power that would *other* them, displace them from their traditional land, undermine their ways of knowing, and enforce a western perspective on them. This colonizing power has induced language loss among Indigenous communities and sent their children to residential schools to be stripped off of their Indigeneity and to undergo a process of acculturation to the ways of the white man (Fountain, 2017). Drawing on this loss and based on the Child Language Research and Revitalization Working Group (2017), 46% of the languages in the world may not be handed down to future generations by the end of the 21st century, and along with this language extinction their diverse, accompanying knowledge systems will vanish as well. In addition, non-Indigenous researchers conducted research among Indigenous communities without the consent of the Indigenous peoples involved in the research (Mosby, 2013), and this has led to Indigenous peoples and communities' mistrust with regard to such endeavours. However, this has been changing, and an increasing number of scholars explore and incorporate Indigenous worldviews in their research (Wilson, 2008).

Although it is the correct path to take, this paper does not aim to explore the challenges that Indigenous communities have undergone as a result of non-Indigenous researchers' studies among them. Instead, it intends to explore the world from the lens of the non-Indigenous researchers and delineate the challenges they encounter while they conduct research among Indigenous peoples and communities. I am hoping this article provides some insights to like-minded scholars who aim to add to the increasing literature of research in Indigenous contexts by *other* researcher from a different angle. For a structured argument, I have grouped such challenges under research methodologies, worldview, and participants. To that end, I will briefly discuss research methodologies among Indigenous communities before I describe the challenges non-Indigenous researchers encounter as they conduct studies in Indigenous contexts. Before I pursue this argument any further, the reader is advised about the different definitions offered about the word *Indigenous*. For example, Ali (2017) defines Indigenous peoples as those who were living in a region before the arrival of Europeans, and Walsh (2005) states they are the native people of a place. In this vein, *Indigenous* refers to those who have lived in a place for a long time and have developed apropos worldviews as a consequence of that, such as First Nations of Canada, Aborigines of Australia and New Zealand, and the Bakhtiari, Lor, and Kurdish peoples of Iran.

Research Methodologies

There are challenges that scholars encounter as they conduct research in Indigenous contexts, and one of such is attributed to research methodologies. Methodology is defined as a collection of approaches, rules, and methods that researchers implement in their studies or a paradigm that delineates how the research is pivoted on a worldview. Traditionally, these research methodologies drive from western, positivistic worldview, and as such, they mold researchers' thoughts accordingly, which may or may not lead to the exclusion or misrepresentation of non-western worldviews. An example of this is the research conducted among Indigenous communities that has led to their mistrust because of the unknown purposes of research (Brant Castellano, 2004) and its lack of consent from participants (Mosby, 2013). In a similar vein, and yet from another angle, Said (1978) argues the Orient has been undermined through imaginative construction of ideas formulated by the non-Orient in general. This could be attributed to various reasons, one of which is those who conduct research from their own worldview and interpret the world in line with their own epistemology, which might differ from that of their participants'. Knowing this sheds light on how non-Indigenous research methodologies in academia have contributed to the ongoing colonization of Indigenous peoples and has failed to properly represent their worldviews and ways of being. On the other hand, this has encouraged scholars to explore differences in research through non-Indigenous and Indigenous lens and conduct more culturally sensitive studies based on the Indigeneity of their participants.

With that being said, I believe reviewing the principles of Indigenous research and its constituents helps contextualize the argument more effectively. Indigenous research is a collective endeavor that emanates from Indigenous paradigms and emphasizes on their social and historical contexts. It values an authentic respect, trust, and relationship between the researcher, community, and participants and includes collaborative practices in analyzing data and treating Indigenous participants as partners. It holds researchers liable for their understanding following the completion of the research, ensures relevance to the researcher and their Indigenous partners (Ray, 2012), and liberates them from the harms and impacts of colonization (Gerlach, Browne, & Suto, 2018). This way, Indigenous research restores and preserves Indigenous peoples' traditions, lands, and religious practices and nurtures their economy and society (Gilbert & Tilman, 2017). As a result of this, non-Indigenous scholars are advised to follow Indigenous research methodologies or methodologies more akin to Indigenous peoples' ways of being. In addition, they are recommended to acknowledge colonial tensions (Puch-Bouwman, 2014) and their own wrongdoings (Absolon, 2011) and avoid methodologies that perpetuate the colonization of Indigenous peoples (Singh & Major, 2017). Relying on this will help non-Indigenous scholars instill hope and belief in the capabilities of Indigenous peoples, involve them in research, and consult with their worldviews in the research relevant to them. To that aim, and to ensure their research helps Indigenous communities, Galla and Goodwill (2017) suggest that non-Indigenous scholars follow the principles of *Respect*, *Relationality, Relevance, Responsibility*, and *Reciprocity*.

Now that I have delineated the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous research, let us explore what *worldview* is along with its building blocks – epistemology, ontology, and axiology – in research.

Worldview

The second challenge that non-Indigenous researchers encounter pertains to their way of looking at the world, or their *worldview*. There are diverse stances, perspectives of what *worldview* is. For instance, Hart (2010) defines it as a *mental lens* and a cognitive and perceptual map through which one perceives the world, and it is a symbolic dimension constructed by language that helps its speakers express themselves in a unique manner. For Indigenous peoples, worldview is acquired holistically in childhood and as a result of long residence in a certain place (Munroe et al., 2013) and the relationships among all entities. Worldview is a blend of imported disciplines and the generation of new concepts from within the culture. Adair et al. (1993) believe worldview is measured through cultural references, culture-based justifications, and conceptual bases for research and methodologies. It is as a result of these different worldviews that people develop differences from each other, and by the same token, discussing *others' differences* in research may lead to their misrepresentation in it. I believe one's worldview is passed down

to the next generations through different means, and one of such is story. In my Bakhtiari culture, stories, or *matals,* are recited to teach younger ones about the importance of being good, honest, and brave human beings, and for Blackfoot people, stories teach about good, bad, and the proper ways of living in this world and imply *involvement in an event* (Little Bear, 2009).

However, and despite the similarities among Indigenous peoples, they could develop different worldviews from each other. That is to say, two different people with different languages and cultures may develop a similar worldview while two people from the same culture and language may not. Thus, exploring worldviews will help researchers address some challenges they may encounter while conducting research in Indigenous contexts. Hart (2010) introduces seven principles of Indigenous worldviews as follows. Indigenous knowledge is holistic and depends on all relationships and connections to living and nonliving things in the world. There is no single truth, but truths depend on one's experiences in and with the world; everything in the world is alive and has a soul; everything is equal to other things, and there is no superiority among things in the world; the land from which one comes is sacred and should be revered; among all things in the world, humans are the least important ones. Finally, the way humans and the world are related should be regarded as important (Hart, 2010). This could shed light on why worldviews differ from each other, and knowing this will help scholars conduct more culturally sensitive studies. With that regard, in the following paragraphs, I will explore epistemology, ontology, and axiology to delineate the *nature* of worldview from Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives.

Epistemology is the knowledge one acquires though living in a culture and a language that enables them to assert they know something. It is defined as the systems of knowledge and the philosophical questions regarding it and the truth (Somekh & Lewin, 2005). Indigenous *epistemology* is the way one thinks about a reality or the way they come to know something (Hart, 2010). One's epistemology emanates from their histories, stories, and observations (Getty, 2010), and it focuses on *relational* knowledge (Thayer-Bacon, 2003), and how one acquires their knowledge (Martin, 2017). I will rely on my background to argue the point more effectively. There is a Persian saying that analogizes epistemology to the knowledge that an elder holds vis-a-vis those who do not: "Sometimes an Elder sees something vividly in a brick that a young cannot see in a mirror." I believe the *thing* that the Elder sees in a brick is their epistemology, or how they know the things that they know. Arguably, this unique way of knowing differs from that of others' who live either in the same context or in another one.

People develop diverse *ontologies* from each other. Ontology is the belief in the nature of reality or the world in which a person lives. That is to say, the ontology of an object is the reality of that object, and how a person relates to it. *It* is an appreciation of the fact that all things are related, the philosophical questions in relation to the essence of

being, and the purpose of existence in everyday conversations or *the meaning of life* (Somekh & Lewin, 2005). I hope the following anecdote from my Persian background helps me define ontology more effectively:

> There was a Sufi who would wander around the city in the pursuit of food only to find himself talking with a sanctimonious and yet parsimonious shopkeeper. The Sufi addresses the shopkeeper in the name of God and implores him for a coin only to be ignored by him. Having implored and been ignored repeatedly, the Sufi re-addresses his audience for one last time and says, "How would you die and abandon all your possessions behind knowing that you are unwilling to give away an infinitesimal amount now?" The sanctimonious shopkeeper retorts that we will all die the same! The Sufi looks at him and says, "Would you die like me?" Then, he lies down on the street, puts his wooden bowl under his head and dies right away.

Thus, and based on this anecdote, the meaning of life is not only the materialistic aspect of it but something more meaningful; the way a person relates to and helps others and seeks unity with them.

Axiology represents all the tools and means through which we understand the world in which we live as well as the values and knowledges we pursue in life. Indigenous *Axiology* is a group of morals, ethics, and principles of "accountable responsibility, respectful representation, reciprocal appropriation, and rights and regulations" (Chilisa, 2012, p. 117) that target the essence, nature of one's values. From these principles, a framework emerges that highlights the accountable responsibilities between people, researchers, and participants. This aligns with Smith's (2012) idea that advocates for the designing an Indigenous framework that helps researchers examine research questions, research interests, and research benefits.

As discussed above, there are varied definitions to epistemology, ontology, and axiology, and knowing this will help researchers effectively explore the nature of worldview from Indigenous or non-Indigenous perspectives.

Researchers and Participants

The third challenge that I will discuss in the following section pertains to researchers and participants. Naturally, problems arise when people of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds live in close proximity to each other. It is in such situations that one people along with their culture and power will rise to domination, and as such, they may disregard or fail to comprehend the complexities and differences of the *other* peoples. It is perhaps one of the consequences of this failure that many researchers conducting research among Indigenous communities ended up misrepresenting them, their knowledges, cultures, and ways of being (Reyhner & Eder, 2004). This failure will in turn render such researchers as *outsider* in such contexts and will induce barriers for them as they attempt

to develop "empathetic understanding for the Indigenous experience as a whole and the experience of the particular community in which the research is conducted" (McLennan & Woods, 2018, p. 3). That said, this should not imply rejecting or opposing western research frameworks because western methodologies could be woven with Indigenous ones to help researchers regardless of their backgrounds (Martin, 2003).

However, not every researcher finds it easy to conduct research in and about Indigenous peoples and communities. There are scholars who, regardless of their ability, expertise, and competence, will avoid conducting research in Indigenous contexts as they are merely afraid of doing *the wrong thing,* being considered as outsiders, or being excluded from the research in the first place. There are various reasons attributed to this reality, and I partially take side with Indigenous communities, who have had rather unpleasant experiences regarding non-Indigenous research. That said, although such cases are to be studied individually for their reasons, there are non-Indigenous scholars who have taken steps to inform Indigenous peoples about different research methods so that they do not go to non-Indigenous research unprepared or blindly with good intentions only to be left wondering or dissatisfied (McLennan & Woods, 2018). At the same time, there are Indigenous scholars who will take side with *other* scholars who aim to compensate for their privileges and argue for objectifying research methodologies in Indigenous contexts (Puch-Bouwman, 2014). Therefore, although researchers may not share the same background, they could collaborate with each other to overcome the *insider-outsider* relationship together.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the challenges that researchers encounter while they conduct research in and about Indigenous communities, and I categorized them under research methodologies, worldviews, and participants. As I mentioned in this paper, every research is pivoted around a central methodology, or an overarching worldview, that researchers apply to pivot their research on. However, as current research methodologies are traditionally positivistic and western in nature, they have created a mistrust among Indigenous communities, for whom methodology is a validation process that asserts their Indigenous knowledge and ways of being. These differences in methodology and worldview have unequivocally posed challenges for researchers undertaking research in Indigenous contexts. As a solution, they are advised to conduct their research based on the worldview of their Indigenous participants and follow their methodologies. Following Indigenous methodologies and interpreting the world through their lens will allow researchers to establish trust and mutual understanding, collaboration in research with their Indigenous participants. Prior to that, non-Indigenous researchers are encouraged to acknowledge their mistakes (Absolon, 2011) and combine their research approaches with those of Indigenous ones to have safer, decolonized, and more culturally sensitive research.

When non-Indigenous researchers adhere to Indigenous *frameworks,* they will establish reciprocal, respectful relationships with their participants and avoid methodologies that will perpetuate their colonization. As a result, they will no longer avoid conducting research for the fear of doing the wrong thing or being excluded from research in the first place.

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