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Journeys Around the Medicine Wheel: A Story of Indigenous Research in a Western University

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Cherokee



*O si yo.
Aya Tsalagi
Tsi yv wi ya,
Do da da go hv i.
(Greetings. I am Cherokee, I am one of the real
people.
We are all connected and will see each other
again.)*

These simple Cherokee words of greeting enfold an American Indian reality and knowledge system based on the interconnectedness of all things. American Indian ontologies and epistemologies are quite different from most Western paradigms. However, rather than being accepted and respected as coevals within Western universities, Indigenous paradigms, when acknowledged at all, is most often considered as data that informs Western research (Cajete, 2000). In this article, I explore some of the ways in which Western Research paradigms suppress the sacred aspects of Indigenous people's epistemologies. I then describe the Medicine Wheel Paradigm upon which I based my PhD research, which incorporates spiritual experience as one of the four key elements of human experience.

Silencing the Sacred in Western Research Institutions

Dominant Western research paradigms suppress Indigenous Knowledge Research

through imposing Eurocentric paradigms on research involving Indigenous peoples. This suppression largely silences the sacred aspects of human experience (Stanfield II, 1993). However, Indigenous Knowledge Research places Indigenous knowledge systems as central to ethical, effective research. Indigenous research paradigms voice the sacred aspects of experience (Cajete, 2000; Rhealt, 2001). In the following sections of this paper, I describe ways in which dominant Western research paradigms suppress Indigenous spiritual experience as a valid part of research.

When I began my doctoral research, I was concerned about how to truthfully express my experiences and those of many of my Indigenous colleagues who speak freely of spiritual experiences as an integral part of our research process, while being quite aware that such expressions are held suspect within Western academia. Communication with the natural world and ancestors, as well as knowing that comes through dreams, visions and intuitions, forms an integral part of Indigenous Knowledge Research.

When I discussed my concerns regarding the articulation of the spiritual aspects of research with the supervisors of my PhD research, they told me that I could not mention spiritual experience within my thesis. They explained that if I did, it would not be considered valid social science research. They also maintained that their role was to protect me from the powers that regulate university research and to guide me safely through the research process. However, their advice to silence the spiritual aspects of my research experience contrasts starkly with Indigenous scholars' descriptions of research as 'inherently spiritual' (Begay & Maryboy, 1998: 93).

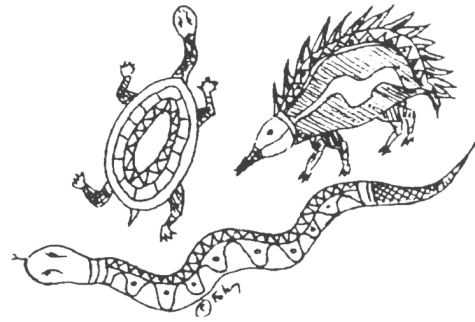
Colonial and imperial processes within Western universities continue to disconnect Indigenous

peoples from the integral role of spirituality in their formalised systems of knowledge production (Smith, 1999: 74). Throughout colonisation, Western scholars have considered the spiritual foundations of Indigenous epistemologies to be primitive and heathen (Deloria Jr., 1973). The silencing of Indigenous spirituality as an integral part of social science research continues today (Smith, 1999: 74; Stanfield II, 1998: 351-354). Research processes that fail to voice the sacred aspects of Indigenous experience have resulted in data which is incomplete and inaccurate:

It has always been the norm in the social sciences to assume that Eurocentric empirical realities can be generalized to explain the realities of people of color...for decades, researchers steeped in Eurocentric norms have applied Eurocentric concepts of families, deviance, social movements...even spirituality to the experiences of people of color. This has occurred to such an extent that our social science knowledge of the indigenous senses of people of color is actually quite sparse and superficial (Stanfield II, 1993: 27-28).

The sacred aspects of Indigenous experience are directly silenced when they are eliminated from formal academic research, relegated to religion or labelled as lacking rigour. The sacred aspects of research are also silenced when Western researchers reserve them as so secret/sacred or metaphysical that they cannot be spoken of nor used in academic research. Such comments are in direct contradiction to the work of many Native American scholars such as Begay and Maryboy (1998), Bopp *et al.* (1989), Cajete (2000), Garrett and Garrett (1996), and Ghostkeeper (2001) who base their academic writing around the concepts of the Medicine Wheel.

Not all Indigenous scholars believe that spiritual experience should form a part of formal academic research (Rheault, 2001). Indeed, there are many aspects of Indigenous experience that are shared only with certain people in certain ways, and are not shared in the research process. Nevertheless, a growing number of Indigenous researchers articulate the interconnections between experience of the sacred and the practical, analytical aspects of formal research. These Indigenous scholars maintain that a balanced understanding of Indigenous epistemologies is essential to the validity of research projects.



My Research Journey: Around the Medicine Wheel

The Indigenous paradigm that underlies my research emphasises the interconnectedness of all things. It is both ancient and modern, expressed through the American Indian Medicine Wheel. The Medicine Wheel Paradigm encompasses a holistic integration of humans and the natural world, including all beings, processes and creations. In this paradigm, the Four Directions, or Four Grandfathers, represent a complex system of knowledge. The following introductory explanation illuminates the research I conducted within this paradigm.

As a Cherokee woman using methodologies based on the Medicine Wheel, I integrated all aspects of human experience represented on the Wheel. In the Medicine Wheel methodology, the East represents the Spiritual aspects of experience. In the East, researchers acknowledge their interconnectedness with the research participants and the wider community. Research from the Eastern position integrates a wide range of senses in coming to know. The South represents the Natural World. In the South, researchers honour and utilise emotional experience, speaking from the heart, with authenticity. The West represents the bodily aspects of knowing. In the West, researchers are encouraged to go within themselves, discovering what is important in relation to the connections between self, others, nature and traditional teachings (Bopp *et al.*, 1989). The North represents the mental processes of balancing intellect with wisdom. In the North, researchers work within the community to find solutions that are balanced and restore harmony to the community as a whole (Huber, 1993: 358-360; Bopp *et al.*, 1989).

Cyclical Indigenous paradigms such as the Medicine Wheel Paradigm have been suppressed by the continuing processes of colonisation,

which support the more linear processes of Newtonian/Cartesian science. Dominant Western research methodologies largely process knowledge in isolation from other disciplines and from other life experiences. Other Cherokee scholars describe the ways in which cyclical Indigenous paradigms are distorted with Western universities. Marilou Awiakta, Cherokee poet and author, describes the effects of the paradigm blindness that characterises Western educational institutions:

I was centered and happy in my heritage until I went to college and began Western education in earnest. Everywhere I turned I found a "squared world," a society so compartmentalized that life, including my own, had no room to move around, to breathe. For twenty years I struggled against the Square World, but I unwittingly internalized it, tore my life web and stuffed the broken strands into the 'boxes'... One quiet line marked the beginning of my healing: 'No more will I follow any rule that splits my soul.' Not for society or for government or for education or for any power whatsoever would I depart from the traditional teaching of my elders: 'All of creation is one family, sacred' (Awiakta, 1997: 777).

Incorporating spiritual aspects in story

To respect and honour the worldviews of the Indigenous participants in my research, I chose to use a narrative approach of coming to knowing, more often termed data collection. I simply asked participants who were willing to share stories of their experiences in transforming conflict. I found that although I did not ask specific questions related to spiritual aspects of experience, all Indigenous participants (and many of the non-Indigenous participants) naturally spoke of their spiritual aspects of their experience of working to develop deeper understanding and more effective relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Participants' stories naturally integrate the spiritual aspects of their experience into research data. Enfolded in stories are human passions and experiences such as spirituality that often become the 'academic undiscussables' (Forester, 1996: 520). In inviting participant's stories throughout my PhD research, I did not ask specific questions related to spiritual experience. Nevertheless, all of the Indigenous participants spoke openly of experiences with

spirits and ancestors through dreams and visions. One of the Indigenous participants shared the following example of the ways in which ancestors assist in Indigenous processes of transforming conflict:

... when I am doing talks ... how I psyche myself up is that I call on my mother ... And I can feel her on my shoulder. On this side. And she walks out with me or she is just there at the stage ... calls on the elders...I've seen him do some fantastic talks and speeches. And I say, 'How did you do that?' and he says, 'Well, you know, I called on them old people. They see me through.' (Participant Interview 5).

Within the stories that the participants have shared with me are many accounts of assistance from, and communication with, ancestors who assist in the processes of conflict transformation. In the following excerpt from one of the Aboriginal participant's stories, the participant describes the ways in which her ancestors assist in transforming conflict:

If anything goes bad I just talk to them. I believe in the spirits. I believe in the spirits getting us to reconcile ... Menmuny is my great-grandfather. His mother had this dream. He told us about it all through the years. She dreamt of the cultural changes that were going to happen. She asked Menmuny not to accept the missionaries. But he had no choice. He's always regretted not listening to her dreams because of the terrible cultural changes that happened on the mission. They were terrible for his people. We believe in dreams (Participant Interview 2).

These participant stories facilitate a deeper understanding of Indigenous experience. My research into conflict transformation would have been severely lacking without consideration of my own spiritual beliefs and experience as well as the spiritual experience that the participants chose to share.

Conclusion

Spiritual experience continues to be a largely taboo topic within Western institutions of higher learning. Within the academy, the silencing of this integral aspect of many Indigenous people's lives often results in research findings that are inaccurate, incomplete and invalid. A growing

number of Indigenous scholars around the world are speaking and writing about the ways in which they integrate their spiritual beliefs, values and experience into their formal academic research, thus increasing its validity within Indigenous communities and the wider academic community.

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