Research Is Ceremony

Indigenous Research Methods

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Foreword and Conclusion

This section is written in order to provide some context for the reader. Through anticipating and responding to the concerns of academics accustomed to the dominant system's method of research presentation, I hope in this foreword to make the book more readable and more understandable. Research is all about unanswered questions, but it also reveals our unquestioned answers. It is my hope that readers of this book will begin to question some of their own beliefs about the way research needs to be conducted and presented, so that they can recognize the importance of developing alternative ways of answering questions.

Stories go in circles. They don't go in straight lines. It helps if you listen in circles because there are stories inside and between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. Part of finding is getting lost, and when you are lost, you start to open up and listen. (Tafoya, 1995, p. 12)

It is my intention to build a relationship between the readers of this story, myself as the story teller, and the ideas I present. This relationship needs to be formed in order for an understanding of an Indigenous research paradigm to develop. This paradigm must hold true to its principles of relationality and relational accountability. As I cannot know beforehand who will read this book, I cannot be sure of the relationships that readers might hold with me or the ideas I share. So, I will start from scratch just to make sure that we begin this book from a common ground.

Finding this common ground is one of the struggles of cross-cultural communication. Yet it is necessary so that both sides in the communication process can begin to see or understand the same things. When communicating with like-minded others, we often take many things for granted. There is an expression: "If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it." The opposite holds just as true: "If I hadn't believed it, I wouldn't have seen it." When talking or writing, we usually expect others to make the same jumps in logic, to follow the same patterns of communication and to have similar terms of reference. The reader must be able to comprehend the writer's beliefs in order to see what the writer sees. When this is not happening, miscommunication is inevitable.

So in addition to explaining the aim of the book, this foreword explains a bit about how my logic works, the pattern my cultural style of communication follows, some of the terms of reference I use and my role in this process. As Terry Tafoya (1995) said, when speaking with people from another culture it often takes longer to explain the context, background or meaning of a story than it does to actually tell the story. On the other hand, when communicating with people who share the same culture, too much explanation or background detailing could be seen as disrespectful of the intelligence of the listener. Since I have no way of knowing if the reader is from the same culture as me, I hope I will be excused if I am being insensitive in this foreword. I come to you with a good heart.

This book describes one view of an Indigenous research paradigm, in the process answering the following questions:

- What are the shared aspects of the ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology of research conducted by Indigenous scholars in Australia and Canada?
- How can these aspects of an Indigenous research paradigm be put into practice to support other Indigenous people in their own research?

I put forward in the book that: 1. the shared aspect of an Indigenous ontology and epistemology is relationality. Relationships do not merely shape reality, they are reality. The shared aspect of an Indigenous axiology and methodology is accountability to relationships. 2. The shared aspects of relationality and relational accountability can be put into practice through choice of research topic, methods of data collection, form of analysis and presentation of information.

While this paradigm has developed from working with Indigenous scholars in Canada and Australia, it is by no means intended to be exclusive to these groups. Indigenous scholars from other countries and homelands (especially some phenomenal Native Hawaiians) have read this manuscript and taken part in discussions of our paradigms, as have many non-Indigenous academics, and have confirmed that their own worldviews are compatible. So I must apologize for leaving out any groups of peoples with my research questions. These were merely intended to provide some boundaries for the sake of my own research, not to limit the use of this paradigm. It is my hope that my continuing journey of learning in this area will allow me to incorporate the words of many more Indigenous scholars from around the world into this paradigm.
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The view I present here was developed in several ways. My lifelong participant observation as an Indigenous person has formed my worldview in general and my beliefs about Indigenous research more specifically. It is through my life experiences as an Indigenous scholar and researcher that most of these ideas developed. The more formal aspects of the participant observation in this research project happened at Indigenous units within universities in Brisbane, Queensland, in Australia and Edmonton, Alberta, in Canada. I also held focus group and individual discussions with Indigenous scholars in both these cities. Feedback and discussion of the ideas were shared experiences that took place with all the participants. The observations and discussions were held over a period of four years.

The significance of this research is explained in the literature review through a chronology of research conducted on, and by Indigenous peoples in light of the political and social context in which it was situated. As we Indigenous scholars have begun to assert our power, we are no longer allowing others to speak in our stead. We are beginning to articulate our own research paradigms and to demand that research conducted in our communities follows our codes of conduct and honours our systems of knowledge and worldviews. Research by and for Indigenous peoples is a ceremony that brings relationships together.

My Writing Style

You will notice that the book is typeset in two different fonts: the main font denotes a more “academic” style; a different font is used for the personal narrative sections, which are initially addressed to my sons, Julius, Max and Falco. When I was originally writing my doctoral thesis, which led to this book, I felt that the dominant style of writing to an anonymous reader did not live up to the standards of relational accountability I was proposing. Indigenous epistemology is all about ideas developing through the formation of relationships. An idea cannot be taken out of this relational context and still maintain its shape. Terry Tafoya (1995) describes this in his Principle of Uncertainty. Just as Heisenberg theorizes in his Theory of Uncertainty in physics, that it is impossible to know both the velocity and the location of an electron at the same time (you would have to stop it to measure its location, or you would lose its location if it maintains its velocity), Tafoya postulates that it is not possible to know exactly both the context and definition of an idea at the same time. The closer you get to defining something, the more it loses its context. Conversely, the more something is put into context, the more it loses a specific definition.

So I was faced with the problem of trying to define or describe the ideas when doing so would take them out of their relational context. In an oral tradition, this problem is overcome by utilizing the direct relationship between storyteller and listener. Each recognizes the other’s role in shaping both the content and process. Addressing parts of the book to Julius, Max and Falco became a device for me to try to provide both context and definition. Instead of writing directly to readers, which is difficult without knowing their culture and context; I chose to write to my children. I further develop the relationships I have with the ideas through my relationship with my sons. I hope that this literary tool allows you to develop your own relationships both with me and with the in this book.

In my current thinking and writing process it would probably make the most sense to address the entire book to my sons, but I have purposefully not gone back into my writing to switch it all to this style. As this foreword was one of the last things written in the preparation of this book, I am now at a point where I can address you directly. The writing process took me several years, and you may notice that my writing style changes, maybe matures, as the book progresses through the chapters. The chapters (other than this foreword) were pretty much written in the order they are presented: so in addition to putting forward ideas, they also represent a chronology of my maturation as a writer and Indigenous researcher.

The two voices may initially seem disjointed. Oftentimes they either cover entirely different material, but they may repeat one another. It was my intention that they cover more or less the same ground, but with two different emphases—one academic and one more personal. As my writing and thinking progressed, these voices became less and less distinct. Maybe I was finally beginning to internalize what it was that I was theorizing about. In final editing of the book, I tried to make a change so that the letters to Julius, Max and Falco begin to directly address you. By chapter four the difference between the voices becomes less clear. By chapter five, you might notice that I have more or less switched to one voice that incorporates both the personal and theoretical but can’t decide which font to use. Perhaps the book should switch to an entirely different font here, but I think that might be too confusing. Anyway I hope that by then you will have internalized enough of the ideas to allow me to write the last parts (including this foreword) in a style that mixes the personal with the theoretical.

Sequencing of the Book

Now that you understand about the style in which the book is written, I must explain that the ordering of the book does not follow the usual linear model either. After the title page, table of contents, abstract and acknowledgements, it is usual for these to be presented as:

a. Introduction
b. Review of literature
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c. Research procedure
d. Data presentation and analysis
e. Findings
f. Summary and conclusions
g. References

While this book evolved from my doctoral thesis and contains all of this information in generally this format, I have tried to present in such a way as to honour and build relationships with the ideas that it presents. I have situated myself in the research process by giving a detailed explanation of my background. This is required by the Indigenous axiology and methodology of relational accountability. The research procedure has been divided into two parts: chapter two discusses the general strategy of inquiry; chapter seven discusses the specific methods. I have done this so that you will have a greater understanding of an Indigenous research paradigm with which to view how I conducted the research process, that is, I hope that you will gain an understanding of an Indigenous methodology before you read about the methods that I used.

The information I am sharing (data presentation and analysis) has been separated into three parts. The fourth chapter goes into detail about the entities that make up an Indigenous research paradigm, namely the ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology. Chapter five discusses some of the varied aspects of relationality. Chapter six carries this discussion further and develops ideas on how to put relational accountability into practice.

Chapter four differs from the dominant style of presentation. Rather than a brief discussion about the demographics or sampling procedure used to select participants, this chapter directly introduces you to the co-researchers. While most dominant research maintains the anonymity of participants, relational accountability requires me to name the co-researchers who worked with me on this project and who wished to be named. It is my hope that this chapter helps you to form your own relationships with the co-researchers, rather than merely allowing you to see the relationships that we share among ourselves.

Chapter six, like chapter four, also varies from the usual style of analysis or presentation of findings. The form of analysis that I chose to use was cumulative and collaborative. All of the co-researchers in this project informed and helped in the analysis and therefore directly shaped the process and the outcome of the research. Although the discussions did not always follow a formalized talking circle format, the analysis followed a circular method in that each co-researcher was allowed to build upon the ideas of the others. I was a full participant in all of the discussions, sharing what I had learned from the others, and both giving and receiving feedback in a more or less continuous manner. All of us as co-researchers came to a mutual understanding of what an Indigenous research paradigm is.

So chapter six may serve two purposes (and I hope that it serves even more with further reading and insight). It is in itself an analysis of the ideas that developed through this research. In this sense it may stand alone as a presentation of research findings. It is also meant to be an example of the process. Here too it may stand alone as something like a transcript of a discussion. But as both process (or context) and analysis (or definition) together, it is my hope that it helps to tread the fine line between context and definition that Tafwaya (1995) talks about in his Principle of Uncertainty.

Chapter seven finishes off the book by using my own research process as an example of an Indigenous research paradigm in action. It discusses how I chose the topic, the methods used, the ways that ideas were analyzed and the style of presentation. It goes over some of the methodological and axiological problems I faced (and maybe overcame) in the process. It discusses how the relationships I made have in turn shaped me and the conclusions that these relationships allowed me to form, and it attempts to look into the future. I close the book by writing again to Julius, Max, and Falco.

In the typical circular style common to many Indigenous peoples, this foreword is really more like a summary and conclusions chapter. Maybe there are other reasons why it needed to go first, but as I said at the beginning, it is intended to acquaint you with my style of presentation and with the ideas themselves so that you will understand where I am coming from, or where I am going, in this writing. Perhaps it would be a good idea to re-read this section again at the end, so that your reading process in itself will complete the circle.

So you have now become embroiled in the relationships that go into making up an Indigenous research paradigm. I believe that Indigenous epistemology and ontology are based upon relationality. Our axiology and methodology are based upon maintaining relational accountability. With a deeper understanding of these concepts, I hope that you will come to see that research is a ceremony. The purpose of any ceremony is to build stronger relationships or bridge the distance between aspects of our cosmos and ourselves. The research that we do as Indigenous people is a ceremony that allows us a raised level of consciousness and insight into our world. Let us go forward together with open minds and good hearts as we further take part in this ceremony, not why this word...
Chapter One

Getting Started

This chapter introduces the overall questions I address in this book. I also present the academic rationale behind these questions. Briefly, if Indigenous scholars are to be freed from the need to constantly justify our research and knowledge systems from a dominant system perspective, it may be necessary for us to be clearer in our articulation of exactly what our own paradigm entails. But before getting into this introduction, I need to address some other issues.

Through the following letter to my sons, Julius, Maximus, and Falco, my personal motivations for conducting this research may begin to be understood. I hope the letter will serve as a medium for you to develop a deeper relationship with me through the already strong relationships I share with my sons. Relating to me requires that you know a lot more about me before you can begin to understand my work.

Hi Julius, Max, and Falco,

I'm not sure where to begin. I want to write this book or story or whatever it is for lots of different reasons, but mainly I am doing it for you. It is my hope that you will be able to learn from what I have written and that I may also be able to help other Indigenous people through my writing. These aspirations make it difficult for me to get started, as I am overwhelmed by the enormity of the task I have set myself.

I want you to know what it is to be Indigenous, to be Cree. I believe that this knowledge will come through the living of your life, and as your father I hope that the experiences and modelling I provide make the knowledge come easier. I know that for me it has often been a struggle and not an easy knowledge to live with. There have been many things that have impacted upon my life; experiences both positive and negative have shaped who I am as an Indigenous man. By the time you read this, you will have probably heard all the stories a million times. The story that I want to tell you now has to do with being a student and a researcher (maybe even a scientist) and how I am able to be these things while holding my head up high and holding true to the ideals and culture I was raised in. It may be that hearing my story about being an Indigenous researcher will make it easier for you to carry your beliefs into whatever field you choose to pursue when you grow up.

I am going to write about an Indigenous research paradigm: what it is, why it is important and what it means to me. It is through learning and living this paradigm that I assert my Indigeneity (if there is such a word) in the world of academics. Many people before me have written about the need for such a paradigm. I am not going to go over their arguments here— you can read them for yourself if you are interested. People such as Linda Smith, Lester Rigney and Fyre Jean Graveline have written about how Eurocentric research has helped in the colonization and oppression of our people. By standing on their shoulders for my justification, I want to go further and try to explain just how research can be different—can be Indigenous. It may be that by looking at the different aspects of an Indigenous research paradigm, we can both learn more about the bigger question of what it is to be Indigenous.

In order to tell this story, it may be necessary for me to use some pretty big and daunting words. I try hard not to use these words in everyday conversations, because I think that too many people use big language as a way of belittling others. However, some of the ideas I want you to understand require these words, as they are able to get across a lot of meaning. Our traditional language has words that contain huge amounts of information encoded like a ZIP file within them. The English language also has such words, so by helping to decode them for you, this story will be a lot more understandable. Perhaps a good place to begin is to explain to you just what a research paradigm is. A paradigm is a set of underlying beliefs that guide our actions. So a research paradigm is the beliefs that guide our actions as researchers. These beliefs include the way that we view reality (ontology), how we think about or know this reality (epistemology), our ethics and morals (axiology) and how we go about gaining more knowledge about reality (methodology). I am going to talk a lot more about the meaning of these words later.

An Indigenous research paradigm is made up of an Indigenous ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology. These beliefs influence the tools we as researchers use in finding out more about the cosmos. Like myself, other Indigenous scholars have in the past tried to use the dominant research paradigms. We have tried to adapt dominant system research tools by including our perspective into their views. We have tried to include our cultures, traditional protocols and practices into the research process through adapting and adopting suitable methods. The problem with that is that we can never really remove the tools from their underlying beliefs. Since these beliefs are not always compatible with our own, we will always face problems in trying to adapt dominant system tools to our use. I hope that my articulating the aspects of an Indigenous research
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paradigm will help you and others to develop tools that will allow research to take place in Indigenous communities that can make a real difference in our lives.

Another reason I am having trouble starting this story is that I needed to search myself for a long time to come up with a way of telling the story that fits within the paradigm that I am learning about. It does not feel right to me to simply write a regular old text book. Standard academic writing may not be able to express these ideas in a way that is respectful of their intent. Part of the importance of developing an Indigenous research paradigm is that we can use methods and forms of expression that we judge to be valid for ourselves. We can get pasthaving to justify ourselves as Indigenous to the dominant society and academia. We can develop our own criteria for judging the usefulness, validity or worth of Indigenous research and writing. We can decide for ourselves what research we want and how that research will be conducted, analyzed and presented. Your mother helped me to come up with the idea of writing this story for you, and it feels right to me. As well as for my own benefit, it is for you and other Indigenous people that these ideas need be expressed.

This learning came through a lifelong process, though I am only going to write about a short section of it here. I find it difficult to get this down in a written form, as these lessons did not come to me in the linear or step-by-step fashion that written English requires. I think that my entire upbringing, culture, teachers, experiences and lots of other things (some that I cannot explain) came together to allow me to form a relationship with these ideas. I will try to explain as many of the factors that went into the formation of these ideas as possible, but it may be up to you to come to your own conclusions about where they fit.

As you read this story, you might realize that the aspects of an Indigenous research paradigm are really important to how we view the world around us through our whole lives, not just in the research process. We cannot remove ourselves from our world in order to examine it. As I am learning more about these concepts, my own being and world around me changes to reflect these lessons. The scientific study of the concepts contained within an Indigenous research paradigm has had a great impact on me personally. These ideas for me come close to the core of what it is to be Indigenous, as well as doing Indigenous research.

Over the next little while, I am going to tell you how I formed a relationship with these ideas. I am going to write about where my research or learning journey began and where it led. Many other people helped me, and I am going to tell you some of the things they said. Together I hope we can come to a fuller understanding and a more respectful relationship with some of the components of an Indigenous research paradigm, and develop ways of putting this paradigm to use.

Getting Started

Introduction

Many residents of Indigenous communities in North America and Australia believe that Indigenous people are among the most studied on earth (for example, see Rigney, 1999; Smith, 1999). While this belief in itself may be debatable, it is based in the fact that Indigenous people are accustomed to research being conducted in their communities. This research has neither been asked for, nor has it had any relevance for the communities being studied. People are accustomed to seeing researchers come into their communities, do whatever it is they do and leave, never to be heard from again. Because community members are for the most part excluded from the research process, they have become resentful of research in general.

Within the past decade though, research and researchers have begun to change. More is being done to bring Indigenous communities into the research process, and the usefulness of the research is becoming more visible and beneficial to the communities. A precursor for this change has been the growing number of Indigenous people who have excelled in academia and who focus their study on their own peoples. These new Indigenous scholars have introduced Indigenous beliefs, values and customs into the research process, and this in turn has helped research to become much more culturally sensitive to Indigenous peoples (Martin, 2003; Rigney, 1999; Steinhauser, 2002; Wilson and Pence, 2006).

An important aspect of this emerging style of research is that Indigenous peoples themselves decide exactly which areas are to be studied. It is time for research that is conducted by or for Indigenous people to take another step forward. An integral part of Indigenous identity for many Indigenous people includes a distinct way of viewing the world and of "being." Indigenous people have come to realize that beyond controlling the topic chosen for study, the research methodology needs to incorporate their cosmology, worldview, epistemology and ethical beliefs. An Indigenous research paradigm needs to be followed through all stages of research.

The term Indigenous itself is in the process of being reclaimed by Indigenous people. In this respect, Indigenous differs from "small I" Indigenous, which is sometimes used to indicate things that have developed "home grown" in specific places. For example, settler Australians have a unique psychology that has developed with their culture, which might be called an indigenous psychology (Kim and Berry, 1993). As Indigenous people become more active politically and in the field of academia, the term Indigenous, as an adjective, has come to mean "relating to Indigenous people and peoples." The word Indigenous carries political implications. The first peoples of the world have gained greater understanding of the similarities that we share. Terms such as Indian, Metis, Aborigine or Torres Strait Islander do nothing to reflect either the distinctiveness of our cultures or the commonalities of our
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underlying worldviews. Indigenous is inclusive of all first peoples—unique in our own cultures—but common in our experiences of colonialism and our understanding of the world. When using the term Indigenous research, I am referring specifically to research done by or for Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous people have adapted some of the theory developed in the social sciences, especially feminist theory and relational psychology (Taylor, Gilligan and Sullivan, 1995). Much of the ideology underlying these areas is similar to an Indigenous worldview in that it challenges the cultural outlook of mainstream society. Of special significance is the way relational theory examines power relationships and hierarchical structures of male-dominated, Euroamerican ethnocentrism that is prevalent in most social science theory (Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, 1994). Participatory action research (PAR) with the social action component of its theory (Kennis and McTaggart, 2000) has also been widely used by Indigenous researchers. While Indigenous research may look to relational psychology or PAR for support, this support is not for external validation but rather as a complementary framework for accepting the uniqueness of an Indigenous research paradigm.

As an Indigenous research paradigm grows and evolves, we need to go beyond the tendency to compare it with mainstream research, in order to develop theory, practice and methods that are uniquely Indigenous. This addresses one of the major complaints that Indigenous people have about the social sciences (and science in general)—that researchers come from outside the community to “study” Indigenous problems (Smith, 1999).

There are several problems with the dominant scientific approach to Indigenous research. One of the most obvious is that researchers, no matter how objective they claim their methods and themselves to be, do bring with them their own set of biases. At the very least the choice of research topic and methodology reflects researcher bias. Psychologists, possibly more than members of any other discipline, have sought to impose their own European definition of reality upon the rest of the world (Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, 1994, p. 3). In addition, this approach focuses on problems and often imposes outside solutions, rather than appreciating and expanding upon the resources available within Indigenous communities. As an outsider to the Indigenous Australian people, I am aware of these biases and will discuss this further in later sections of the book.

Many studies in psychology, human services and other social sciences conducted on Indigenous people—as opposed to those conducted by or with Indigenous people—focus on negative aspects of life, as identified by outside researchers. In many of their conclusions, the studies identify “problems” that are in need of further study (Dion, Gotowiec and Beiser, 1998; Novins et al., 1997). The research agenda is set from outside the community. As Reynolds-Turton (1997) concludes, the focus of these studies is on illness rather than health. One consequence of such studies, even though their intentions may have been good, has been the proliferation of negative stereotypes about Indigenous communities.

Another, more subtle, problem with “outsiders” researching Indigenous peoples is that there is always a comparison made between the culture of the “studied” and that of the “studier.” The language, tone and focus of research reflects this comparison, with the inevitable consequence of rating of one over the other. As proponents of a holistic view of our worlds, Indigenous scholars may recognize the holistic approach to oppression that is evident in all of the ways that Indigenous peoples are held down by research and the dominant view of knowledge and the world is upheld. It is time for Indigenous peoples and Indigenous research to break free from the hegemony of the dominant system, into a place where we are deciding our own research agendas.

In her article about the paradox of Indigenous higher education, Heather Harris (2002) addresses the issue of hegemony with a Coyote story. Stories and metaphor are often used in Indigenous societies (not just in Canada and Australia but with other Indigenous peoples around the world) as a teaching tool. Stories allow listeners to draw their own conclusions and to gain life lessons from a more personal perspective. By getting away from abstractions and rules, stories allow us to see others’ life experiences through our own eyes. This information may then be internalized in a way that is difficult for abstract discussions to achieve. Harris’s story to me illustrates just how pervasive dominant system academics have been in guiding Indigenous research and the teaching of Indigenous knowledge:

Coyote was once again fed up with running around all day in the hot sun for a few scrappy gophers and rabbits. Dirt dirty in his eyes, and what for? Barely a mouthful. Coyote had tried getting food at the supermarket one time like the Human People do but got the shit kicked out of him for that. So, once again, he went to his brother, Raven, to ask him for advice.

Coyote said, “Raven, there’s got to be an easier way to get fed. I tried the supermarket—got beaten up. Tried to get money from welfare but came up against the Devil’s Spawn in a K-Mart dress. Nothing’s worked so far. You got any other ideas?”

“Well,” Raven said thoughtfully, “the White Humans seem pretty well fed and they say that the key to success is a good education. Maybe you could go to school.”

“Hmmm,” Coyote mused, “maybe I’ll try it. Couldn’t hurt.”

Well, Coyote went off to the city to the university because that’s where Raven said adults go to school.

In a few days Coyote was back.
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“Well my brother,” Raven inquired, “did you get your education?”

“No, not exactly,” Coyote replied, “education is as hard to get as a welfare cheque. To get an education like the teachers at the university takes at least 10 years—that’s a Coyote’s entire lifetime—and in the end, you don’t get paid much anyways.”

“When I got to the university they asked me what program I was in. I didn’t know so they sent me to this guy who told me about the programs. I kinda liked the idea of biology—if I learned more about gophers maybe they’d be easier to catch. I liked the idea of engineering—maybe I could invent a great rattle trap. But in the end I settled on Native Studies. Now that’s something I can understand—I’ve known these guys for thousands of years, even been one when it suited me.”

“So I went to my Introduction to Native Studies course and, can you believe it, the teacher was a white guy? Now how much sense does that make? I saw native people around town—any one of them has got to know more about native people than some white guy.”

“When I asked this guy what Indian told him the stuff he was saying, he said none of the stuff in the book. Then I asked who the Indian was who wrote the book. And he said, it wasn’t an Indian, it was a white guy. Then I asked him what Indian the guy who wrote the book learned from and the teacher got mad and told me to sit down.”

The next day I went to my Indians of North America class. I was really looking forward to meeting all those Indians. And you know what? There was another white guy standing up there and not an Indian in sight. I asked the teacher, “Are we going to visit all the Indians?” He said, No. So I asked him, “How are we going to learn about Indians then?” And he said, just like the other guy, from a book written by a white guy. So I asked him if I could talk to this guy who wrote the book and the teacher said, “No, he’s dead.”

“But then, I was getting pretty confused about this education stuff but I went to my next class—Indian Religions. And guess what? When I went in, there wasn’t another white guy standing up at the front of the room—there was a white woman!”

“I sat down and I asked her, ‘Are we going to the sweat lodge?’ She said, ‘No,’ Sundance, ‘No’ Yuwipi? ‘No.’ Then how are we going to learn—no wait, I know—from a book written by a dead white guy! I’m starting to get the hang of this education business.”

“So then I go to my Research Methods class thinking I’ve got it figured out. In this class the teacher (you’ve got it—another white guy) said that our research must be ethical, that we must follow the guidelines set out by the university for research on human subjects. The rules are there, my teacher said, to protect the Indians from unscrupulous researchers. Who made these rules, I asked—you guessed it—a bunch of white guys. They decided we need protecting and that they were the ones to decide how best to protect us from them. So I told my teacher that I wanted to interview my father. The teacher said, you’ve got to ask the ethics review committee for permission. What? I’ve got to ask a bunch of white guys for permission to talk to my own dad? That can’t be right. I was confused all over again.”

“So I sat down and thought about all this for a long time. Finally I figured it out. If white guys teach all the courses about Indians and they teach in the way white people think, then to find Indians teaching the way Indians think, all I had to do was give up Native Studies and join the White Studies program!” (pp. 194–196)

Purpose of the Book

The main focus of this book rests with the positive effects of maintaining, transmitting and clarifying an Indigenous way of doing and being in the research process—the basis of an Indigenous research paradigm.

The development of an Indigenous research paradigm is of great importance to Indigenous people because it allows the development of Indigenous theory and methods of practice. For example, in the field of Indigenous psychology, Indigenous people will be the ones who decide what is “normal” or “abnormal,” or if that distinction even needs to exist. A strong Indigenous research paradigm can provide ways to celebrate the uniqueness and glory of Indigenous cultures, while allowing for the critical examination of shortcomings. It will encourage a greater appreciation of Indigenous history and worldviews, thus allowing Indigenous peoples to look towards the future while neither demonizing nor romanticizing the past. This study is also important for non-Indigenous people, as it will assist in the understanding of Indigenous issues, cultures and values. Just like Coyote in his quest for knowledge, students should have the choice of studying “Native” issues that are researched and presented from an Indigenous paradigm.

There is a common recognition by workers in the fields of human services, education, health, criminology and psychology, to name a few, that Indigenous peoples, whether in Canada or Australia, present a different set of needs and necessitate a different way of doing business in the service industries (Coleman, 1998; Davidson, 1995; Novins et al., 1997; Reynolds-Turton, 1997; Ross, 1992). In an attempt to meet these different needs, investigations, royal commissions, specialized programs and staff cultural training have been advanced. A few examples of these initiatives help to justify the need for an Indigenous research paradigm.
Research is Ceremony

In Australia, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSC) evolved from the Aboriginal Development Commission in an attempt to provide funding and political representation for Indigenous Australians. It has been suggested that a problem with ATSC is that dominant society bureaucrats established it and the Australian government is continually trying to impose its own views of economic rationalism, political allegiance and policy direction upon the group. While recognizing that services are not provided on an equal basis to Indigenous people, the government nevertheless expects economic viability and imposes dominant societal standards for ATSC programs. The Aboriginal Land Fund Commission, developed in 1990, was set up to address Indigenous land acquisition, but it has proven ineffectual. Recommendations from the royal commissions on Aboriginal deaths in custody and on the stolen generations have either not been implemented or have been “watered down” (personal conversation, John Williams-Mooley, 1999).

Similar examples of Indigenous programs designed by “experts” from the dominant system are utilized in Canada. Aboriginal justice inquiries have been held in several provinces, as has a royal commission into the state of Aboriginal people in Canada (Canada, 1996). Although it was five years in the making and at an expense of millions of dollars, the Canadian government has only implemented several of the minor recommendations made by the commission report.

One thing that most of these Indigenous inquiries hold in common is that they look at social, historical and economic factors to explain the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and then make recommendations that are intended to adapt the dominant system to the needs of Indigenous people. These programs proceed with the assumption that if economic and environmental conditions were the same for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, Indigenous people could “pull themselves up” to the standards of dominant society. This same attitude promoted the forced assimilation of Indigenous people through such social tragedies as the “Stolen Generation” and forced residential schooling. The other thing that all of these inquiries hold in common is that without fail, the conditions and issues that are being studied get worse, rather than improving, after the research has been done (Atkinson, 2002a).

Research Question

There is limited research to date that recognizes that Indigenous people think and behave in a manner that is unique to ourselves (Brant, 1990; Cajete, 1994; Sioui, 1992; A. Wilson, 1996). There is a need to examine how an Indigenous research paradigm can lead to a better understanding of, and provision for, the needs of Indigenous people. Appreciating the differences Indigenous people have in terms of their ontology, epistemology, methodology and axiology can lead to research methods that are more fully integrated with an Indigenous worldview. The social sciences will be enriched as this understanding extends to the general community.

The theoretical framework underlying this study assumes that there are common aspects within the research paradigms of Indigenous peoples in Canada and Australia, and the research aims to determine what these common aspects are. Through searching out the similarities in the beliefs underlying the research of Indigenous scholars in Canada and Australia, it is hoped that a shared Indigenous research paradigm may be developed.

As stated in the foreword and conclusion, the study that this book is based upon aimed to answer the following questions:

a) What are the shared aspects of the ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology of research conducted by Indigenous scholars in Australia and Canada; and

b) How can these aspects of an Indigenous research paradigm be put into practice to support other Indigenous people in their own research?

It is important to remember that this book looks for similarities between aspects of a research paradigm for Indigenous peoples and will not compare Indigenous ideas, theories or beliefs with the dominant system. It is not possible for me to use an assimilated view (i.e., to try to conduct this research as a white researcher would) in order to try to understand successful Indigenous research. It is important for me to use an Indigenous viewpoint while conducting and writing up this research, in order that a legitimate and comprehensive understanding of an Indigenous research paradigm is reached.

The next chapter discusses how this research question developed, followed by a brief review of literature. Rather than attempt a comprehensive review of the multitude of research paradigms and methodologies that an Indigenous research paradigm might draw upon for support, the literature review focuses on the stage through which Indigenous research has progressed.

This chapter explored my personal reasons or motivation for conducting and writing up this research. Through the pre-existing relationship I share with my sons, I hope that you have formed a stronger relationship with me, the researcher and scribe. I also provided an academic rationale for the research, described its purpose and the research question that I intend to address. Thus armed with motivation, rationale and purpose for this study, I venture forth into my research saga.