

Turtle Island Indigenous Psychologies: Radical Understanding

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores Indigenous psychology as a radical alternative to modern theories of psychology. I explain and define Western psychology as a dominating force which overshadows other psychological approaches. I then explore cross-cultural and previous ideas of Indigenous psychology as subsections of Western psychology. I explain that cross-cultural and Indigenous psychology are no different than Western psychology as they rely heavily on abstract, fixed meanings. Cultural psychology provides a radical approach which invites Indigenous psychology based on a genuine understanding of Indigenous practices. I explore Turtle Island Indigenous Psychologies (TIIP) as local, interrelated, oral, ceremonial, and medicinal or healing. I then use TIIP as a radical perspective to critique the colonial or tautological approaches dominating Western psychology. I offer TIIP as a genuine, radical opposition to Western psychology, which can only be used from a place of comprehensive understanding.

KEYWORDS: Indigenous psychology,
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I went through a short phase of walking an hour away from home to the nearest Denny's almost daily. This was during the pandemic, when many of us were searching for alternative places of study amidst the staleness of home. On one of these days, an older Indigenous man sparked conversation with me while leaving. He asked what I was studying, and I answered, "Psychology". He was intrigued, he tells me, "Oh, I study psychology too you know, but not that psychology, not your psychology. I study *Indigenous psychology*." At the time, I had not encountered the term, but it is not difficult to imagine. Of course, Indigenous peoples have their own psychological theories and procedures. But what are they? And what does "not your psychology" mean?

My Denny's encounter occurred in Calgary, Alberta. Treaty 7 territory, home to Indigenous groups such as the Blackfoot Confederacy, the Tsuut'ina First Nation, the Stoney Nakoda, and the Métis Nation of Alberta Region 3 (University of Calgary, 2023). When he mentioned Indigenous psychology, I assume he was referring to the Indigenous knowledge local to the land which he belongs to. Turtle Island (North America) contains a myriad of Indigenous groups that maintain localized epistemologies and ontologies. Each way of being is as sophisticated as the last, interrelated with the land it came from. Our interaction got me thinking, what are these Indigenous psychologies? What do they teach, and what can we learn from them? In this paper, I explore the fundamental ideas of the Indigenous psychologies native to Turtle Island and compare them to Western Psychology, cross-cultural psychology, and cultural psychology. My intention is to learn from Indigenous psychology as a radical perspective, constituted by the interrelation of context, ceremony, and healing.

WESTERN PSYCHOLOGY

To begin, I will explore the current understanding of dominant, mainstream, general or Western psychology. After World War II, “my” or Western psychology was exported around the globe and soon after it became redundant to mention American (or Western), as a prefix to psychology (Pickren, 2009, p. 87). Within psychology, the cognitive revolution transformed the dominant theory of behaviorism into cognitivism. Jerome Bruner (2002) recalls that the revolution began by discussing “meaning-making” or the meanings human beings created out of the encounters with their world (p. 2). Somewhere early on, the emphasis on meaning transformed into an emphasis on the processing of information (Bruner, 2002, p. 4). Cognitive processes were comparable to computability, mirroring the societal developments at the time (Bruner, 2002, p. 6). Since, cognitive neuroscience has been the predominant focus of Western psychologists.

Richard Shweder (1990) designates cognitive, Western psychology as “general psychology” (p. 4). He identifies the underlying aim of general psychology as the objective to describe a central processing mechanism, presumed to be a transcendent, abstract, fixed, and universal property of the human psyche (Shweder, 1990, p. 4). He highlights general psychology’s desire to create controlled conditions, such as in natural science, therefore psychologists attempt to disconnect the internal psychological structures from external environmental conditions (Shweder, 1990, p. 5). In the process of abstracting universals, psychologists detach the meaning embedded in an individual’s world from the cerebral functions. When I mention Western psychology, I am recalling this process of stripping away contextual meaning to uncover cognitive function, then creating abstract universalisms from the data.

Western psychology has a monopoly on psychological research. The countries of the USA, Canada, and the UK publish more than 60% of all research in psychology (Allwood, 2018, p. 3). It was documented that 96% of participants from the top six psychology journals were from Western countries (Allwood, 2018, p. 3). Moreover, the findings of Western researchers often have poor replicability in non-Western countries (Allwood, 2018, p. 1). Despite the poor replicability, mainstream psychologists value themselves as superior producers of empirical truth. Western psychology is the search for absolute truths and universals in the name of science, controlling for context and culture.

Cross-Cultural and Indigenous Psychology

As explained above, there are shortcomings of mainstream research, causing certain psychologists to diverge from the mainstream approach. One alternative is to operationalize culture as an antecedent or independent variable, and study it as an index to behaviors (Greenfield, 2000, p. 224). This approach is called cross-cultural psychology. Its main contribution to the field is testing the generalizations of Western research in non-Western countries and repeatedly discovering they transfer poorly (Shweder, 1990, p. 11). Cross-cultural psychology has been particularly triumphant in East Asian countries by distinguishing between the individualism of North America and the collectivism of East Asia. Cross-cultural psychologists rely on the universals of individualism and collectivism as the hallmark of their methods, often tested in examples such as Surveys, IQ tests, and measures of field independence and interdependence (Greenfield, 2000, p. 224).

Some cross-cultural psychologists have recently adopted the term Indigenous psychology. While debated, Indigenous psychology typically refers to the development of a local psychology, grounded in the language, history, and culture of one’s own society (Pickren, 2009, p. 89). The cross-cultural approach includes two main schools of thought. First, Indigenization from without or an *etic* approach (Kim, 2000, p. 266). The *etic* approach takes predetermined psychological theories of universals and tests them in a local context (Kim, 2000, p. 266). Second, Indigenization from within or an *emic* approach (Kim, 2000, p. 268). The *emic* approach represents a “bottom-up” understanding of how people function in their natural contexts, beginning with culture, then abstracting universals from the cultural context (Kim, 2000, p. 268). Regardless, both approaches use universals and empirical methods to exemplify their findings. Under this approach, Indigenous psychology is merely a subsection of cross-cultural psychology, which is another subsection of Western psychology.

Cultural Psychology

Cultural psychology does the opposite of this. Shweder (1990) explains cultural psychology here,

“The basic idea of cultural psychology is that, on the one hand, no sociocultural environment exists or has identity independently of the way

human beings seize meanings and resources from it, while, on the other hand, every human being's subjectivity and mental life are altered through the process of seizing meanings and resources from some sociocultural environment and using them" (p. 74).

To further explain, Shweder's thinking develops through the principle of *intentionality*. Intentional worlds are manufactured, dynamic, and dependent on the context (1990, p. 74). Intentional things only exist in intentional worlds. For example, I am sick in the hospital. The doctor informs me that only immediate family members can visit. My biological sister is allowed to visit because in this intentional world, sister is based on shared biological content and the nuclear family unit. What about my best friend of 10 years? In many intentional worlds, if I describe my best friend as a sister, that is perfectly acceptable, and people understand what I mean. In the intentional world of the hospital, she is not a sister. Cultural psychology shifts the focus to the meaning-making process of an intentional world and intentional people inside of it. Intentionality is never fixed and is always contextual, based upon the everyday interactions of people in their world.

Western psychology includes a broad scope of approaches and theories. The main theme throughout them all is the search for universal, abstract truths to explain psychological behavior. I argue that cultural psychology provides an escape from Western, universalist positivism. This begs the question, what are other ways of thinking outside of universalism? In this next section, I dive into Indigenous psychologies to understand psychological meaning from a holistic perspective.

TURTLE ISLAND INDIGENOUS PSYCHOLOGIES

As I described, some psychologists claim the term Indigenous psychology to portray their research as *Indigenized* yet use Western theories and methodologies to exemplify their findings. In this next section, I plan to do the opposite, by engaging in a meaningful understanding of Indigenous knowledge, specifically in Turtle Island. Rather than Indigenous psychology as a singular idea, I argue for *Turtle Island Indigenous Psychologies* (TIIP) as a plural, reflective of the myriad of processes located within specific communities. I am not claiming Western psychology

or cross-cultural psychology should adopt ideas from TIIP, rather I argue that Indigenous knowledge approaches psychology from a radically different perspective and we can learn from it, complimentary to cultural psychology. Shweder describes this as, "thinking through others" or "thinking through culture" (1990, p. 109).

Indigenous Knowledge

"At the hearings considering an injunction to stop the first James Bay hydro-electric power development in northern Quebec, an elder from one of the northern Cree communities that might be affected by the development was brought in to testify about Cree lifeways and the environment. When asked to swear that he would tell the truth, he asked the translator for an explanation of the word. However, truth was translated for him, as something that holds for all people, or something that is valid regardless of the rapporteur, the elder responded: 'I can't promise to tell you the truth; I can only tell you what I know.'" (Dei et al., 2000, p. 25).

To argue for a fruitful image of TIIP, I will reference Indigenous studies of knowledge, science, and philosophy to explain. To begin, Indigenous knowledge is *local knowledge*, culturally conditioned and relational to land (Warrior & Nelson, 2017, p. 190). As the above quote suggests, Indigenous ways of knowing and being are concerned with relationality and context, not ultimate truths (Warrior & Nelson, 2017, p. 196). Relations being other humans (elders, family, friends), or more-than-humans (land, animals). Humans, more-than-humans, and land interrelate with each other, cultivating knowledge and understanding through group specific teachings and ceremonies. These processes are connected to the land which it developed on and to disconnect them would be inappropriate. This results in knowledge systems which function in diversity where truth is relational and contextual - depending on where you are.

Knowledge is *interrelated* with all things human and more-than-human. Leroy Little Bear (2012) writes that Indigenous philosophy consists of "ideas of constant motion/flux, all creation consisting of energy waves, everything being animate, all creation being interrelated, reality required renewal, and

space as a major referent” (p. 521). This quote carries a wealth of information. Namely, understanding the world as in constant motion, energy coursing through, more-than-humans and nature as all living beings, and the importance of embodied practice in space. Knowledge is not in the head, rather knowledge interconnects through the myriad of relations in our active world. Moreover, someone cannot be separated from the relations that person is engaged with. Relations embody the cyclicity of holistic knowledge.

Oral history or *oral culture* is inherently reflective of contextual relationality. Dialogue incorporates relational accountability into the exchange because of the relationship between speakers and listeners (Wilson & Laing, 2018, p. 142). Some Indigenous languages are especially inclusive of this. For example, in Wintu, an Indigenous Californian language, it is impossible to speak without at every point detailing the source of one’s information (Allen, 2021, p. 4). Listeners recognize the source as a person who has embodied teachings and is now able to teach others. Another component of oral culture is the ability to adapt depending on the context. As Alex Wilson explains regarding the Cree creation story, “A story like that can only be told and listened to, never written down. Stamped in the lines of black letters onto a white page, recorded and reduced, repeating itself with each reading, the meaning of the story would be lost. We must tell our stories carefully” (2013, para. 1). She stresses the importance of oral history as a generative tool. Meaning is cultivated in practice such as dialogue, song, dance, and ceremony.

My previous points indicate the importance of Indigenous knowledge as a domain of praxis (Swazo, 2005, p. 569). Those in the community practice beneficial ways of knowing, being, and relating through the embodiment of *ceremony*. Someone cannot simply access this knowledge by reading a paper or watching a video. You must live the knowledge (Allen, 2021, p. 5). Simmee Chung (2018) reflects upon an Elder in the classroom describing why the day began with smudging, morning song, and morning prayer (p. 94). The Elder explains that he was inviting the class into a relational space for all to come together “in ceremony, and *as* ceremony” (Chung, 2018, p. 94). Elders invite those present in ceremony to respect the sacred constitution of knowledge. Repeated ceremonies such as smudging and morning prayer allow participants to consistently welcome themselves into and embody the teachings

which have been passed down orally. The knowledge is not owned, or concrete. Rather, it is expressed through the active listening and participation of those within the ceremony.

For Western societies, healing often implies the healthcare system and medicine regarding pharmaceutical drugs. For many Indigenous groups, *healing and medicine* carry different connotations. Medicine relates to ecology, ceremony, and relations. For example, in David Delago Shorter’s (2017) research on a Yoeme village, he explores healers named moreakamen (p. 490). If a person is sick, the moreakamen may ask if they are fulfilling their duties to their family or community, or if they have offended other-than-human beings (Warrior & Shorter, 2017, p. 498). The moreakamen demonstrate sickness, healing, and medicine in the domain of relations. Instead of locating the source of sickness through a framework of universal symptoms, the moreakamen invites the person to actively consider the relations they exist within. Sickness can be healed through the medicine of embodying healthy relations. In this way, healing is also a practice. An individual practices healing through positive relations with others, whether it be human or more-than-human. A healthy relationship with plants allows people the benefits of their medicine, something that can be obtained through the relations of people guiding each other as to what the plants can do.

The tenets I have described interrelate with each other, attributing to the holistic and contextual quality of Indigenous knowledge. For example, ceremonial practices are dependent on the land the community exists within. The language spoken supplies speakers with different means of understanding themselves and others. Healing practices depend on where you are and who you are in relation with. Knowledge cannot be reduced to an ultimate truth or a shallow understanding, rather the embodiment of knowledge is an ongoing practice of becoming in relation. This reiterates my argument for TIIP as an approach inclusive of the myriad of practices native to Turtle Island. TIIP recognizes meaning as in relation to the context it is practiced in. Therefore, I argue that psychology cannot separate itself from the contextual in an attempt to find the actual. The actual exists only where it *actually* is, in the everyday lives of people inside a community.

Challenges

TIIP and colonial institutions are contradictory. Universities are located on top of Indigenous places which already bear knowledge (Whetung & Wakefield, 2018, p. 151). As I have conveyed, Indigenous ways of knowing are radically different compared to Western ideas. Western Universities are concerned with rank, profit, quality of empirical research, and producing “logical” students. Indigenous teachings are contextual, relational, oral, ceremonial, and embodied. How can the two co-exist within the institution? In the following section, I will critique the colonial practices of psychological discourse with TIIP, criticize cross-cultural psychology, and finally compare TIIP and cultural psychology.

CRITIQUE, CRITICISM, AND COMPARISON

Colonial Psychology

To begin, I will compare positivist science to colonialism and identify how TIIP exemplifies radical understanding of psychology. Norman Swazo (2005) invoked a Foucauldian perspective to do this. He argues that unitarity discourse of knowledge (in this case, the field of psychology) generates a scientific discourse which asserts itself as power over other cultural knowledge systems (Swazo, 2005, p. 571). As exemplified by Western psychology, the creation of controlled research protocol has developed a universal, cognitivist approach which denounces unfalsifiable theories. According to Foucault, the standards of “rigorous science” imply that Indigenous ways of knowing are lacking in quality and believability, and their failure to comply with Western criteria of truth implies they are nonconceptual and useless (Swazo, 2005, p. 569). This process rationalizes the erasure of TIIP while consecrating Western psychology, therefore perpetuating colonialism.

Indigenous knowledge refuses to engage in ultimate truths used to undermine the other. This is not due to uncertainty, confusion, or “uselessness”, rather a comprehension that personal certainty does not mean another’s experience will be the same (Allen, 2021, p. 7). In this way, Indigenous discourses around knowledge are not triumphant and imperial. TIIP does not undermine others through the “sophistication” of science discourses. TIIP are dependent on a holistic understanding of contextual realities. This does not mean that cultural relativism is where TIIP stops, rather

this is where it begins. As Nelson (2017) describes,

“From my perspective, all knowledge is culturally conditioned and culturally relative, so Western science is another cultural story, a very powerful one indeed, but a culturally conditioned one, nonetheless. Indigenous knowledge systems are also culturally conditioned and relative, which is precisely the point of local knowledges: they are specific to particular peoples in certain places and aid in their adaptability and resilience. (p. 190).

As Nelson describes, knowledge is culturally constituted. Western psychologists’ process of controlling culture through experiments, then implementing those conclusions back onto other populations is a colonial approach.

The Western psychological approach reflects the paternalism riddled throughout colonial history. Empirical or positivist research implies that Western criteria possess an ultimate understanding of psychological functioning. Therefore, Western psychologists are quick to characterize what is incorrect about an individual’s functioning in the domain of mental health. They identify a psychological disorder or disease, then offer healing through specific routes of cure, usually involving psychotherapy and medication. In comparison, TIIP ideas of sickness and healing involve the relational networks which constitute the individual, and encourage healing through participation in ceremony, community, and medicine vastly different from the Western understanding of it. Joseph P. Gone exemplifies this through his research on culture, coloniality, and the well-being of Indigenous communities (Gone, 2023). He regards many modern Western mental health practices as cultural forms of brainwashing, he focuses instead on the “life-generating sacred power of ceremony” in Indigenous communities (Gone, 2016, p. 315). In this way, TIIP challenges colonial psychology through radically different methodologies based on the continuous practice of healing in everyday life.

The Cross-Cultural Problem

Cross-cultural psychologists attempt to challenge colonialism by adopting the term Indigenous psychology (Allwood, 2018; Greenfield, 2000; Kim, 2000). As described earlier, cross-cultural psychologists continue to use universalisms and

Western methodologies for their research. They extrapolate a universal framework (typically individualism and collectivism) from specific cultures then implement the universals back onto the same or different cultures, all the while claiming to be cognizant of non-Western methodologies. The adoption of Indigenous psychology into cross-cultural psychology is problematic and inappropriate if psychologists continue to use universalisms in their research.

Patricia M. Greenfield (2000) exemplifies this. Early in her paper, Greenfield advocates that much of Indigenous psychology is just cross-cultural psychology, using Western methodologies such as questionnaires and the study of variables (2000, p. 226). She explains that Indigenous psychology, especially in East Asia, is privileged to elite populations (university students) (Greenfield, 2000, p. 226). So far, her reasoning suggests that these are colonial psychological practices, very different from the TIIP I described. Later, she backtracks and argues for the integration of cross-cultural, cultural, and Indigenous psychology into a deep-structure approach. She claims, "This higher-order conceptual framework will have truly universalistic qualities" (Greenfield, 2000, p. 236). How can a theoretical framework be inclusive of anti-universalist theories through universality?

The cross-cultural psychology problem argues that shallow inclusions of local knowledge are not an Indigenous psychology. It is not enough to claim yourself Indigenous. Rather, an ethical relationship between institutional research and Indigenous knowledge exists through a genuine understanding of an individual's coming to be in place (Whetung & Wakefield, 2018, p. 151). A dialogue about the fundamental differences between Westernized and Indigenous practices must be open for ethical relating to occur (Whetung & Wakefield, 2018, p. 156). As the aptly named paper, *Please Don't Just Hang a Feather on a Program or Put a Medicine Wheel on Your Logo and Think 'Oh Well, This Will Work* suggests, psychologists cannot appropriate Indigenous knowledge to repackage their original, universalist ideas (Walsh-Buhi, 2017). This will only result in cultural appropriation or the perpetuation of colonialism which fails to interact meaningfully with Indigenous knowledge. As I have argued, TIIP provides a radically different understanding of psychology, and researchers cannot

be too quick to claim Indigenization for themselves.

Cultural and Indigenous Psychology

Earlier, I described the ideas of cultural psychology, which correspond with many ideas of TIIP. Cultural psychology focuses on meaning-making, context, and embodiment. Cultural psychologists Cor Baerveldt and Theo Verheggen (2012) argue for a psychology constituted by "lived embodied practice" (p. 24). Therefore, "knowing is indistinguishable from being", as persons embody knowledge through action in a situated, normative world (Baerveldt & Verheggen, pp. 38-39). Similarly, Indigenous scientist Nelson (2017) explains knowledge as "coming to know" (p. 190). In addition, Indigenous scientists Whetung and Wakefield (2018) explain it as "coming to be" in place (p. 151). All authors agree upon the practice or cultivation of knowledge inside a cultural, or local world. TIIP, when taken genuinely, demonstrates cultural psychology's ideas of meaning-making processes specific to the area, and how those processes are embodied through those in community.

Psychologist Joseph P. Gone (2016) marries the radical focus of cultural psychology with the practices of Indigenous knowledge to foster the genuine healing of Indigenous communities. He practices *community psychology*, in which he explores the Indigenous ways of knowing and healing as alternative forms of therapy for issues such as problem drinking. Gone exemplifies an integration of Indigenous knowledge without abstracting universals or perpetuating Western ideas. Instead, he employs Indigenous knowledge to heal the disastrous effects of colonialism on Indigenous peoples.

CONCLUSION

Going back to my Denny's encounter, when we met, I had only just begun the immersive journey of understanding Western psychology. Later, I began a new journey of attempting to unlearn Western psychology. This journey runs parallel with the sections in the paper. I learned of Western psychology, then cross-cultural psychology, then cultural psychology, and I conclude now at Indigenous psychology or psychologies. In this paper, I argue for an understanding that Turtle Island Indigenous psychologies are radically different from Western psychology. I began by explaining the dominance of Western psychology, characterized by the

abstraction of absolute truths in the name of science. I then explained cross-cultural psychology, a subsection of Western psychology concerned with cultural universals such as individualism and collectivism. I added that cross-cultural psychologists have attempted to integrate Indigenous psychology into their approach but implement a shallow understanding of Indigenous knowledge. Alternatively, I argue that cultural psychology's anti-universalist approach is inclusive of, or runs parallel to, much of Indigenous knowledge.

So, what is Indigenous psychology? I assume the man I met at Denny's was not discussing the cross-cultural adaptation of Indigenous psychology. Rather, I imagine he was describing the psychological knowledge local to the land and community he comes from. I argue that Indigenous psychology or Turtle Island Indigenous psychologies can be studied and implemented through a genuine understanding and reflection of Indigenous knowledge. I argue these psychologies include *local context*, or a recognition that knowledge cannot be separated from the land which it came from. *Interrelatedness*, or an understanding that everything exists within relation to the other, human and more-than-human. *Oral culture*, a recognition that the oral transfer of knowledge allows for accountability and adaptability. *Ceremony*, or the embodiment of knowledge through sacred practice. And finally, *healing* in the domain of relations with others. To conclude, Indigenous psychologies do not share similar shortcomings of Western psychology. Indigenous psychologies celebrate the relationality between all things and use it to encourage the embodiment of Indigenous knowledge and healing. If Western psychologists want to meaningfully encourage Indigenous psychology, I argue it cannot be done without understanding that Indigenous knowledge comes from a holistic, contextual, and embodied place.



Artist: Layla Reddy

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