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Unquestioned Answers: A Review of Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods

Dan Wulff

University of Calgary, dwulff@ucalgary.ca

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Abstract

Indigenous research methods offer important considerations for qualitative researchers. The emphasis on relationships over knowledge, participation over expertism, and holism over specialized understandings draw striking distinctions for the researchers invested in honouring their participants. This highly readable and creative book presents research practices that respect the inseparability of research and other practices of living.

Keywords

Indigenous Research, Relationships, Ceremony, Participation

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***Unquestioned Answers:
A Review of Research is Ceremony:
Indigenous Research Methods***

Dan Wulff
University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada

Indigenous research methods offer important considerations for qualitative researchers. The emphasis on relationships over knowledge, participation over expertism, and holism over specialized understandings draw striking distinctions for the researchers invested in honouring their participants. This highly readable and creative book presents research practices that respect the inseparability of research and other practices of living. Key Words: Indigenous Research, Relationships, Ceremony, and Participation

In his new book, *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*, Shawn Wilson (2008) explains, “Research is all about unanswered questions, but it also reveals our unquestioned answers” (p. 6). Wilson presents the notion of research as an idea and practice reflective of cultural values and beliefs of the researcher. Research is a cultural practice and is afforded value given its accordance with the beliefs and ideas embraced by that local culture. Wilson declares an unwillingness to engage in a contestation of Western and Indigenous approaches to research, and uses his concise and to-the-point book to present his ideas about Indigenous research methods.

Even in the layout of this book, the author finds ways in the rather confining design options of the book-form to relate to the reader that embraces his thinking. He did not want to speak to an anonymous reader so he created conversational partners by speaking periodically to his three sons. This device illustrates a fundamental component of Indigenous research methods: “I further develop the relationships I have with the ideas through my relationship with my sons.” The relational is central to Indigenous ways of knowing and acting. We are always accountable to all our relations, even in our research and in our professional writing.

Wilson (2008) makes clear that Indigenous research methodologies manifest Indigenous values and beliefs. Research is simply another practice or articulation of an Indigenous life—no more, no less. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in her book, *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2001), emphasizes this same point: “Indigenous methodologies tend to approach cultural protocols, values and behaviours as an integral part of methodology” (p. 15). To understand Indigenous research methodologies presumes an understanding of the Indigenous life. No doubt the experience of colonization on the generations of lives of Indigenous peoples has underscored their appreciation of the beliefs that unite them, as well as a real and abiding understanding of the consequences of hegemonic ideas and practices. From these experiences, the foundational value of relationality becomes paramount and is intricately threaded throughout this book.

Wilson (2008) states, “[a]n idea cannot be taken out of this relational context and still maintain its shape” (p. 8). He credits Terry Tafoya (1995) with “[t]he 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” (p. 8). This appreciation of the embeddedness of ideas or practices in their contexts sets the stage for us to encounter ideas or practices in their complexity, not their individuality. This context issue was taken up by Adele Clarke in her book *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory after the Postmodern Turn* (2005). In her book she actively wonders about the possibility of seeing the context of an idea, a person, a community, or a practice *not* as outside of, but within that idea, person, community, or practice. The desire to contextualize may be a way of subdividing our world that mystifies rather than clarifies.

Many forms of Indigenous writing and storytelling bear close resemblance to Indigenous research methodologies. The marvelous book *Daughters of Copper Woman* by Anne Cameron (1981) accords with the values Wilson speaks of when he discusses Indigenous research. In re-telling Northwest Coast Indian myths, Cameron utilizes the same Indigenous principles called upon in designing and conducting Indigenous research. In seeking closer connections with one’s audience, “[b]y getting away from abstractions and rules, stories allow us to see others’ life experiences through our own eyes” (Wilson, 2008, p. 17). The emphasis on relating to one’s audience leads the Indigenous storyteller or Indigenous researcher to build connection, not as a device to convey packaged knowledge—rather, as a value in its own right. It is the focus on relating (as opposed to using relating as a vehicle for something else) that creates a bedrock on which Indigenous research so strongly rests.

Indigenous research must make a difference in people’s lives, not as an afterthought or as a separate applied step, but as a function of the entire research process. Given the relational emphasis of Indigenous research, conducting research honours the relatedness of the researcher(s) and the participants at all times.

In both critical theory and constructivism, knowledge in itself is not seen as the ultimate goal, rather the goal is the change that this knowledge may help to bring about. Both paradigms share the axiology that research is not seen as worthy or ethical if it does not help to improve the reality of the research participants. (Wilson, 2008, p. 37)

Herein lies a close connection with participatory action research, research that is based upon people’s concerns and involves them in the research process from start to finish. Wilson cites Rigney (1997): “Indigenous people are at a stage where they want research and research design to contribute to their self-determination and liberation struggles, as it is defined and controlled by their communities” (p. 54). The attention to process and content is clear in an Indigenous worldview:

If we’re going to educate Aboriginal people through the hierarchical process, what you’re basically teaching them is the hierarchical process. Therefore the process is the product. If you teach or do research within the traditions of the circle, which is inclusive, participatory, proactive, that sort of thing—very general terms on this—then you’re teaching the

individuals within that circle to become participatory, inclusive and so forth. (Wilson, pp. 103-104)

“. . . [R]eality is not an object but a process of relationships, and an Indigenous ontology is actually the equivalent of Indigenous epistemology” (Wilson, 2008, p. 73). Relationships are fundamental to the Indigenous way of living and working in the world. Wilson goes on to say that the Indigenous view holds “an epistemology where the relationship with something (a person, object or idea) is more important than the thing itself” (p. 73). This level of valuing relationship is a serious challenge to Western views of the person as an individually-bounded self. This point resonates strongly with Gergen (2009):

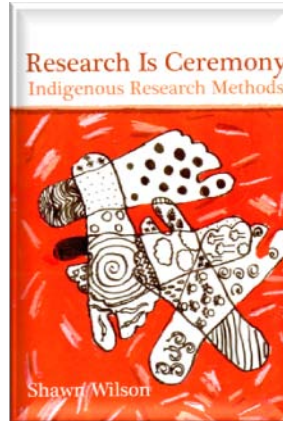
My attempt is to generate an account of human action that can replace the presumption of bounded selves with a vision of relationship. I do not mean relationships between otherwise separate selves, but rather, a process of coordination that precedes the very concept of the self. My hope is to demonstrate that virtually all intelligible action is born, sustained, and/or extinguished within the ongoing process of relationship. (p. xv)

This view of the person undermines the whole notion of breaking the world down into component parts and the consequences thereof (i.e., specializations, isolation of variables, privilege). Wilson states: “Rather than viewing ourselves as being *in* relationship with other people or things, we *are* the relationships that we hold and are part of” (p. 80). Understanding human existence in these terms has crucial implications for all human activity, research included as a human activity.



The diagram above is presented by Wilson to represent the non-linear nature of the Indigenous worldview that is fully present in Indigenous research. This “wheel” has no hub, no forward or backward, no isolation. Indigenous approaches embrace the artistic, the spiritual, the sensual, and the intuitive, again not as an add-on or separate component, but as integral to the whole. This holism stands in contrast to Western research approaches that seek to isolate and compartmentalize.

Another representation of this relationality is shown on the cover of the book:



The use of color, non-literalness, intersecting non-replicating images, and depictions of human feet invite us to imagine wholeness in life.

With the embeddedness of Indigenous culture in Indigenous research, Wilson (2008) highlights that research consequently need not be formal: “It is a ceremony for improving your relationship with an idea. It takes place every day and has taken place throughout our history” (p. 110). Research becomes, as my wife and colleague, Sally St. George, often says a form of “daily practice.” I wonder if *all* research practices are mere reflections of socio-cultural conditions and beliefs. If this is so, what socio-cultural beliefs are revealed by Western scientific research practices? Objectification? Individuation/isolation?

The notion of *discovery* was interestingly discussed in *Research is Ceremony*. The language most often used to credit the explorers, Columbus and Cook, with discovering America looks and sounds differently when one considers that people already had been living in these “discovered” places for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. The word discovery would perhaps be better replaced with “enhanced awareness” on the part of the explorers and their sponsoring agents. Columbus and Cook developed an enhanced awareness of the world—they came to know something to which they were previously unaware of, the understanding of the world was given the opportunity to expand and grow. In Indigenous research, the search for the unknown or the Truth gives way to creating relationships with ideas:

Right or wrong; validity; statistically significant; worthy or unworthy: value judgements lose their meaning. What is more important and meaningful is fulfilling a role and obligations in the research relationship—that is, being accountable to your relations. (Wilson, p. 77)

Wilson (2008) cites Judy Atkinson in outlining the major principles that guide Indigenous research. One I would like to comment on is the importance of acting in ways that demonstrate a reciprocity and a belief in giving of oneself. Full partnership is a challenging idea in a research endeavour but from an Indigenous point-of-view, it is automatic. This presents the opportunity for the researcher to be changed. Wilson explains, “if research hasn’t changed you as a person, then you haven’t done it right” (p.

135). The common pairings of “subject-object” or “change agent and those changed” evident in Western views of research are glaringly absent from an Indigenous perspective.

Indigenous research has interesting connections to qualitative research traditions. The connectedness among data and analysis so evident in qualitative methodologies (e.g., grounded theory, phenomenology) are revealed in Indigenous research:

. . .the data and analysis are like a circular fishing net. You could try to examine each of the knots in the net to see what holds it together, but it’s the strings between the knots that have to work in conjunction in order for the net to function. (Wilson, 2008, p. 120)

Wilson could have been explaining transferability in qualitative research when he states, “It was up to the listener [of the story] to piece together a lesson from the story and to apply the pieces where they fit to help in the current problem” (p. 28).

The use of visual imagery and metaphor is laced throughout *Research is Ceremony* in a way that creates connection between the author, his ideas, and the reader. This connectedness or relatedness makes this book not just *about* something else—it is the connection. So, true to the book’s title, “research isn’t just like a ceremony, it is a ceremony” (Wilson, 2008, p. 124).

More information about Shawn Wilson and his book can be found at the text’s web site located at <http://www.fernwoodpublishing.ca/Research-Is-Ceremony-Shawn-Wilson/>. Once there you can read the book’s Forward and conclusion.

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Author Note

Dr. Dan Wulff is a Co-Editor of *The Qualitative Report* and *The Weekly Qualitative Report* at Nova Southeastern University. He also serves as an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary and as a family therapist at the Calgary Family Therapy Centre. He can be contacted at 2500 University Drive NW, Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2N 1N4; Telephone: 403.220.8227; Fax: 403.282.7269; E-mail: dwulff@ucalgary.ca.

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