

Chapter One

Getting Started



Research is Ceremony by Shawn Wilson

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. Relationality 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

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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 past having 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.

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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; Steinhauer, 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 control over 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 the power relationships and hierarchical structure of male-dominated, Euroamerican ethnocentricity 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 (Kemmis 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

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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 scrawny gophers and rabbits. Dirt up his nose, dirt 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?"

"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 rabbit 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 'em 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—he read it in a 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."

"By 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 sweatlodge?' '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

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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.

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In Australia, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (AT-SIC) 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 ATSIC 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 ATSIC 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-Mozley, 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

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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 stages 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.