Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations, and contexts

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I come from a white middle-class family in Ontario. I am a non-Indigenous graduate student navigating a community-based participatory research (CBPR) relationship with Indigenous partners. My research is embedded in a larger partnership, with the support and guidance of an experienced non-Indigenous CBPR researcher.

Margaret Kovach, author of Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations, and contexts, demonstrates the importance of introducing ourselves in our writing, as positionality affects our approach. Kovach is an Indigenous scholar based at a Canadian university. Her ancestry stems from Saulteaux and Plains Cree peoples of southern Saskatchewan. She was raised in an adopted Hungarian family on a Saskatchewan farm. At a recent conference, I heard Kovach speak about the research journey: “when we are lost, that is when we really open up and start to listen.” At times, I found myself a little lost when reading this book. As Kovach begins to locate Indigenous approaches amidst the qualitative research landscape, I wondered whether this was an attempt to legitimize them within the academy. But reflecting on this volume, it is clear that Kovach’s work goes well beyond legitimizing Indigenous methodologies; her work centres an Indigenous way of knowing, from which a renewed process of research flows.

The focus of Kovach’s book is the academy, as one contested landscape in Canada. While academic institutions are only one colonial site, Kovach justifies her focus by identifying these institutions as the gatekeepers responsible for upholding what constitutes “knowledge” in our society (p. 79). Kovach portrays the racist policies from academic settings, but further have resisted the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges from these sites of power (pp. 158–163). She acknowledges that decolonizing research processes are becoming a recognized necessity, given the legacy of unethical research practices towards Indigenous peoples and the exclusion of their knowledges from the academy (pp. 75–79). Theories such as post-colonialism may suggest we have moved beyond the detrimental legacy, however, as Kovach asserts, “there is nothing post about it” (p. 76). The ever-present Indigenous-settler relationship cannot be ignored, and while a decolonizing lens is an important aspect of Kovach’s approach, her research framework moves beyond an extension of this Indigenous-settler colonial project.

Kovach begins her process of inquiry by going back to ways of knowing derived from her Indigenous roots and her Elders. In this way, Indigenous methodologies is a deep pursuit of questioning one’s epistemological underpinnings; of questioning what knowledges we favour in our approach to research. A Nêhiyaw (Plains Cree) knowledge base becomes Kovach’s “epistemic centre” (p. 45); a way of “returning to [her] tribal core” (p. 129), and it is from this place that her research methods flow. The book emanates from the findings of her doctoral research and incorporates the conversations she had with other Indigenous scholars: Michael Hart, Graham Smith, Jeannine Carriere, Cam Willet, Laara Fitznor, and Kathy Absolon. There is generous personal reflection interwoven throughout the text, expanding and reflecting on her lessons from these scholars. The chapters explore experiences with “travers[ing] different worlds” (p. 134); how these scholars have integrated Indigenous knowledges into various aspects of their research frameworks, while operating within academic boundaries.

Kovach has a strong theoretical grasp of qualitative methods and analysis techniques in general, exemplified through engagement with the vast literature cited throughout. Her true contribution, however, is a critical analysis of the
implications these status-quo qualitative research techniques have on tribal knowledges and peoples. She acknowledges that her book will be of interest to a wide array of those in the academy given that “Indigenous research frameworks are enjoying growing interest in the research community” (p. 19). But Kovach ensures her approach “is not solely about setting forth another research option on the buffet table. It is about acknowledging an Indigenous cultural worldview and identity…” (p. 158). Her book is about making space in the academy for tribal epistemologies and peoples to lead this voice. Foremost, her intended audience is the growing (albeit slowly) number of Indigenous graduate students who, like her, struggle to create space for themselves in the academy. To Kovach, these Indigenous scholars are her community, and this book provides a way for her to commit to that struggle.

And so, while non-Indigenous researchers (like myself) should not claim to be using Indigenous methodology (lacking a tribal epistemic centre), we can be informed by Indigenous knowledges and approaches to inquiry, so as to honour the communities we work with. As such, I highly recommend this book to other researchers, particularly students, considering academic inquiry involving Indigenous peoples.

Ella Bennett  
Dalhousie University

Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods


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In his book, Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods, Shawn Wilson articulates an Indigenous research paradigm in which the shared ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological components of Canadian and Australian Indigenous researchers are identified. An Indigenous research paradigm is a guiding set of beliefs, values, and principles that parallel Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and learning. It is through the demonstration of research as ceremony that the conceptualization of these ideas unfold. Wilson effectively uses creativity in both the structure and style of his writing to successfully provide readers of varying expertise with a well-written account of Indigenous research methods and their application.

As both an academic and Opaskwayak Cree from northern Manitoba, Wilson tells the story of his life and how his upbringing and relationships with other Indigenous people have shaped his way of articulating an Indigenous research paradigm. It is at this point that the methodologies of this research are introduced: mainstream academic procedures such as in-depth interviews and participant observation are utilized, so too are Wilson’s reflections on life and relationships with others. He explains that, in order to effectively study Indigenous issues under an Indigenous research paradigm, the use and transmission of knowledge must be holistic in nature. As such, the role of storyteller rather than author/researcher is used as a culturally appropriate research device. Storytelling allows listeners to understand information within the context of the storyteller’s life, resulting in a better understanding of overarching messages.

Wilson adds to the effectiveness of his work by writing within the paradigm he seeks to describe. For example, two distinct writing styles are utilized throughout the book to provide both context and definition for the anonymous reader, a balance that Wilson explains is difficult to achieve. He maintains that the closer something comes to definition, the more it loses its context. Conversely, as something is put into context, it is removed from its definition (p. 8). To address this, a formal academic style is complemented by personal narratives addressed to Wilson’s three sons. It is through this unique style of writing that the reader is invited to develop a relationship with Wilson outside the confines of traditional academic discourse and experience firsthand the concepts of relationality and relational accountability, two components of paramount importance within an Indigenous research paradigm. The inclusion of the reader as an active participant in a relationship with
the reading/author exemplifies an Indigenous research paradigm in practice and is a novel technique that allows for a thorough understanding of the methodology at work.

If readers are still unclear about the cultural processes from which Indigenous methodologies stem, an extensive review of decolonizing literature provides further understanding. This book is presented as a culmination of the growing body of literature identifying the need for culturally appropriate research practices specific to Indigenous peoples. Wilson uses the influential work of Maori scholar Linda Smith, from her book Decolonizing Methodologies (2006), in addition to that of other notable Indigenous scholars, as a starting point for his articulation of an Indigenous research paradigm. Wilson argues that such literature suggests a need to end Western claims of superiority over Indigenous ways of doing research, and to begin respecting knowledge generated as a result of Indigenous methodology (p. 16). It is within this context that Wilson intentionally refrains from justifying his work’s differences from Western conceptualizations of knowledge and embraces it for being uniquely Indigenous.

While it is clear that differences between the proposed Indigenous research paradigm and traditional western paradigms exist, this gap is narrowing. Much of what Wilson proposes closely parallels community-based participatory research, a research design quickly growing in popularity among scholars. Community-based participatory research has been shown to be particularly effective at honouring the research needs and desires of Indigenous communities (Castleden et al. 2008; Fletcher 2003; LaVeaux and Christopher 2009). Interestingly, much of its effectiveness stems from the relational accountability between researchers and community partners. With recognition of community-based participatory principles becoming widely accepted, the strength and applicability of the Indigenous methodologies described by Wilson are evident.

Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods is an important contribution to the growing field of Indigenous research. Through self-reflection, storytelling, and relationship building, Wilson effectively demonstrates the ceremony that is Indigenous research and highlights the importance of both relationality and relational accountability that typically remain absent from western research paradigms. The scope and delivery of Wilson’s thesis provides an excellent account of Indigenous research methodologies, making it an important read for those with an interest in decolonizing geographical research.

References