

# **INTRODUCING MAINSTREAM PSYCHOLOGY TO NATIVE STUDENTS WHOSE FEET ARE IN TWO VESSELS**

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## **Abstract / Résumé**

Many Native university students find themselves caught in a cultural conflict between their heritage and the tenets of scientific psychology. We describe our experience of adapting introductory psychology to a Native institution of higher learning in terms of basic assumptions distinguishing the two cultural traditions. Given the students' sense of place, we provide examples of modifications in instructional processes and course content that we made to bridge the cultural gaps and we discuss implications for psychology.

Beaucoup d'étudiants indigènes d'université se trouvent en conflit culturel entre leur héritage et les principes de la psychologie scientifique. Nous décrivons notre expérience d'adapter l'introduction à la psychologie à un établissement indigène post-secondaire en termes de suppositions de base distinguant les deux traditions culturelles. Étant donné le sens d'endroit des étudiants, nous fournissons des exemples de modifications des processus d'instruction et du contenu de cours que nous avons fait pour établir les liens culturels et nous discutons des implications pour la psychologie.

From Fall 1993 to April 1997 we taught introductory psychology to Native students enrolled in a university access program at the Six Nations Polytechnic (SNP), located on the reserve south of Brantford, Ontario. Richard, a non-Native Professor of Psychology at Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU), was the instructor until April 1999. Pam, who is a Mohawk, a resident of the community, and holds an MA in community psychology from WLU, was the co-instructor for the first four years. Pam was responsible for coaching individual students on course assignments, for providing Native content, and for assisting Richard in becoming aware of Native culture and history.

The Native University Access Program provides Native students with an opportunity to take bona fide, first-year university courses at a Native-run institution, SNP, with mainly Native instructors on Native territory. Besides WLU, four universities in southern Ontario contribute a university course in other disciplines to the access program, which seems to be successful. A recent, small-scale evaluation of the program showed that the majority of one cohort of access students stated that they were not apprehensive about attending a non-Native university and did not anticipate being discriminated against in that environment (Abotossaway, 2002).

The program administrators, understandably, are concerned about the students' transition to mainstream campuses after they complete their first year at SNP. Accordingly, we structured the two-term introductory psychology course along standard lines to provide the students with as close to a conventional introductory psychology experience as possible. We organized monthly quizzes, consisting of standard multiple-choice questions and short-answer essays; library research assignments; and a final exam structured like the quizzes. The class met weekly for three hours, 13 weeks per term. In addition, Pam provided weekly tutorial sessions and also was available for telephone consultations with the access students. Typically, the students used these opportunities to prepare for test-taking.

With respect to content, we used a popular text that had been adopted by all colleagues teaching this course at WLU (Myers, 1995). Because the course is intended to be equivalent to the WLU offering, it is not focused on Native psychology, even if such an orientation was culturally appropriate. Consequently, we covered Native issues and perspectives in relation to individual chapters in the textbook. But, thanks in large measure to student feedback, we incorporated activities in every class, such as small-group discussions, to enhance the opportunity for experiential learning, which is the preferred learning style for many Native students (Couture, 1987, 1991; Wilson, 1994). Generally, the stu-

dents performed at an average (C+) level in the course, which corresponds to non-Native students' performance at WLU. Very few access students, however, subsequently majored in psychology; instead, they selected a discipline from the humanities and social sciences, Indigenous studies, or business programs at one of the five cooperating universities.

Across the years that we taught the course, class sizes ranged from 30 to 14, depending on access program enrollments. The students mainly were from the local community. Generally, they had attended elementary school on the reserve but high school in neighboring White communities, typically Brantford. For many of the students, issues of identity-loss and "ethno-stress" (i.e., "the stress that occurs when the cultural beliefs or joyful identity of a people are disrupted," Antone, Miller, & Myers, 1986, p. 1) were palpable and unmistakable. Typically, the students' parents, older relatives, and grandparents were oppressed by such infamous, systemic aspects of Canadian colonialism as reserves, residential schools, and a child welfare policy of "scooping" Native children from their homes. These psychosocial realities mirror the quality of social integration of Native peoples in general with respect to social structures, poverty, health, and education (Barsh, 1994).

Considering the students' backgrounds, we understand them as having their feet in two vessels – one boat, the canoe, carries Native traditions, values, and beliefs, while the other boat, the vessel with sails, carries the dominant White culture (Johnson, 1996). The metaphor of two vessels stems from the historical agreement of the Two-Row Wampum Treaty Belt since first contact in the 17th century. This agreement signifies that White cultures and Native cultures are of equal value and should travel parallel to each other, like two unique vessels. However, for the contemporary Native student, having one foot in each of the vessels, one of which is culturally foreign, is risky to one's sense of balance, literally and figuratively. Precarious balance is particularly problematic, given that one of the effects of colonization has been the denigration of Indigenous ways of knowing. Some students in the access program seemed more aware than others of the cultural balancing act demanded of them from straddling two boats when taking an introductory psychology course.

In fact, the literature indicates that Native students enrolled in non-Native college and university courses can experience acute cultural dissonance. Ryan (1995), for example, found that Native students attending a nursing preparation and BScN programs in an urban centre experienced adaptation difficulties. Attending to family concerns, securing housing, managing finances, and dealing with racism inhibited

the students' capacity to concentrate on their schoolwork. In an interview study of 67 Native students at a post-secondary institution the students reported that they had difficulties with budgeting their time, taking notes in classes, preparing for tests, managing stress, and dealing with family pressures (E. Danziger, 1996). They recommended better preparation for Native students and better support for them on campus.

From her experience teaching a large Introductory Psychology to a mixed class of Native and non-Native students, Wilson (1994) emphasized that the quality of the professor-student relationship is crucial for the academic success of Native post-secondary students. This relationship is sustained by the virtues of humility, caring, and respect. As an expression of respect, Wilson argued that instructional effectiveness is also dependent upon professors' cultural awareness and their incorporation of opportunities for active learning, inasmuch as active experimentation is likely to be Native students' preferred learning style. In this regard she initiated one-hour, informal "catch-up sessions" three times per week for the Native students from which she reported they benefited greatly.

At the core of the adaptational difficulties many Native college and university students experience while attending non-Native institutions is the demanding nature of balancing the two cultural traditions. Couture (1987) discussed "the Native struggle with value reinterpretation and identity redefinition" (p. 179) in relation to the cultural clash between Native and Western values and behaviour. He noted that, because of Canadian society's historical imposition of an alien educational philosophy and pedagogical practices on Aboriginal people, there has been a gap in developing culturally-respectful educational foundations for Aboriginal students. Couture argued that conventional educational theory and practices were culturally insensitive:

Much of mainstream psychology, for example, is based on a reductionistic/mechanistic model of human behaviour, which has had a direct and disproportionate influence on modern educational theory and practice. The reductionist oriented mind, as natives are concerned, is arrogant, patronizing, insensitive, excessively systematized, ignorant of other ways of knowing. (p. 191)

The challenge for university education is to develop in non-Native instructors culturally-sensitive understanding of Native ways. Couture (1987) advocated that educators working with Native students foster the development of both "right-brain" and "left-brain" abilities, intuitive as well as analytical capacities, to meet the students' basic psychological processes, if educators wish to be effective with Native students. In

addition, he recommended experiential learning and Freirean problem-posing education as a fundamental learning strategy: “[L]earning has to be personalized in order to develop the intuitive and analytical aspects of human mind...” (Couture, 1991, p. 65). By contrast, the conventional objectivistic mind, as concretized in implementation of the scientific method, “fails to perceive and esteem another mind that is characteristically intuitive, actively metaphoric, and symbolic in expression, in addition to being analytical” (p. 187).

In this primarily philosophical paper we compare the two cultural traditions regarding knowledge production or “science,” drawing from the work of Native scholars Pam Colorado (1988), Joseph Couture (1987, 1991), Vine Deloria (1992, 1994), and James Dumont (1988). Then we discuss some of the modifications in course content and instructional processes that we constructed in our struggles to bridge the cultural gaps between the students’ social locations and White psychology. Lastly, we briefly identify some implications for mainstream psychology’s scientific foundations. However, we make no claim to represent the totality of diverse Native views; rather, we present only what we have come to understand, which stems mainly from an Iroquoian perspective. In addition, this is not a paper that provides empirical evidence for the effectiveness of curriculum changes in the access program related to student achievement in subsequent psychology courses at mainstream universities.

## **Contrasting Scientific Worldviews**

In her master’s thesis, which is a critique of the colonialist research approach, Pam Johnson (1996) identified four core values and epistemological beliefs on which the “Two Rows” differ.

First, the spiritual and the sacred are primary in the Native worldview (Dumont, 1988). By spirit, we mean an everlasting life-force, giving purpose and direction. Spirit also means a personal guardian and guide to a parallel reality in dreams and visions. Consequently, “the search for truth and learning is a spiritual relationship between the individual and the Creator” (Colorado, 1988, p. 56). This viewpoint is the antithesis of the Western assumptions of materialist causality and determinism. In the modernist vision of objective science, religion and the spirit are sharply separated from scientific theory and practice (Walsh-Bowers, 2000).

A second characteristic of Native ways of knowing is holistic vision, that is, acknowledging the totality and interconnectedness of all things in nature. This viewpoint is the antithesis of the Western assumption of

reductionism, in which the whole is merely the sum of its individual parts. Furthermore, Native knowing is a union of intuition, insight, and feeling with empirical sensing and rational thought in relation to the knower's concrete environment and sense of place in that environment (Colorado, 1988; Dumont, 1988).

A related characteristic is the profoundly ethical nature of Native ways of knowing. A genuine understanding of the interrelatedness of all creation and of one's place in the created world evoke an internal devotion to balance, harmony, and respect for all creation. Relationships are the person, as humans are believed to be dependent on all other creatures. Consequently, a person's ethical responsibility is to cooperate with the Creator's master plan of sharing, honesty, humility, and courage (Johnson, 1996).

A fourth characteristic is the Native emphasis on subjective ways of knowing, including prayer, visions, dreams, and meditation, as well as observation, conversations with elders, interspecies communication, and knowledge of the prophecies and ceremonies (Colorado, 1988; Deloria, 1992; Dumont, 1988). These personal media provide communication with both the spiritual and material realms. This viewpoint is the antithesis of the Western assumption of objectivism with its cleft between science and spirit, and observer and observed (Walsh-Bowers, 2000).

In sum, Native knowing is spiritual and centred on relationships and the interconnectedness of nature. As Couture (1991) put it, "Native awareness and perception is of the spiritual as belonging to this world, and not to some beyond. This is the stuff of 'earth spirituality'" (p. 60). In fact, "central to Native knowledge is the concept of a direct experience of nature, the principle of the spiritual immanent in creation, in direct relationship with Nature" (p. 63). Thus, spirit and matter are not dualities as they are in the Cartesian mode that has predominated in Western thought since the Enlightenment. Furthermore, relationality is pivotal to Native knowing: "In traditional perception, nothing exists in isolation, everything is relative to every other being or thing" (p. 59). Consequently, rather than polarities, "rational knowledge and intuition, spiritual insight and physical behaviour" (p. 57) are irreducibly united in Native knowing, which shares certain characteristics with feminist, self-in-relation theories (e.g., Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991).

## **Balancing the Two Cultural Traditions**

Before describing the androgogical challenges we faced in course content, it is important to acknowledge some fundamental dimensions that vitally affect central course processes. These core dimensions are

the students' "personal geography" and our personal approach to teaching by which we attempted to foster respectful relationships among the instructors and the students. In fact, it is from these relationships and resultant student feedback that we gradually learned to suit the course to the students' needs.

First and foremost is the Native students' sense of place. The course is taught on home territory for most of the students. As community members, they enter the classroom environment on familiar turf with a rooted feeling of security that enables them to maintain their unique cultural voice. This foundation serves to ensure that discussion of culture-based teachings in relation to standard topics in introductory psychology is acceptable, if the students so desire.

The second core dimension is fostering respectful relationships between instructors and students, as stressed by Wilson (1994). Our primary responsibility was to nurture a classroom climate of respect for differences in worldviews and personalities. Because personal relationships are well-worn paths to knowing for these students, and some freely share personal experiences related to course content, Richard also let them know who he is as a person. This type of humble student-instructor relationship facilitates mutual learning and student openness to becoming acquainted with scientific psychology. The result was that the students and the instructors collectively worked at fostering an interpersonal climate of trust, acceptance, and humility.

We particularly endeavored to cultivate a safe, interpersonal environment for the students to respond to the course content regarding those topics where cultural clashes can occur, such as child development and dreams. For example, thanks to students' feedback in our first year of the program, Richard cautioned students ahead of time about topic areas that could be threatening to them, so that they could prepare themselves emotionally and choose to absent themselves, if necessary. For instance, he would state something like, "Warning: There will be potentially painful material next week on substance abuse." Then at the start of the next class he gave a reminder about this topic coming up, again to provide students with an opportunity to choose how they wished to cope with their intense feelings about yet another manifestation of the effects of colonialism.

Another key aspect of course processes was the need to shift to an active-learning mode versus mainly lecturing, as noted by Couture (1987, 1991) and Wilson (1994). Many Native students' learning styles differ from the standard scientific reasoning approach common in the dominant society, although there is a wide variety of learning styles among the students. Many students feel more comfortable with concrete ex-

amples, classroom demonstrations and activities, and small-group discussions. From that experiential base they can more easily make abstractions. The difference between Richard's inclinations for abstract thinking and lecturing without much dialogue with the students on the one hand and the students' learning preferences on the other hand remained an instructional challenge for him. The highly personal teaching approach demanded of Richard heightened his sense of discomfort with his own well-established intellectual style of conveying course content. Eventually, he was able to shift to being fully present with head, heart, and spirit in the classroom, but not without considerable self-monitoring and constructive feedback from Pam. His exposure to the ceremonial life of the community at the "graduation" ceremonies for the access students enhanced his own process of acculturation.

As to course content, our constant concern was to uphold the legitimacy of Native experiences and Native ways of knowing that the students inferred from the textbook are characterized as "unscientific," hence not genuine psychology. One attempt to achieve the goal of validating the students' own experiences was to identify as problematic the cultural clashes between North American psychology as an explicitly materialist science, founded on linear thinking, and a Native worldview centered on spirituality and rooted in circular thinking about the created world. Frankly, many of the students found scientific psychology alien, because for them it is narrow in scope and spiritless. Others were quite anxious about their family members and friends regarding them as losing their traditional beliefs and ways, if they became too familiar with and absorbed scientific psychology's concepts.

Following are four examples of how we tried to balance content:

1. When covering developmental theories, we pointed out in Piaget's model the devaluing of animism and pretend-play, which he contended was characteristic of the pre-operational stage of cognitive development. For many Native people, in contrast, animist beliefs and play are valid dimensions of maturity throughout their life-span. In this way we attempted to support the authenticity of the students' own cultural understanding of child development.

2. Beginning with coverage of developmental phenomena and then throughout the course we noted that for Native people living in Native communities "family" means what Western people call the "extended" family, not the so-called nuclear family. Thus, as the Native students know from their own experience, aunts and uncles and grandparents can serve as "parents" for the children, cousins may be considered brothers and sisters, and sometimes children will live with relatives for a period of time. This large web of supportive relatives provides a firm sense



of security for all. Living physically close to one another is important. Consequently, a Native person's very identity is consciously bound up with one's (extended) family and community (Connors, 1996).

3. When discussing "the limits of intuition and common sense" and ESP, the text author (Myers, 1995), like many psychologists, appears to conflate the term "intuition" with faulty common sense. We asserted in class that intuition is often an unconscious alternate path of knowing, and it is actually intrinsic to all creative work including *scientific* discovery (Mitroff, 1974). Moreover, the Native notion of the unity of body, mind, and spirit and Native people's intimate experiences with another, paranormal level of reality all contradict the conventional view adopted by mainstream psychologists on ESP. We indicated to the class that the position of some Native scholars is that there are two separate but concurrent and simultaneous realities: sensory reality and clairvoyant reality. Each is a valid path to perceiving the world. Similarly, dreams provide access to the other reality; it is the soul of the person that moves about in the non-ordinary reality, and dreams provide contact with the spirit-world (Dumont, 1988).

4. "Personality" is also fundamentally different within the Native worldview and transcends the individualist-collectivist distinction made in cross-cultural psychology. Consequently, in presenting differing conceptions of personality, we included Native perspectives. For example, the four personal systems of body, mind, heart, and spirit are united within one circular concept. This view differs from linear, compartmentalized, despiritualized thinking. As one of our students explained to the class, the heart—the *real* self—incorporates the will for intending and decision-making, the mind for thoughts and planning, and the emotions for feelings.

Practically, with the heart as the all-encompassing metaphor or image, interpersonal decision-making for Native people is not a mere cognitive process but "heartful," inasmuch as intimate relationship comes before all else. When the Native person experiences respect in the form of empathic listening by others, he or she feels more self-reliant and more capable of problem-solving through intuition. Furthermore, Native people value external, observable behavior, which masks people's hidden feelings, less than they value understanding what is in a person's heart. Intuition is the road to this understanding.

### **Implications for Western Psychology**

Upon reflection, we discerned congruence between the Native students' struggles with mainstream psychology and post-modernist trends

in the discipline. Diversity theory (Trickett, Watts, & Birman, 1993), the emergence of Indigenous psychologies (Kim & Berry, 1994), feminist theories such as self-in-relation (Jordan et al., 1991), the restoration of spirit and incipient critique of pure materialism in psychology (Walsh-Bowers, 2000), and democratizing psychology (Sampson, 1991) all resonate to some degree with Native perspectives. These conceptual connections aid Richard considerably in addressing the cultural boundaries of Western psychology to mainstream students when he teaches the history of psychology course at WLU. In fact, drawing from his rich experience at SNP with its significant impact on his identity as a White psychologist inspired him to author a paper for a special issue of the *Journal of Community Psychology* on developing the relationship between community psychology, which is one applied subdiscipline of psychology, and religion and spirituality (Walsh-Bowers, 2000). In this article Richard argued that scientific psychologists cannot achieve rapprochement with religion and spirituality until they abandon their discipline's historical position as a purely objective science, denigrating subjectivity, soul, spirit, and spirituality.

We also realized that Native psychology students' valiant attempts to keep their balance while straddling two vessels were distressing because of the nature of the discipline's philosophy of science. Psychology's scientific conventions were quite alien to many of our students, who were struggling to be at peace with their Native identity in an academic world. For example, the Western scientific project is founded on an epistemology of realism. Its assumptions are that there is a universal external reality that is subject to capture by the objective observer and the personhood of the observer should play no role in the quest to hold an unblemished mirror up to reality. Furthermore, the doctrine of realism dictates that scientific activity is value-free, apolitical, and ahistorical; that is, the social historical context should have no effect on the uncovering of universal truths.

Furthermore, a common definition of psychology, at least in North America, is "Psychology is the study of human behaviour and mental life." Historically, this definition is derived from centuries of European, *linear* thinking. In contrast, the way of knowing and being in the created world among Native people is circular and holistic. Even a modified relational definition, such as "Psychology is the empirical study of the person's experience with her or his meaningful environment," misses the central relationship to spirit and the created world of land, heavens, plants, rocks, insects, birds, and mammals. The Native way entails connectedness with all of the created world, nurturing the inter-relatedness of all beings, and respecting everyone's experience as well as one's own

subjectivity. Therefore, the ultimate goal of Native knowing becomes living in harmony, balance, and peace with all of the created world.

Rather than focusing exclusively on objective matter, Native knowers are likely to centre and ground what and how they know in their direct experience and their spirituality. Rather than completely adopting the stance of the detached, superior observer, Native students are inclined to spiritual understanding and relationship in their approach to scientific inquiry. For them, science must be directly connected with people's lives and must provide concrete answers to the question, "What good is it doing?"

In conclusion, there is much that academic and applied psychologists can learn about culturally appropriate, knowledge production from the various Native peoples. Moreover, our experience in the classroom suggests that applications to Native students of much of standard psychology's theories, research, and practices can be limited in value if not culturally inappropriate. Mainstream psychologists might claim that their current textbooks incorporate cultural diversity in relation to basic processes, such as the influence of cultural variations on perception, and in applications of psychology, such as principles of multicultural counselling. It is true that as instructors we could render even conditioning theories relevant by considering applications to the Native students' experiences, for example, in training their domestic animals and pets. However, adding and stirring cultural diversity to an intellectual soup the base of which is Western stock is not the same as, for example, Iroquoian "three sisters soup" (corn, beans, and squash) in which the basic ingredients are Indigenous natural products. That is, cross-cultural psychology is but one of several perspectives on human diversity; moreover, it is a framework from which "research efforts are much more likely to seek validation of dominant-group psychological concepts on non-dominant groups than vice-versa" (Watts, 1992, p. 120). Indigenous psychologies (Kim & Berry, 1994) represent a different approach to diversity in that they respect cultural relativity. Thus, the position we take is supported by the accumulated evidence for both Native ways of knowing and the socially constructed nature of conventional psychological theory, research, and practice (e.g., K. Danziger, 1997; Sampson, 1991; Walsh-Bowers, 1999). Rather than abstractly universalizable and unproblematic, scientific psychology, even with cultural diversity added to it, is a social product of time and place with inherent cultural limitations.

Unfortunately, there seems to be very little literature, at least in mainstream psychology, on teaching the discipline to Native students, let alone on the formidable difficulties in doing so. For instance, perusing

the most recent decade of annual annotated bibliographies published in *Teaching of Psychology* revealed no articles on the subject. Psychologists who teach Native students, therefore, might prepare themselves for understanding how to deal with the inevitable cultural clashes by consulting the sources referenced in this paper (e.g. Colorado, 1988; Couture, 1987, 1991; Deloria, 1994; Locust, 1988), as well as multidisciplinary journals, such as this one and the *American Indian Quarterly*. For example, Berry (1999) discussed the negative influences of non-Native society and the positive influences of Native societies that lead to both negative and positive consequences for Native persons, such as cultural identity. In this regard, it is important to respect the diversity of adaptation to biculturalism among Natives in Canada. As Couture (1987) stated:

It is widely agreed that Natives today live on a continuum ranging from highly acculturated urban Natives through to traditional outback Natives. This continuum is manifested in many different languages (including English and French) and in many different customs and traditions. It includes those groups who exhibit varying degrees of cultural and social breakdown, personal disorganization, and near complete identity loss among their members. Many factors contribute to this diversity, which derives largely from legal and regional differences, different histories of inter-tribal relationships, and Native/white relationships mediated through a variety of dominant social institutions (p. 179).

Equally valuable for effective educational planning for Native students is recognition of the distinctive characteristics of traditional Native values (Couture, 1987) versus the self-contained individualism characteristic of Western societies and scientific psychology in particular (Sampson, 1988). As we discussed above, these central values include the connectedness of all aspects of nature, psychic rootedness in the land and one's personal geography, the sense of belonging to a collectivity, an emphasis on the intersubjectivity of persons in relationships, and spirituality at the core of all experience. These values express themselves psychologically within diverse Native nations in the behavioural domains of family life, the role of elders, consensual decision-making, and the use of analogy instead of straight-forward logical thinking. In view of the cultural gaps between Native students' traditions and Western ways, non-Native instructors will likely be more effective in educating Native students about mainstream psychology to the extent that they can straddle the two distinct cultural vessels as competently as their students.

### Notes

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The authors are grateful to Edward Connors and the reviewers for their comments. Please address all enquiries to Richard Walsh-Bowers, Department of Psychology, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3C5, Canada; e-mail: <rwalshb@wlu.ca>.

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