



Matters of Note

Reconciling Indigenous knowledges and Western scholarship. Is it possible?



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Indigenous Insights aims to shed light on Indigenous knowledges by addressing some key issues that surround them and explain why and how they are not simply applicable to Indigenous peoples, but have relevance and importance to integrative health and healing for all peoples.

The American Psychological Association's (APA) Council of Representatives, the governing body responsible for approving all APA policy statements, recently voted to reconcile Indigenous and psychological science; subsequently releasing a policy statement to this effect.

It is very heartening to see that at this moment in humanity's history, one of the most well-known psychological establishments has acknowledged Indigenous perspectives are a necessary part of developing "a more inclusive and holistic understanding of human behaviour and wellbeing" and that they also "provide a richer toolkit for psychology" (1, p. 1).

As an Indigenous scholar, I do concur that key to understanding any phenomena, especially what it means to be human, is recognising there are a multitude of lenses, all coloured by often very different socio-political-cultural histories, through which any phenomena can be interpreted.

But, I equally wonder whether Indigenous knowledges can authentically have a place in institutions such as Western psychological science, or indeed in Western scholarship in general? In making this statement, I am certainly not undervaluing the relevance and importance of Indigenous knowledges to the human experience and indeed to more deeply understanding a range of phenomena. Much of my recent publication history has been devoted to delineating what Indigenous knowledges are and to raising awareness about the importance and relevance they have. Inherent to Indigenous knowledges is wisdom that is much needed in this world, at this time.

In making the above statement, I am instead questioning whether Western scholarly institutions are ready for the ontological shift that it will take to endorse Indigenous knowledges as legitimate repositories of wisdom. I do not say this to dampen the spirit with which many people and institutions are now recognising the exciting possibilities that exist when apparently diverse perspectives are brought together. I say this because my experiences suggest that this may remain challenging.

'Finding Common Ground' or maintaining uncommon ground?

Two years ago, I gave a very brief oral presentation alongside several

other international peers as part of a symposium at a conference that was themed that year as 'Finding Common Ground'. I gave my presentation the title: *Being an expert. Who gets to decide?* and with only seven minutes to speak, I began by discussing that there remains a tension within and among some disciplines and scholarly communities about the interest Indigenous knowledges are being given, and how such tension seems to be focussed on a number of unfounded assumptions related to the idea that Indigenous knowledges are 'not science'. I spoke about how in Aotearoa New Zealand, debates about science and Indigenous knowledges have been elevated in recent years and are much along these lines, providing an example of an open letter that was penned in 2021 by seven prominent scientists suggesting that Indigenous Māori knowledges, known commonly as *mātauranga*, were 'not science'.¹⁰ The letter ignited quite a reaction across academia and beyond in Aotearoa New Zealand! Naturally, Indigenous Māori academics responded steadfastly, listing many ways that Indigenous Māori knowledges are obtained by methods and processes similar to those of science, and also the many ways the letter incites biased and unfounded racist assumptions about Indigenous peoples.^{11,14,15} As well as the wide within-country objection to the open letter, the debate went international. A prominent UK-based biologist waded in,³ as did a very well-known billionaire.¹³

Only half-way through my presentation, I then went on to highlight how such claims reflect a lack of understanding about Indigenous knowledges. A case in point are the statements that Indigenous knowledges are simply 'myths.' While they do indeed represent a form of story-telling, it is story-telling with the purpose of transmitting knowledge, which of course is a form of what we would now consider to be 'science communication'. Yet, it is story-telling that uses metaphor – emotive and counter-intuitive metaphor to transmit knowledge in a memorable way. In psychology, the power of narrative, particularly that which is emotive and minimally counter-intuitive, is recognised as an important component of memory recollection.^{5,9} Equally, such 'myths' are often contextualised and place-based understandings about, for example, local ecology and how it can be best sustained.⁶

I had practiced and timed my presentation down to the second, so knew I could get every last word of my pre-written talk out within the seven-minute timeslot. To my surprise, with one minute to go, the Chair interrupted and told me time was up. Nodding in acknowledgement, I nonetheless continued with my presentation, noting that claims made by scientists about the 'not science' nature of Indigenous knowledges have power. They persuade public opinion and inform societal discourses

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about the nature of reality. But also, because of the dominance and privileging of the scientific paradigm, at least in the Western world, the very role of ‘scientist’ means those fulfilling such roles are often bestowed the label of ‘expert’, which itself comes with an unspoken privilege. Anyone who does not have such a role may not be considered with the same esteem when speaking to specific phenomena. They would not necessarily be considered an expert.

I continued by stating that science is only one system of knowing and acquiring understandings. There are other systems of knowledge that may not use the same terminology or same methods of acquiring knowledge about phenomena, but they are still ways of knowing, being and understanding the nature of our material reality, and in some cases, these ways of knowing provide explanations that science currently cannot. Notwithstanding the ongoing debates about whether Indigenous knowledges constitute science or not, I discussed the importance of recognising that power and privilege exist in Western scholarship, and how as scholars it is important to reflect and be reflexive about our own positioning and the unconscious biases we bring to our scholarship. We must ask whether our scholarship perpetuates assumptions about science and expertise that are helpful or harmful, particularly to Indigenous peoples and their knowledges. We should not underestimate how we, as scholars, can play a role in changing societal discourses about knowledge, what constitutes knowledge and who gets to decide what knowledge is valued and what knowledge matters. Nor should we underestimate the role that it plays in framing who is an expert.

Then, I finished and sat down.

After several more presentations, it was time for the usual Q&A. My presentation yielded a couple of nice comments, and then one particularly emotive comment from a gentleman from South Africa, who indicated that such understandings of traditional wisdom were necessary but missing (in his opinion) in his country. To my surprise, the Chair interrupted and stated that Indigenous knowledges are nothing but myths and had no place in scholarship! I was stunned. My proverbial rug of expectation that the conference was a forum for ‘finding common ground’ had been pulled from under my feet in dramatic fashion.

Reflecting on that experience, it seems to me that not everyone is ready or willing to concede “that traditional wisdom has not been given equal power and weight as compared to mainstream epistemologies,”⁽¹⁾ (p. X) or entertain the idea that Indigenous knowledges might have any valence. What then does this mean for the reconciliation of Indigenous knowledges with Western scholarship?

To share, or not to share?

Furthermore, many Indigenous cultures’ knowledge systems are embedded in oral traditions. This may have been perceived as being due to Indigenous peoples not having a written language or script within which to encode their knowledge. Written word is often taken, at least in contemporary times, as a proxy for intelligence. Indeed, to have a written script is a form of intelligence and enables the transmission of information – yes, information (as opposed to wisdom). It is able to be read by anyone, at any time. But, it does not mean that the original intent of the knowledge that is written will be received in the way it was intended, or that it will be used for beneficial means.

Equally, the absence of a written system of communication should not be confused with a lack of knowledge or understanding or wisdom. Many Indigenous knowledges remain embedded in and transmitted through oral traditions – entirely by design. This is because some knowledges are considered so sacred, they are not readily shared with just anyone, and even when shared, they are often couched in terms that have meaning but cannot be so easily unravelled without the necessary details to unravel them! So, those ‘myths’ that the Chair from the conference appeared so unenthusiastic about, serve a very important function with regards to the acquisition and transmission of knowledges.

It is for this reason (combined with the epistemicide that occurred as a result of colonisation) that traditionally, at least in the culture of the

Indigenous Māori of Aotearoa New Zealand, there was reluctance to share Indigenous knowledges with those who may not have the wisdom to interpret and use such knowledge in appropriate ways. This is perhaps best described by a prominent Indigenous Māori leader, Māori Marsden (1992). After discussing how knowledge was not necessarily shared with ‘Tutuaa’ (the common herd) but only shared with selected apprentices who were taught and tested over time, he relayed a personal experience in which it became apparent why. Rather than paraphrase his story, it seems best that I leave him to tell it in his own words:

After the war, when I returned to the Wananga I was questioned by the elders of the Wananga about my war experiences. In the course of my sharing our experiences I mentioned the atom bomb. One of the elders who had of course heard of the atom bomb asked me to explain the difference between an atom bomb and an explosive bomb. I took the word ‘hihiri’ which in Maoridom means ‘pure energy’. Here I recalled Einstein’s concept of the real world behind the natural world as being comprised of ‘rhythmical patterns of pure energy,’ and said to him that this was essentially the same concept. He then exclaimed, “Do you mean to tell me that the Pakeha scientists (tohunga Pakeha) have managed to rend the fabric (Kahu) of the universe?”. “Yes.” “But do they know how to sew (tuitui) it back together again?” “No!” “That’s the trouble with sharing such ‘tapu’ knowledge, Tutuaa will always abuse it.” (7, p. 4)¹

While reconciling Indigenous knowledges with Western scholarship requires a sharing of knowledges, it also by necessity involves a recognition that not all knowledges can or should be shared. Could Western scholarship, including that of psychology, which acknowledges “traditional wisdom itself (e.g., language) should be protected and preserved whenever possible”⁽¹⁾ (p. 1), also acknowledge that such protection and preservation of traditional wisdom may not be the remit of Western scholarship? Indigenous peoples and their knowledges endure, despite most Indigenous communities (extinct and still living) being subject to extensive histories of colonisation. There is much Indigenous knowledges have to offer the world, and there is equally much that the world may not be ready to receive from Indigenous knowledges.

Sense or non-sense?

I have spent nearly twenty years researching exceptional experiences of consciousness, such as near-death experiences and end-of-life experiences, and the implications of such phenomena for understanding the nature of what is called in Western scholarship, ‘consciousness.’ Due to my positionality as an Indigenous scholar in this area, I am often called on to give presentations that encompass both areas – Indigeneity and consciousness. And so it was that recently, I was invited to give a presentation on Indigenous notions of consciousness (which, I might add, I thoroughly enjoyed).

In my presentation, I began by noting that there is not one single word in the Indigenous Māori language that readily and easily translates to consciousness. Rather, there are a number of terms. To understand these terms in their fullest sense, one must by necessity have an awareness of Māori ontologies, which is something I could not readily overview in the time I had available to me to present. So, I instead very briefly noted that Māori perspectives about the nature of reality, fundamentally acknowledged the existence of spirit as inherent in all things. And, this spirit comes from a singular source, which ultimately means that all phenomena are connected across time and space.¹²

To better elucidate an understanding of consciousness, I then gave an example. As an avid gardener, I often draw on my experiences in the garden, and indeed this is what I did in this talk. I stated that when I go

¹ In the above quote, the term ‘Pakeha’ refers to non-Māori People, often of caucasian descent. While the term ‘tapu’ is often referenced as meaning ‘sacred’ or ‘restricted’.

to harvest from my garden, I first seek permission to harvest from the plants. The response I receive is not one that I can easily articulate, but it is a response that is at first visceral with a cognitive interpretation attached to it. The Māori term I would use to describe this response is rongo, which means to 'sense.' This type of sensing occurs through four of the five modalities commonly espoused in Western understandings, including hearing, smell, touch, and taste. Sight is not covered by rongo, because there are other words that denote sight as seen through the eyes. Rongo also extends to a sixth sense, a type of intuitive consciousness. I explained that this is what is happening when I seek permission from plants to harvest – it is rongo in action. Colleagues of mine have utilised rongo as a method in their research, and invariably call this type of experience rongomātau,⁴ mauri hono,² and wānanga.⁸

Once permission is received, I thank the plants I am harvesting. Not in an obvious verbalized way so that others can hear me. Rather, my thanking is without audio. It is instead a thanking that is voiced in my head but expressed through my heart. I thank the plant for offering itself as a source of sustenance. Just as I interpret a signal that grants permission for me to harvest the plant, in return I transmit a signal to the plant to thank it. Why do I thank the plant? Because I believe that the plant senses my gratitude. We may not speak the same language verbally, but I do believe we mutually understand an energetic language, that in the Māori language we articulate as the term rongo. Rongo is but one example of a term that gives effect to the idea of consciousness as an awareness and responsiveness to one's surroundings. I cannot describe, at least not in scientific terms, the underlying mechanics of rongo. But, I can say that it is a type of conscious communication that, according to my subjective experience, works.

Or does it? Is it 'sense' or non-sense?

Could Western scholarship, such as psychology, which is "grounded in positivism and empiricism" and that (at least in the past) "assumes the methods and interpretations of the dominant science are superior to traditional Indigenous wisdom" (¹, p. 1), ever truly understand or endorse rongo as a form of knowledge acquisition and transmission that guides my interactions with plants (who I acknowledge as conscious beings of intelligence), and informs my behaviour as a gardener? And, if not, what does this mean for reconciling Indigenous knowledges with Western scholarship?

Conclusion

I am enthused by and applaud the commitment that institutions such as the APA have made to reconciling Indigenous knowledges with psychological science. Acknowledging that the story of what it means to be human has not always been told from more than a handful of perspectives, is a useful first step in this process. I also remain convinced of the value, meaning, and relevance that Indigenous knowledges have in contemporary times. Yet, experience reminds me of the need for respectful cautiousness. Reconciling Indigenous knowledges with Western scholarship will require reflexivity, tolerance, perhaps some compromises, on individual, systemic and societal levels. The APA (¹, p. 2) suggests that integrating "traditional wisdom from around the world with the conduct of psychological science can lead to a more equitable and culturally responsive discipline." I would like to think it could also

lead to a more equitable and culturally responsive world.

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Declaration of competing interest

None.

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