

Chapter 22

Researching Indigenous Ways of Knowing–and–Being: Revitalizing Relational Quality of Living

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on exploring the contributions of indigenous-oriented relational thinking-and-being in terms of implications for the quality of social living and for sustaining relationships with everything in our ecological niche. It offers an account of how we can treat Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) as envisaging socio-economic development differently from economic models of growth which thus far can be said to govern processes of globalization. The chapter attempts to demonstrate that resuscitating IKS is not so much a matter of researchers' documenting and respecting the content of indigenous knowledge that has been created to date. More important is to direct research with the aim of drawing out and revitalizing the styles of knowing and living that can be interpreted as characterizing indigeneity. Examples are provided of how research can be directed with this in mind.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I unpack the notions of indigenous knowledge and indigenous knowledge systems (IKS). I suggest that in the light of the unequal relationships between Western-styled ways of knowing and indigenous-oriented approaches, it is important for researchers to actively seek opportunities to revitalize what indigeneity has to offer in terms of the quality of knowing and being.¹ I aver in the chapter that this revitalization has implications for the quality of living not only in so-called developing countries, but also in developed ones. I suggest that while IKS can be seen to offer certain distinct ways of understanding human existence in the web of life (where everything is perceived as interconnected) there are possibilities for rapprochement between alternative styles of knowing, including more Western-oriented approaches. But this rapprochement requires a dialogue which is not set up as adversarial. I myself am English speaking South African – classified as “White” in terms of racialized categorizations – but I sympathize with an indigenous orientation (Romm, 2010, 2011, 2015a).

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Along with many indigenous authors, I argue that we should treat IKS as a system in which learning can take place across indigenous communities and across the globe. As far as cultural traditions in IKS are concerned, I suggest that these can be seen as containing a *number of options for interpretation and action*, rather than as providing fixed prescriptions for conduct. I propose that researchers should gear their research to drawing out (with others concerned) the potential for human connectedness with all living and nonliving things: in this way they can exercise their obligations as researchers to making a difference to our quality of living towards a “better” world.

I suggest that IKS can all too easily be rendered marginalized and its contents rendered “harmless” in terms of rethinking our styles of engagement with one another and with our natural environment (as Tuck & Yang too caution, 2014, p. 235). I therefore seek in the chapter, following Tuck and Yang, to draw out the *radical implications* – for developing and so-called developed countries alike – of respectful engagement with indigenous ways of knowing and living.

I am hoping that my discussion is inspirational for researchers – whether professional or lay researchers – involved in co-exploring the contributions of IKS in terms of possibilities for knowing and living (see also Romm, 2014a,b, 2015b). My objectives of the chapter are to:

- Offer deliberations around how we might create space for meaningful dialogue between indigenous and Western-oriented styles of knowing. These deliberations are based on my interpretation of relevant literature and of what I take to be illustrative examples. My deliberations are meant to *serve as an invitation to readers to reflect further upon what such dialoguing might involve in practice*.
- Offer considerations pertaining to how we can (as researchers) treat “tradition” as *open to evolution*. Again I offer interpretations of theoretical arguments, coupled with chosen examples, for readers to engage with.
- Present a “case” for directing research concerning IKS in such a way that it points to *radical possibilities for connected ways of knowing and living* – including revisiting capitalist modes of organizing “business”. The focus in this chapter is on how research (and researchers) indeed might serve to facilitate thinking around radical possibilities so that IKS is not rendered marginalized.

The chapter is not meant to offer any conclusive statements about theoretical frameworks or methodological options. It should be read as a story that I have created, which invites readers also to write into the story, by challenging it, modifying it, and extending it in terms of their understandings of theoretical positions and experiential contexts with which they are familiar. As Collins too advises, different contributors are seen as “writing missing parts to the other writer’s story” (2000, p. 38).

BACKGROUND

Mawere (2014) indicates that in the phrase “indigenous knowledge”, the word *indigenous* “literally means original, first, native to a place or aboriginal to an area” (p. 4). As noted in endnote 1, the term “indigenous” as born in a place is normally associated with non-European indigenous communities. Masemula (2013, p. 45) points out that a “common denominator among indigenous communities is that they have all been subjected to colonization at some point in their history”. Chilisa likewise specifies that an indigenous cultural group is a group of people whose cultural heritage differs from traditions that

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