

Chapter 8

Valuing Indigenous Research Paradigms in the Context of Language Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to justify the value of Indigenous research paradigms, specifically in the context of research on language acquisition. This argument has implications not only for research on language acquisition and the practice of language instruction but also for qualitative research, more broadly. Specifically, depending on the context of a given research project, it may be critical for educational researchers to value and respect Indigenous epistemologies and worldviews; otherwise, educational research endeavors may be adding to knowledge at the expense of devaluing research participants and local communities.

AN INDIGENOUS PARADIGM

To begin a discussion of an Indigenous methodological paradigm, one must first appreciate the over-arching premise of *relationality*. As Weber-Pillwax (2003) explained, “The foundation of Indigenous research lies in the reality of the lived Indigenous experience. Indigenous researchers ground their research knowingly in the lives of real persons as individuals and social beings, not in the world of ideas” (as cited in Wilson, 2008, p. 60). In this paradigm, “reality *is* [emphasis added]

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relationships or sets of relationships” (Wilson, p. 73). As Chilisa (2012) points out, this relationality applies not only to interpersonal relations but also to our interconnectedness with the land, spirituality, and the cosmos. Within an Indigenous paradigm, everything is connected; we are related to our research, the participants in the research, the ideas inherent in the research, the process of conducting the research, and the process of sharing the research. To illustrate, Wilson (2008) quoted his friend, Peter, who described Indigenous knowledge as a fish net: One could investigate the knots in the net to try to understand why it holds fish, but it is the strings between the knots that make it strong. The strings here represent the relationships with world around us. Relationality is the lens through which to view an Indigenous paradigm.

Like the net, the elements of a research methodology rooted in an Indigenous paradigm will not follow a linear path but are circular and interconnected (and sometimes overlapping). The visual representation of Wilson’s circle is reproduced below in Figure 1. Wilson (2008) explains that the epistemology that undergirds Indigenous research methodologies is essentially equivalent to Indigenous ontology. In other words, the understanding of reality and the understanding of knowledge (and the creation of knowledge) are inseparable:

In an Indigenous ontology there may be multiple realities, as in the constructivist research paradigm. The difference is that, rather than the truth being something that is “out there” or external, reality is in the relationship that one has with the truth... Thus, there is no one definite reality but rather different sets of relationships that make up an Indigenous ontology. Therefore, reality is not an object but a process of relationships, and an Indigenous ontology is actually the equivalent of an Indigenous epistemology. (p. 73)

Wilson (2008) explains that Indigenous ontology and epistemology can be seen clearly in the languages of many Indigenous people. Familial words illustrate this concept. In Cree, which is Wilson’s native language, the word used between great-grandparent and great-grandchild are the same, implying a non-hierarchical relationship. Another example is found in Cherokee, where the word for *cousin* can imply an extended relationship in the family or someone who is “kin” to me. In other words, the language describes the relationship between speakers; language does not simply label individuals. Wilson (2008) sees these linguistic illustrations as clear examples of an Indigenous ontology that emphasizes relationships and of Indigenous epistemology in which speakers learn this worldview through learning the language.

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