

LOCATION AND KNOWLEDGE- BUILDING: EXPLORING THE FIT OF WESTERN SOCIAL WORK WITH TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

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Introduction

In many regions of Canada, particularly the North, human services grounded in a Western social work model exist alongside Indigenous healing practices rooted in local traditional knowledge. For a long time, traditional knowledge was the only working knowledge base for survival in harsh northern climates. The relatively recent imposition of a Western scientific knowledge base has resulted in efforts to integrate or incorporate aspects of local traditional knowledge. Based on direct experience with this process within my own discipline of social work, I have attempted to explore issues of compatibility of the two knowledge systems with particular attention to the impact of place or spatial location.

My own frame of reference is important to clarify at the outset of this discussion. I am not an Indigenous person. I am a Caucasian male social worker and academic, a Canadian citizen by birth, with over two decades of experience as practitioner, researcher, and teacher of northern social work practice. While I am not a spokesperson for Indigenous knowledge, I do have some experience with the constraints of my own Western system that often inhibit our ability to approach, respect, and learn from Indigenous knowledge. It is from this perspective that I explore what Hardy and Mawhiney (1999) called “the ways that social work practice has been historically limited by its Eurocentric assumptions and values” (p. 360). Among those assumptions are conceptualizations of place.

Western Social Work

Social work developed within industrial urban society as a helping profession with a declared focus on the interaction between people and their environments. For much of our history, social workers trained as specialists defined by three levels of practice: casework, groupwork, and community work. In the past two decades, however, there has been a serious effort to unify the profession by developing a common base of knowledge, values, and skills. Social workers are now trained as generalist practitioners with a framework of skills and perspectives that allows them to work with diverse groups of clients through a variety of social agency settings.

One of the clearest treatments of social work practice models was put forward by Germain and Gitterman (1980) who explained that a practice model consists of four components:

Metaphor	a paradigm or world view; an outlook applied to the world to give meaning to events
Social Purpose	the way the world should be; the goal; desired or preferred circumstances following from the metaphor

Conceptual Framework	a way of thinking; concepts for assessing everyday situations consistent with the metaphor
Practice Method	actually doing something; acting upon the world to accomplish the social purpose.

Generalist practice, according to Germain and Gitterman, was rooted in a metaphor of ecology, “an adaptive, evolutionary view of human beings in constant interchange with all aspects of their environment” (p. 5). Here, the desired state of affairs involved a goodness-of-fit between people and their environments where both could prosper. The specific social purpose of social work was declared to be “to strengthen adaptive capacities of individuals and primary groups, and to influence environments so that transactions promote growth and development” (p. 28). The conceptual framework advanced by Germain and Gitterman (1980) involved forms of life stress experienced when there was an imbalance between personal resources and environmental demands. The actual practice method of generalist social work practice consists of a sequential problem-solving approach requiring definition of the problem and roles, assessment, intervention, and evaluation of outcomes. There have been many subsequent texts on generalist social work practice, but the major components of the dominant generalist model (metaphor, social purpose, conceptual framework, and practice method) remain intact.

Turner (1999) examined the theoretical base of contemporary Canadian social work practice and concluded that our knowledge base was rich, broad, and diverse. He identified nearly thirty different bodies of theory that drive effective social work practice, including Aboriginal Theory in this list (p. 27). In his search for common threads or patterns among the identified theory bases, Turner (1999) asserts that each one “attempts to address some aspect of the person-in-environment situation, the uniting thrust of social work practice” (p. 27).

Traditional Knowledge and Healing

Traditional knowledge has often been presented in the mainstream literature as a potential resource for the management of wildlife and other renewable resources (Inglis, 1993; Ferguson, Williamson, & Messier, 1998; Freeman & Carbyn, 1988). Huntington (1998) defined "Traditional Ecological Knowledge" as

the system of experiential knowledge gained by continual observation and transmitted among members of a community. It is set in a framework that encompasses both ecology and the interactions of humans and their environment on physical and spiritual planes. (p. 237-238)

For an introduction to a broader conceptualization of traditional knowledge, I turn to the words of Dr. Pamela Colorado and Dr. Elisabeth Sahtouris. By the definitions of Western science, Dr. Sahtouris is a biologist and Dr. Colorado is a social work educator; yet, both women were involved in founding the Worldwide Indigenous Science Network. As explained by Colorado (1991):

When I look around at what I had learnt through my education, I asked myself what, in western society, carries the weight that our indigenous knowledge does in ours? What is equivalent in terms of the value that we put on our knowledge systems, including the ritual and all that's in it? I concluded that it had to be science, not religion or philosophy, for it seemed to me that science is held in such high esteem in the west. (p. 21)

Just what is the content of this Indigenous science? Is it a body of stored knowledge? Is it a method? Is it an approach to nature? Or some combination? Using the categorizations of Western science, Dr. Sahtouris (1992) explained how Indigenous science

includes biology, geology, astronomy, navigation, meteorology, botany, medicine/pharmacology, psychology, agricultural engineering, plant genetics, ecology, social and political sciences [and] is based on thousands of years of observations and experiments in living nature...It is not a

science that stands apart from nature to look at it objectively; it does not eliminate the sacred, but integrates it. It fosters dialogue between humans and the rest of nature. (p. 4)

Dyck (1996) agreed that “Aboriginal science openly advocates a spiritual aspect” (p. 97) that is absent from conventional Western science. She argues that the failure to recognize a spiritual domain in Western science renders invisible crucial aspects of the creative process (insights, dream messages, intuition). Further elaboration from Colorado (1991) identifies the centrality of spirituality, natural energies, and place within traditional knowledge:

If you want definitions of what indigenous science is: some people have called it natural science, others have called it life science, some have called it woman science, but for my own purposes, I go back to *sciens/scientia*, which means “to know” in its largest sense. Native science is a way of bringing people to a higher knowledge, and one of its goals is to bring us to the *Gii Lai* – ‘the still quiet place.’ In other words, our religion and our spirituality are built into it. Another thing that can be said is that native scientists, through their rituals and songs, etc. are working all the time with energies – the energies of the earth – in a way which is just as precise as the ways western scientists work. (p. 21)

From his perspective as a theoretical physicist within the Western scientific tradition, Peat (1994) explored Indigenous Science as an alternative way of knowing the world and acting in a healing capacity. He concluded that the approach to knowledge within Indigenous Science “is profoundly different from that of its Western counterpart” (p. 56) because traditional knowledge is “an ongoing process better represented by the activity of coming-to-knowing than by a static noun” (p. 55). In this way, Peat came to accept that Indigenous science could not be understood in isolation from other aspects of life; it “remains inseparable from the cohesive whole, from a way of being and of coming-to-knowing” (p. 241). Obviously a difficult concept to express in the English language, this “coming-to-knowing” (Peat, 1994) or “to know in its largest sense” (Colorado, 1991) appears central to the process of traditional knowledge.

Coming-to-knowing means entering into relationship with

the spirits of knowledge, with plants and animals, with beings that animate dreams and visions, and with the spirit of the people. As in all relationships, agreements must be made and obligations and responsibilities entered into with the spirits. Thus, when a person comes into relationship with certain knowledge, he or she is not only transformed by it but must also assume responsibility for it. (Peat, 1994, p. 65)

Social Work, Traditional Knowledge, and Place

The overall worldview of Western science has been described as “mechanical” when compared with the “organic” perspective of Indigenous peoples (Sahtouris, 1992, p. 3). Peat (1994) explained that “Indigenous science deals with connection, harmony, and relationship rather than with the mechanical influence of forces on bodies” (p. 253). Colorado (1993) attributed the “great imbalance” between Western and Indigenous peoples to “linear thought which emphasizes separation and hierarchy ... [and shapes] the mind so powerfully that Western-thinking people often confuse linearity with reality” (p. 93). Deloria (1973) connected Western linearity with a lost sense of place when he argued for recognition of an American Indian “spatial dimension” to history rather than the standard “recording of a linear time sequence” (p. 150). With specific reference to the helping professions, Hart (1996) explained the contrast in this way:

Western models of healing separate and detach individuals from their social, physical and spiritual environments, isolating “patients” for treatment purposes and then re-introducing them into the world. Traditional healers are concerned with balancing emotional, physical, mental, spiritual, aspects of people, the environment, and the spirit world. (p. 63)

In an attempt to focus my comparison of the two knowledge systems, I have considered the influence of spatial location on three major components of the helping process: world view, practice, and education.

Place and World View

As described earlier, social work practice models are rooted in a metaphor or world view, a way of looking at the world to give meaning to events. The current dominant model of generalist social work practice begins with an ecological metaphor, a view of persons in constant interaction with all the systems that surround them. This perspective is often summarized as *Person-in-Environment* to emphasize that the unit of focus in social work is the interaction between person and environment rather than simply individuals who need “fixing up”. A social work assessment considers demands and resources from the environment as well as the capabilities and needs of the person. This foundation metaphor of *Person-in-Environment* promotes a social purpose (the goal, the ideal state of affairs) of a healthy exchange between strong individuals and stimulating resource-filled environments.

From the perspective of traditional knowledge, there may be major problems with this Western emphasis on *Person-in-Environment* because the person and the environment are still understood as two separate (although interacting) entities. Using the collective culture of the Inuit as an example, Tester (1993) showed how “through their cosmologies, Inuit diminished the distinction between human and non-human nature” (p. 11). In contrast to the Western social work perspective of *Person-in-Environment*, the foundation metaphor of traditional knowledge has been characterized as a perspective of *I am I and the Environment* (Ortega y Gasset, 1985; Stairs & Wenzel, 1992).

This fundamental difference in world view has been expressed in the literature in different ways. Exploring regional identity in Lapland, Suopajarvi (1998) concluded that “I’m not in the place but the place is in me” (p. 3). Goehring (1993) contrasted Eurocentric notions such as “land is an economic resource like any other” and “land belongs to us” with the Indigenous versions of “land is the source of life” and “we belong to the land” (p. 55). Stairs (1992) distinguished between Western “egocentric” identity patterns and Inuit “ecocentric” patterns “involving connections within and between the human, animal, and material worlds” (p. 120).

Jackson (1994) examined the man-nature relationship in the Western world view and concluded that the natural landscape was no longer sacred but had become a potentially dangerous source of energy

that “has to be filtered, diluted, made to conform to federal standards of health and safety” (p. 90). The Swinomish Tribal Mental Health Project (1991) cautioned that non-Natives have “enormous difficulty” grasping the traditional notion “that each tribal group *belongs* to a general area or tract of land which they hold in a sort of sacred trust, but which they do not *own* per se” (p. 22). With specific reference to the Western Apache, Basso (1996) elaborated on the relationship between place and identity:

As Apache men and women set about drinking from places – as they acquire knowledge of their natural surroundings, commit it to permanent memory, and apply it productively to the workings of their minds – they show by their actions that their surroundings live in them. Like their ancestors before them, they display by word and deed that beyond the visible reality of place lies a moral reality which they themselves have come to embody. And whether or not they finally succeed in becoming fully wise, it is this interior landscape – this landscape of the moral imagination – that most deeply influences their vital sense of place, and also, I believe, their unshakable sense of self ... selfhood and placehood are completely intertwined. (p. 146)

Stairs & Wenzel (1992) contrasted Indigenous “*world-image* identity” with Western “*self-image* concepts” and argued that many traditional societies have “no necessary gap between the presentation and the self” (p. 8-9). Working from this metaphor or world view, they articulated the social purpose arising from traditional knowledge as “group and environmental interdependency rather than self-sufficiency” (p. 9). Such a world view is fundamentally different from the Western social work notion of adaptive individuals in supportive environments.

Place and Practice

Western culture has been relatively successful in separating knowledge from geographic location, and we are getting better at it all the time with our technology. Our notion of “profession” suggests a person with recognized knowledge and a skill set that allows him or her to practice effectively in any location. Credentials certify that a

person has acquired a certain knowledge base; professional status allows the practitioner to apply that knowledge through active practice in any setting where the credential is accepted. Professions have even defined as a problem the situation where a practitioner has close personal ties with the community being served. Codes of Ethics grapple with issues of dual and multiple role relationships. A stance of “objective outsidership” (Relph, 1976; Zapf, 1993), acquired through professional training and usually demanded by the employing agency, is the starting point for conventional assessments in most Western helping professions.

This Western notion of a professional helper licensed to practice anywhere does not appear to fit well with the crucial sense of place that is a foundation of traditional knowledge. Colorado (1991) has already identified the importance of spirituality and “the energies of the earth” within Indigenous science (p. 21), forces which are clearly connected with a profound sense of place. Peat (1994) elaborates:

Unlike Western science, the importance of the landscape, and specific places in it, is a characteristic of all Indigenous science... Within Indigenous science there is an association of spirit or energy with particular places, and it is important to visit these places and carry out ceremonies there ... This idea of the significance of place and the energies associated with it is common to Indigenous sciences all over the world... Western science does not appear to have a corresponding concept. (p. 265-267)

For the purposes of social work planning and service delivery in Canada, the province has generally been accepted as the unit of analysis; provincial residents are often assumed to share common values and vision, a common world view. Administrative regions have been created by federal and provincial planners after the fact for purposes of service delivery. Administrative convenience has resulted in regions defined as “sub-provincial bureaucratic constructs” (Zapf, 1995, p. 69). Yet, Suopajarvi (1998) cautioned that

Regions, and new regional districts, can be created by administrative division (such as provincial administrative areas) but those living in an area identify with a region that

is not necessarily born of political decision. (p. 3)

Using the province as unit of analysis often causes us to consider outlying regions as political continuations of central jurisdictions rather than as areas with their own identity, needs, energies, and traditional knowledge base.

Place and Education

Most university level Canadian schools of social work are located in urban centres in the south for economic reasons. Peat (1994) observed that such economic considerations completely ignore any sense of energy or spirit associated with particular places where learning activities should be carried out:

Certainly there are universities and research centres where initiation and coming-to-knowing is practiced, but these learning centres could have been built almost anywhere, and their locations were determined more by economic considerations – nearness to cities, the presence of outstanding researchers, etc. – than by consideration of the land itself...the notion of sacred space is missing in Western science. (p. 265-267)

In these urban universities, graduate research and theory-building work tend to frame hinterland issues in non-Indigenous terms, with research activities supervised by academics operating within a Western world view. Relatively few Indigenous Canadians have sought graduate social work education in the cities likely because of the overwhelming costs (financial, emotional, physical, spiritual) of relocation.

Much of the course content currently used in Canadian schools of social work is American in origin. Northern Canadian social workers in general, and Indigenous workers in particular, do not constitute a sufficiently large market to attract mainstream authors and publishers. It often requires less effort and expense to buy the packaged American material promoted as generic and universal in application. An obvious danger here is that social work graduates may be trained to work on American problems with American strategies, without regard for local values and priorities, in total ignorance of

local traditional knowledge as a resource and direction.

The current thrust towards distance delivery and technology-assisted learning may represent real progress in making social work education and credentials available in outlying communities, but the surface neutrality of this approach can disguise underlying assumptions of a Western world view. Through technology, content can be freed from constraints of place and relationship, a situation which may be advantageous for disseminating Western information but which runs counter to the coming-to-knowing approach of traditional knowledge. In his critique of one northern BSW program, deMontigny (1992) concluded that

Southern based structures – organization, curriculum, knowledge, skills, and values – vitiated “risk-taking” by northern faculty. We could only imagine an educational process where the wisdom of Native elders and Native teachings was at the heart of our work. We could only dream of education which was not confined to the spaces of a classroom or a field placement, not bound to the linear structures of organizational time, and not governed by a university calendar. The organizational demand to produce grades, evaluations, reports, and even graduates silenced a form of education based on wisdom, individual progress, connection to one’s people, spirituality, and respect. (p. 77)

Directions

There is evidence of efforts within resource management to integrate practice derived from the two systems of knowledge. Some have offered a vision of power sharing or “co-management,” a blending of the Western and traditional resource management systems to optimize the benefits of each without one system dominating the other (Berkes, 1994; Osherenko, 1988; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Smith & Slocombe, 1998). Such co-management at this point appears to be a goal rather than a specific practice with a blueprint. As explained by Smith and Slocombe (1998):

There is no worldwide definition of co-management and no one grand institutional design . . . Co-management is basically

a form of power sharing, although there are a variety of approaches with differing balance among parties, and the specifics of the implementing structures can vary a great deal. (p. 1)

Similar discussion of co-management or real integration of the two systems is not readily apparent in the social work literature. Part of the problem may be what Kaliss (1997) labelled “analytical arrogance” because Western “social science concepts developed within an exploitative context reflect that context” (p. 37). When Aboriginal Theory is presented as one of the many bodies of knowledge informing social work practice (Turner, 1999), is this not closer to exploitation than integration? How can one system presume to incorporate the other when the foundation world views are so profoundly different (especially with respect to the importance and implications of place)? Can any true integration take place while Western social work assumes the universality of its particular world view and social purpose?

Certainly there are ongoing efforts to build bridges between Western social work and traditional knowledge involving committed and capable people from both sides. There are also indications that the overall approach of Western science may slowly be coming to terms with the neglected concept of place. As expressed recently by Gould (1996):

In the last ten years, more and more adjacent areas of the human and physical sciences, as well as the humanities, have exhibited a much deeper awareness of the crucial importance of space and time. People, both scholars and practitioners, are slowly recalling that almost every physical process and human endeavour has a geography as well as a history. At one level, to say that everything exists in space and time may be little more than a rather banal truism, but at a more reflective and intense level it develops into an acute awareness of ‘spatio-temporality’ that can open up and illuminate a topic in extraordinarily effective ways. Indeed, it is not impossible to think of the twenty-first century as the ‘spatial century’, a time when a sense of the geographic emerges prominently once again into human thinking. (p. 458)

In an effort to avoid “analytical arrogance,” one might substitute “Western thinking” for “human thinking” in Gould’s words because traditional knowledge may have never abandoned its profound connection with place and spatial location. Perhaps this was part of what Sahtouris (1992) meant when she described traditional knowledge as the means by which “indigenous peoples are the guardians of our species, the part of humanity that alone holds the wisdom to ensure our healthy survival” (p. 6).

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