Decolonization and Liminality: A Reflective Process for Research as a Cooperative and Ethical Practice

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A researcher working with a Native nation in Canada required an exploration and awareness of decolonization not only in her experience, but also in the progression of the research. She became aware that decolonization was important for the "settler" as well as those living with the impact of colonization. This awareness was both welcome and unwelcome as the researcher was plunged into "crossing the divide" and examining what she thought she knew. Decolonization is significant work and requires that liminal space to progress and allow beliefs, and perceptions to surface the difficult and at times uncomfortable feelings that come.

INTRODUCTION

Many of us would not dispute that leadership makes a difference in organizations, in communities and in the lives of people. But what is leadership and how is it defined in the literature? Many efforts to define leadership as a theory, a phenomena or perhaps a set of traits and behaviors have been exhausted only to find that there are at least four hundred definitions currently in the literature (Crainer, 1995). Joseph Rost (1993) made a valiant effort to suggest a definition of leadership and to progress the discipline by inviting scholars to agree. Scholars however, do not agree on its definition, and maybe that is one of the interesting aspects of leadership; we know it when we see it. Perhaps this is why leadership is frequently referred to as a social construction. Indeed there are new and advanced degrees in leadership emerging all the time which require ways to define leadership so it can be understood and developed or learned (Harvey and Riggio, 2011).

Much of the literature that reflects leadership or leadership development however, includes cultural perspectives that are mainly Western or Eurocentric. Some of the relational or collaborative theories of leadership that have emerged more recently, referred to as post industrial leadership (Rost, 1993, Dentico 1999); also reflect a Western based view though there is movement in these theories towards a more collective model of leadership that may be more similar to Indigenous views (Lipman-Blumen, 1996; Wheatley, 2008). There is little in the academic literature that includes approaches to leadership from Indigenous cultures, though there are a few notable contributions and this body of work is growing: (Kenny and Fraser, 2012; Makokis, 2009; McLeod, 2002; Ottman, 2005). Due to this lack of Indigenous leadership models in the literature, these views are then excluded from academics and leadership development programs. By excluding these Indigenous perspectives, the leadership theories that are taught assume a Western worldview rather than an integral approach including diverse perspectives.

A Study to Explore Indigenous Leadership

In order to elucidate the Indigenous view of leadership, a study was conducted that explored a Native nation's, or Indigenous community's understanding and practice of leadership. More specifically, the study focused on the leadership-related perspectives and practices found at the Blue Quills First Nations College (BQFNC) in Canada. The study was originally proposed as a multiple case study analysis which included the researcher interviewing Indigenous leaders, participant observation, and inductive code based analysis, somewhat expected in a qualitative research design. However, there was much that was not known—or found in the leadership studies' literature, about the ethics of conducting research with Indigenous nations. During and following the study, a great deal was learned about the ethics involved in the cross cultural study, including the impact of decolonization on both the process of the research design, and on the researcher. Because this type of learning is intrinsic and generative, I will write more personally in some sections of this paper.

Due to the gap in the knowledge of research ethics with Indigenous nations, the process was unpredictable, lengthy and fraught with uncertainty. The timeline to receiving an invitation and/or authorization to conduct research with a Native nation evolved from a research proposal into a multi-year process of meeting people, getting to know them, waiting, establishing relationships, then waiting some more and ending up realizing that perhaps the research should not be done, or at least not be done by a non-Native person. Though the research design had met the approval of the Internal Review Board for the protection of human subjects at the Western university, it did not necessarily follow that ethical obligations had been met as required by the Indigenous Nation. More frequently, Native nations and institutions have established their own requirements to ensure the protection of human subjects.

Decolonization and Research

There were many starts and stops involved in conducting research or in receiving permission and gaining access to people who might want to participate. This unpredictability and uncertainty involved learning to work with a different worldview and some of that learning involved understanding decolonization. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) in her work on *Decolonizing Methodologies* discusses the ethics of research and recommends questions that should be asked as part of the research process:

> In contemporary Indigenous contexts there are some major research issues which continue to be debated quite vigorously. These can be summarized best by the critical questions that communities and Indigenous activist often ask, in a variety of ways: Whose research is it? Who owns it? Whose interests does it serve? Who will benefit from it? Who has designed its questions and framed its scope? Who will carry it out? Who will write it up? How will its results be disseminated? While there are many researchers who can handle such questions with integrity there are many more who cannot, or who approach these questions with some cynicism, as if they are a test merely of political correctness. These questions are simply part of a larger set of judgments on criteria that a researcher cannot prepare for, such as: Is her spirit clear? Does he have a good heart? What other baggage are they carrying? Are they useful to us? Can they fix our generator? Can they actually do anything? (p.10)

Throughout the extended process, I began to realize that for the research to take place, I would need to consider alignment between the research and the process of decolonization. In other words, I started to become increasingly aware of the *way* that I was thinking about the research and approaching the work to be done. As a typical left coast, Western educated academic in the United States, I had learned the dogma of goal setting, eating an elephant (one piece at a time), and the corporate culture of networking and getting tasks accomplished. These skills had served me well in leadership positions and in academia. However, throughout this process, my consciousness was changing and I considered that I would need to operate in a different way. I had to become aware that I held certain mental models (Senge, 2006) about how to work with others that would have an impact on the forming of relationships and how the research

work would be negotiated with people from another culture. Many of my assumptions held that research is a linear and logical endeavor. I wondered, "How would these deeply held assumptions blend with an Indigenous worldview?"

Worldviews

For example, I recall an initial meeting with the Native scholar I would eventually be working with. For months I had reached out to her and her sister-in-law, both Indigenous professors, to schedule a meeting. Regardless of the emails or offers to call on the phone, nothing happened; nothing more than polite non response. When I finally had an opportunity to meet one of them, it happened very suddenly and the meeting was serendipitous—much like a coincidence. (A colleague heard they were in town being honored by the University and gave me their cell phone numbers.) To contact them, I was nervous because I had been trying to begin a conversation for quite some time. I called; she answered and suggested we meet that same afternoon. I had been emailing, and reaching out for over six months and then it just happened almost suddenly. We had a meaningful conversation; a meeting of the minds, and agreed to continue the discussion. When I shared my thoughts about our finally meeting after all that time, she understood my feeling and said, "Our Elders tell us, things happen for a reason; there are no coincidences." In other words, I needed to learn to operate in a different way, to align my approach—my thinking—with Native ways as I was learning them, with Native values as I was experiencing them in order to approach the research in an ethical way. I learned that I could not force my will, that if the research was going to happen, I would need to learn to trust that it would. I needed to be willing to engage in this process called decolonization, in the research process, by surfacing my own deeply held assumptions and re-examining them, then learning about research with a different world view.

Over a two year period, relationships continued to form between the researcher and members of a Native nation at BQFNC on the ancestral lands of the Cree at Saddle Lake Reserve. Following a few visits, many conversations, and meals shared it was agreed by some of the Native Scholars that consideration would be given to the research proposal. However, it was stated clearly that members would make the decision collectively and that if access was granted, if permissions were given, Indigenous methodology would be used in a collaborative approach. The assumptions of a Western approach to research were being called into question.

The Meaning of Consent

In many Native nations, an individual consenting to participate in a study creates ethical issues because without the input and consent of the Elders and the consensus of the group, access could not be granted. This, in fact, is a major sticking point when Western scholars want to study Indigenous groups, according to Wilson (2008):

> Basic to the dominant system research paradigms is the concept of the individual as the
> source and owner of knowledge. These paradigms are built upon a Eurocentric view of
> the world, in which the individual or object is the essential feature. (p.127)

This collective paradigm employed by many, and, possibly, most Indigenous groups is fundamentally different from the individualistic paradigm in most Western academic institutions. Because of the differences in worldviews, even the question of consent to engage in research is a completely different concept. Due to the different views of consent, both protocols, the requirements of the Indigenous nation and the Western University, were followed in order to comply with ethical requirements for the protection of human subjects. In addition, the Native protocols required relationships and stated intention that those associations to be ongoing.

Indigenous Research Ethics

Following another visit to Saddle Lake Reserve, more relationships formed and the opportunities to form friendships were plentiful. Though I looked for the right time to formally ask and receive permission

to conduct the study, I learned that the process would be more complex. In order to engage members of the Nation in any research interviews or dialogues etc., I would need to learn about and comply with the research ethics policy, ethics dialogue and perhaps a ceremony at Blue Quills First Nation College including honoring their Elders, their protocols and traditions. All of this, I would later learn, is incorporated into the ethics policy adopted by the Blue Quills First Nations College. That policy states:

> To fully comprehend the ethics environment, researchers must commit to relationships, ceremony, and protocol within the institution and community which will provide the interpretation. The academy has come to our lands, and now it is time to teach the academy how to be in our lands. (p.1)

As the study progressed, issues emerged around appropriate and ethical ways to explore leadership in a co-researcher framework. Because much harm has been done to Indigenous groups by external researchers, any power differential or relational distance were issues to be avoided (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). I would also need to understand the concept of relational accountability, "the sort of accountability that occurs naturally and almost unconsciously because deep relationships have been formed…that virtually prohibit a researcher from acting inappropriately or in a way that would harm the group he or she is studying" (Buchanan and BQFNC, 2010, p. 43). For Indigenous methodology, relationships are embedded with research and epistemology.

Throughout what became a negotiation of researcher roles, the concept of decolonization continued to be important. According to Smith (1999), "Decolonization is a process which engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels. For researchers, one of those levels is concerned with having a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values which inform research practices" (p. 20). As a result of this new understanding and realization, the process of learning and self examination for this idea of decolonization plunged the researcher into a liminal space of learning and development.

Decolonization and Liminality

Because I was familiar with the literature on Indigenous leadership, I had become acquainted with the ideas of decolonization and therefore it was not a foreign concept. However, as I traveled to Canada and to BQFNC to continue to form relationships and hopefully explore Indigenous views of leadership, I began to understand more personally and analytically the need to engage the cognitive and reflective work of decolonization. As I had understood decolonization it was the sometimes uncomfortable, difficult work of identifying when the dominant culture, including colonization has moved into your head and "made a nest." When we operate from this "nest" we assume that we are entitled to the benefits of colonization and do not need to be aware of it, or to consider the impact that colonization has had on Indigenous peoples. It reminds me of Senge's (2006) work on mental models—yet the process is not strictly an intellectual exercise. I assumed that decolonization was a process for Indigenous peoples and did not initially see how it impacted me as a researcher.

When I became aware of my own need for decolonization—I plunged into liminal space; the past ignorance was gone yet I was not familiar with what the future looks like (Turner, 1992, p. 132). Paulette Regan (2005), a non-Native researcher who also engaged this process described her experience;

> It seems to me that there is this place of 'not knowing' that may hold a key to decolonization for non-Indigenous people. As members of the dominant culture, we have to be willing to be uncomfortable, to be disquieted at a deep and disturbing level – and to understand our own history, if we are to transform our colonial relationship to Indigenous peoples. For it is in this space of 'not knowing' and working through our own discomfort that we are most open to deep, transformative learning. The kind of experiential learning that engages our whole being – head, heart and spirit. (Regan, 2005, p.7)

It is in this liminal space that I was disturbed and felt uncertain about my own understanding; I pondered how to relate to Indigenous peoples and how to do the work of decolonization. At times I felt some resistance, the longing for these concepts to sort of go away and return me to a former state of ignorance. However, I realized that I must work to identify those mental models, that "nest", that are the remnants of colonial oppression. This work is needed in order to progress, to be able to participate in an authentic dialogue with Indigenous people. This tension reminded me of the teachings of Paulo Friere (1990); "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 36). That process, in turn, helps to free me, and others, to see ideas in new ways and to consider new ways of approaching leadership. It was important for me to recognize my responsibility for the work and to not expect Indigenous people to do this for me. Monture and McGuire (2009) stated:

> Colonialism, however, is not just about Aboriginal women [or Aboriginal men, for that matter]. We have our grief to carry about the oppression our ancestors and our relatives have survived. But colonialism also requires those who do the oppressing change. We acknowledge that many Canadians carry guilt over what has happened to Aboriginal peoples across the span of Canada's history. And as much as we have had to carry our own grief, Canadians too must work through the guilt. This guilt is not (and cannot be) the responsibility of Aboriginal peoples. This is, we believe, a more profound responsibility than simply dealing with what academics and anti-racist activists would call "white privilege." (p. 523)

The work of decolonization is complex, at times creating cognitive dissonance, at other times feelings of uncertainty and even detachment. Decolonization is significant work and requires that liminal space to progress—to allow beliefs and perceptions to surface the difficult, and at times, uncomfortable feelings that come. Grande (2007) writes,

> To allow for the process of reinvention, it is important to understand that Red pedagogy is not a method or technique to be memorized, implemented, applied, or prescribed. Rather, it is a space of engagement. It is the liminal and intellectual borderlands where indigenous and non-indigenous scholars encounter one another, working to remember, redefine, and reverse the devastation of the original colonialist encounter. (p. 135)

However, as a researcher that strove to remain ethical, it is this reflection in action that ultimately led to a new sense of freedom and increased capacity to engage in relational accountability with Indigenous peoples. The work of decolonization is done in reflection, in relationships and even in research.

As the research evolved, the Native scholars did agree to collaboratively engage in the research project to explore Indigenous views of leadership as long as good relationships continued, that the methodology would be Indigenous, and that the ethics requirements, including a dialogue, protocols and ceremony were followed prior to any data collection.

Following the original research, relationships are ongoing. As a result of the project, and not long afterwards, graduate students from the Western university were invited to engage in a Cree cultural immersion experience including Indigenous arts, ceremonies and talking circles among many other experiences. It is through these relationships that the most powerful process of decolonization continues, humanizing the other. And as a Kumeyaay Elder told me, "Well, we are all Indigenous from somewhere."

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