

The Breath of Life: First Nations Knowledge



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I began developing the Breath of Life as a First Nations “theory of everything” when I was a graduate student, struggling to apply western theories to First Nations child welfare studies. I was thinking more deeply about First Nations ways of knowing and being and contrasting them with western-based theories and colonial ways of thinking.

Like the search for a unifying theory in physics, the Breath of Life (BOL) supposes a place where human beings are indivisible from the Earth, from the universe and from human existence across time and space. The balance among relational worldview principles constantly shifts in this dynamic space. Recalibration to achieve balance is governed by distinct First Nations cultural laws and norms, which in turn are adapting to change.

As the only First Nations student in my class, I was awakened to the differences in worldviews of what exists and how different elements of existence relate to one another (ontology) that underlie social work theories, such as the anti-oppressive approach, ecological theory, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and the more holistic and interconnected approach taken by many First Nations.

For example, First Nations peoples think their ancestors are mostly right, while western thought assumes their ancestors are mostly wrong or that their ideas are underdeveloped. First Nations peoples believe in unified and interdependent theories; western theories like to break things down. First Nations peoples believe in expansive concepts of time and space; western theories focus on one lifespan. First Nations peoples believe all relationships matter; western theories think only human relationships, or subsets of human relationships, matter.

As First Nations peoples, we rely on those who came before us to have passed on the essential knowledge of what it is to be human and a member of our group. We are trustees of knowledge—not holders, owners or creators of knowledge – just as we are the trustees of the lands that are bound up in our identity.

First Nations peoples have lived in the lands now known as North America for many thousands of years, passing knowledge from one generation to the next. The western child welfare practices imposed on First Nations children over the last seven decades have resulted in poor outcomes for First Nations families and communities in Canada. There are more First Nations children in state care today than at any time in history, including during the residential school era. These poor results have revitalized calls from First Nations for their traditional knowledge,

values and customs to be placed at the centre of the child welfare enterprise as the first step in establishing meaningful First Nations research practices.

The western bias toward individual rights translates into different theoretical segmentations of knowledge, which often do not have obvious connections with one another and little tolerance for a plurality of perspectives. Feminism, critical theory, positivism and modernity all explore reality using different lenses, like single flashlight beams in a dark room. Sometimes the beams cross each other but little attention is paid to the intersections or unlit areas. The holder of the flashlight tends to see only those things enlightened by their narrow beam of choice.

In social work, the ecological model and structural theory acknowledge interconnections, but they bracket the time frames and dimensions from which they view reality. If a First Nations epistemology (how knowledge is shaped and validated) is applied, the child, family, community and world are wholly affected by four interconnected dimensions of knowledge – emotional, spiritual, cognitive and physical – informed by ancestral knowledge, which is to be passed to future generations.

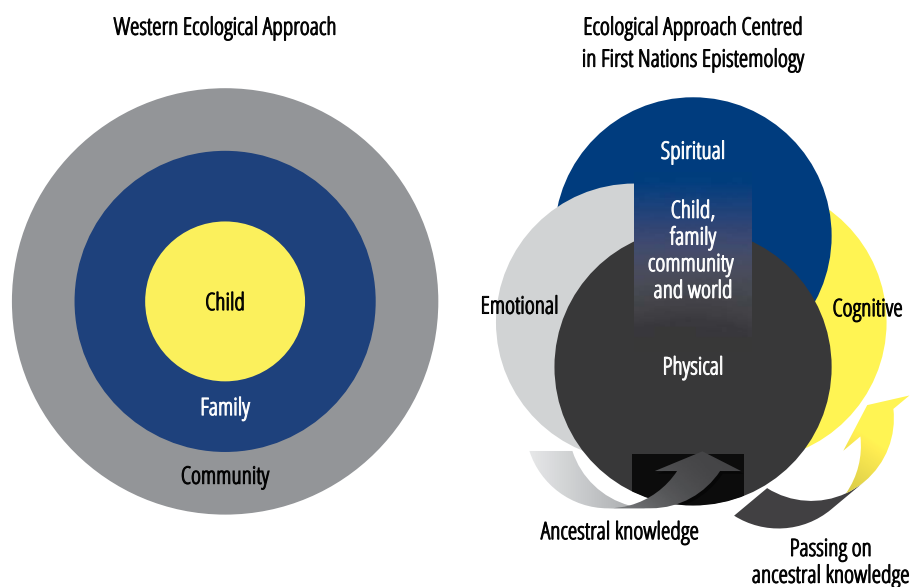


Figure 1. Contrasting epistemological approaches in Ecological Theory

Contrary to social science theories, the western study of physics, chemistry and biology contemplate an interconnected worldview that is more aligned with First Nations approaches. The Breath of Life theory draws several essential parallels from western physics: (1) the confirmation of multiple dimensions of reality (2) the interconnectedness of time and space (3) the idea that we are all made of stars and (4) any serious theoretical development requires a collective effort across time. The Breath of Life Theory is intended to be built on by others so it can better capture the richness of First Nations ontologies.

First Nations epistemologies might seem simple, such as in the case of the seven Ojibwe grandfather teachings: respect, wisdom, love, honesty, humility, truth and bravery. However,

this simplicity of expression ensures that values are understood by all and enables accountability for the actualization of the values in all aspects of life.

The differences between western and First Nations worldviews are vast in dimension, scope and values and even today, the colonizers have almost no concept of the vast knowledge they denied themselves when they forcibly imposed their own systems.

Western social work continues to override solutions practised by First Nations peoples for millennia with a western concept of child safety. Mainstream social work struggles to understand First Nations ways of caring for children and in most cases, does not even acknowledge that First Nations peoples have well-developed knowledge and laws.

Western and First Nations epistemologies should be explored on an equal footing and not on a hierarchy, understanding that they reflect very different world views and contexts. First Nations research methods, such as storytelling and oral history, are not widely used and concepts of First Nations mathematics and science are often dismissed. First Nations students must often draw from the western research tool chest, even when studying First Nations peoples. First Nations knowledge, appraised on its own merits and studied in accordance with its own methods, is a preferred approach for matters affecting First Nations peoples.

In our canoe is our way of life, our language, our law, our customs and traditions. And in the boat likewise are the European language, customs, traditions and law. We have said please do not get out of your boat and try to steer our canoe. And we will not get out of our canoe and try to steer your boat. We are going to accept each other as sovereign—we are going to travel down this road of life together—side by side.

—G. Peter Jemison, Faith Keeper, Cattaraugus Reservation,
Seneca Nation Public Broadcasting System

Reconciliation is about putting non-Indigenous people back in their own boats and creating space for us to travel down the river, learning together from our differences. This seems simple, but it is not. It is still a western captain steering the First Nations child protection canoe in social work with child welfare approaches that have substantially failed to benefit First Nations children over seven decades.

There is increasing evidence suggesting that western child welfare approaches themselves pose a risk to First Nations families, by negating the effects of structural risks such as collective colonial trauma and poverty, which lie outside of what families alone can influence.

So why does western social work hold so tightly to its imposition of knowledge on First Nations peoples? I believe colonialism, racism, power, oppression, economic gain and fear limits westerners from seeing and valuing knowledge that is different from their own.

In 2005, more than 200 experts in First Nations child welfare came together to set in place a new set of principles to guide a process of reconciliation in child welfare centered on First Nations ways of knowing and being. Five principles called *touchstones* were identified:

- **Self determination:** First Nations peoples are in the best position to make decisions for First Nations children.
- **Culture and language:** There is no culturally neutral social work practice or practitioner and when working with First Nations children, First Nations ways of knowing and being need to be driving the approach.
- **Holism:** addressing the needs of the child within his/her interconnected reality with due consideration to the generations to follow.
- **Structural interventions:** addressing structural risks, including those sourced in social work itself.
- **Non discrimination:** ensuring First Nations children have equal opportunities and placing First Nations child welfare knowledge on an equal footing with Euro-western social work.

The touchstone principles are intended to be interpreted within local culture, context and time, thus respecting diversity and difference. The long-term success of this reconciliation model remains unclear, but the touchstones have created a sustained space for First Nations and non-First Nations social workers to explore differences with the hope of developing a system of child welfare that improves the outcomes for First Nations children. A greater emphasis on equity within and between the relational worldview principles would be a useful modification to highlight the richness of First Nations ontology and epistemology.

An unexplored opportunity lies in understanding how First Nations and western social work epistemologies can coexist in a way that respects our differences, instead of trying to overcome them. Before this can happen, there is a need for the type of reconciliation that the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples called for:

1. telling the truth as experienced from multiple perspectives of Canada's colonial history with First Nations peoples,
2. acknowledging and learning from that history and then,
3. rebuilding a relationship based on mutual respect and recognition.

The truth-telling phase illuminates the forces that continue to subjugate First Nations peoples and First Nations knowledge, both in Canadian society and in social work. In making these forces visible, we have an opportunity to rout out colonial residue in social work and create safeguards against its future recurrence.

Once we are back to steering our own canoes, First Nations and non-First Nations peoples can bring the richness of their different approaches to benefit all children, youth and families. Reconciliation will not solve all the problems in social work or in First Nations and non-First Nations communities, but we must move forward anyway. The record numbers of First Nations children in child welfare care and the failure of western approaches to protect First Nations children demand that we do all that we can.

Further Reading on the Breath of Life Theory

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