



## **TOWARDS A RECOGNITION OF THE PLURALITY OF KNOWLEDGE IN SOCIAL WORK**

### **The Indigenous Research Paradigm**

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#### Résumé de l'article

Le travail social est une profession qui s'est grandement transformée au cours des dernières décennies, modulée par les diverses transformations sociales, politiques et organisationnelles de la société dans laquelle elle évolue. Or, on retrouve aujourd'hui des recherches de plus en plus diversifiées, où plusieurs visions du travail social coexistent. Ces visions multiples s'accompagnent de valeurs et de principes, mais également d'idéologies tantôt dominantes, tantôt marginales. Les peuples autochtones sont l'un des groupes les plus marginalisés et leurs visions du monde le sont tout autant au sein de la profession. Aujourd'hui, il semble y avoir une volonté de reconnaître la pluralité des savoirs en travail social. Le présent article poursuit cet objectif en présentant le paradigme autochtone en recherche. Il s'agit d'une réflexion théorique qui s'articule autour du contexte historique menant à la création du paradigme, une description de ce qui le compose de même qu'une présentation de quelques exemples de son utilisation par des chercheurs en travail social. Enfin, l'article met en lumière certains enjeux persistants quant à la reconnaissance du paradigme autochtone au sein de la profession.

# TOWARDS A RECOGNITION OF THE PLURALITY OF KNOWLEDGE IN SOCIAL WORK

## The Indigenous Research Paradigm

*Lisa Ellington*

**Abstract:** Social work as a profession has undergone significant change in recent decades, modulated by the various social, political, and organizational transformations of the society in which it evolves. Today, there is increasingly diversified research encompassing a number of coexisting visions of social work. These multiple visions come hand in hand with values, principles, as well as ideologies, some of which are dominant, and others that are marginal. Indigenous Peoples are among the most marginalized groups in society and so are Indigenous worldviews within the profession. Currently, there seems to be a willingness to recognize the plurality of knowledge in the area of social work. In line with this objective, the purpose of this article is to present the Indigenous research paradigm. This is a theoretical contemplation centered around the historical context that led to the paradigm's creation, a description of what it consists of, as well as a presentation of a few examples of its use by social work researchers. Finally, the paper brings up certain persistent issues related to the recognition of the Indigenous paradigm within the profession.

**Keywords:** Indigenous paradigm, research, social work, epistemologies, methodologies

**Abrégé :** Le travail social est une profession qui s'est grandement transformée au cours des dernières décennies, modulée par les diverses

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**Mots clés :** paradigme autochtone, recherche, travail social, épistémologies, méthodologies

*IN THE LAST FEW DECADES*, it has been recognized that the field of social sciences is marked by significant inequalities in terms of resources, recognition and authority, with research institutions in Western Europe and North America occupying a central position of influence and prestige (Connell, Beigel & Ouédraogo, 2017). Obviously, the paradigms, methodologies and objects of study reflect the social position of researchers and create a certain scientific hegemony within the disciplines of the “social” environment. In this regard, several authors stress the urgency of recognizing epistemic diversity in social work, a profession that promotes the importance of respect, self-determination and the plurality of knowledge (Connell et al., 2017; Dominelli & Ioakimidis, 2016; Smith, 2012). The efforts of various researchers to counter scientific imperialism (Cajete, 2000; Little Bear, 2000) have resulted in the development of a new research paradigm: the Indigenous paradigm. While several authors report on this emerging paradigm, there is still very scant literature on ontology, epistemology and the methodology that it is based on. The researchers' stance and the ethical principles underlying this paradigm are addressed in some publications (Hart, 2010; Wilson, 2008), but in a sparsely and fragmented way. Francophone literature on the subject is also almost non-existent. Yet, it is the study of paradigms that prepares individual researchers to “become members of a particular scientific group” (Kuhn, 1972, p. 25 - unofficial translation). Understanding emerging paradigms then has implications for all research disciplines, including social work. The purpose of this article is to contribute to the emerging literature; it focuses specifically on the Indigenous research paradigm, the context of Indigenous research and the history leading

to its emergence, what it is composed of and the persistent issues surrounding its recognition within social work. In this regard, we will draw on Canadian and international literature, mainly from Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Mexico and Africa.

## **Terminology**

### *Paradigm*

Before highlighting the Indigenous research paradigm, it is important to return to the definition of a paradigm as developed by Kuhn (1983). For this physicist and science historian, this concept refers specifically to “the set of beliefs, recognized values and techniques that are common to the members of a given group” (Kuhn, 1983, p. 238 - unofficial translation). In this sense, a paradigm is a worldview that guides the researcher not only in the choice of a methodological approach, but also in the ontological, epistemological and ethical aspects of his research. Generally, the use of the notion of paradigm is used to distinguish schools of thought that are not based on the same assumptions or, in other words, “do not inhabit the same world” (Lien Do, 2003, p. 55).

### *Indigenous*

It seems fundamental to define the term Indigenous, since it is directly related to the notions of power and knowledge that give rise to the emergence of the paradigm presented in this paper. Indeed, the “classification” of Indigenous Peoples as a differentiated group is primarily seen as a strategy of non-Indigenous people to emphasize racial difference and, at the same time, use their power over oppressed populations (Rigney, 1997). For many Indigenous Peoples, being differentiated now has political, cultural and social implications that need to be recognized and emphasized (Wilson, 2008). The term Indigenous refers to the descendants of peoples who inhabited a territory at the time others settled there, creating a relationship of domination. Indigenous Peoples differ from the dominant culture in their languages, traditions and customs. It also refers to individuals who define themselves as such, regardless of where they are in the world. It is also used as an adjective to refer to the knowledge and worldviews that result from reflections by Indigenous researchers. However, we recognize that this is a general term that does not represent all the diversity and heterogeneity of nations and cultures.

## **The Indigenous Paradigm: Emergence of the Historical Context**

Indigenous knowledge has existed for hundreds of years on all continents. Despite this historical presence, however, it has only articulated itself in

what is called the Indigenous paradigm in recent decades. In this regard, a chronological analysis supported by Martin's (2003) historical division is fundamental if we are to understand the context in which this new paradigm is framed, which has emerged out of power relations and oppressive dynamics (Wilson, 2003).

#### *The Terra Nullius Phase (1770-1900)*

During the period known as *Terra Nullius*, Martin (2003) highlighted the takeover by Western peoples of the territories, which they regarded as "masterless". Although Indigenous Peoples were already living on those lands, they were often treated with indifference (Allen, 1988). At that time, research was done on the territory (fauna and flora), or *on* Indigenous Peoples. Decisions made about Indigenous Peoples during this period were based on the theories and beliefs that Europeans were superior, so Indigenous knowledge and beliefs had little value (Henderson-Youngblood, 2000).

#### *The Traditionalist Phase (1900-1940)*

This was followed by the so-called traditionalist phase, in which Indigenous Peoples were portrayed as barriers to scientific, territorial and economic progress (Martin, 2003). Scientific methods were then considered to be far superior to the use of the spiritual realm, medicinal plants and Indigenous ceremonies as modes of knowledge. During this period, data collection (experimental and empirical), by means of "measuring" Indigenous intelligence, was widespread and acceptable (Wilson, 2008). Specimens of human remains were studied and scientists, at that time, forced Indigenous Peoples to eat rotten food or contract certain diseases so that physical consequences could be studied (Kidd, 1994). These practices had a dual purpose of power and knowledge: the manipulation of bodies and the increase in knowledge about Indigenous Peoples generated knowledge that made it easier to destroy "bad habits" and to transform people by subjecting them to new rules, orders and customs (Foucault, 1975). The quantification of Indigenous-specific physical and intellectual characteristics was also intended to shape science as an activity aimed at generalization and universality. This emphasis on quantitative data could be seen as a strategy, an alliance between scientists and the State (Porter, 1995) to eventually put an end to the "Indigenous problem".

At the same time, the arrival of anthropologists has also led to a "traditionalization" of Indigenous Peoples, conveying the idea that they are a homogeneous group with similar physiological and cultural characteristics. Researchers proposed, among other things, to collect information on peoples and cultures that were in danger of disappearing. Typologies were created during this period, when the "noble savage" was the one who had managed to be assimilated by leaving aside his beliefs

(Martin, 2003). The prioritization of knowledge and the degradation of Indigenous knowledge have been going on for decades, and have become embedded in subsequent scientific, political, state and religious practices.

#### *The Assimilationist Phrase (1940-1990)*

In continuity with previous historical phases, the one that prevailed from the 1940s to the 1990s was to examine Indigenous social structures and mythologies, with a view to eradicating Indigenous ways of knowing. According to several authors, this period was largely marked by multiple injustices: economic, political, cultural and epistemic (Baskin, 2006; Martin, 2003), the latter form arising when the concepts, categories or worldviews by which a group understands its universe are replaced or greatly affected by the concepts used by the colonizers (Bhargava, 2013). Non-Indigenous researchers and missionaries claimed to be experts *on* Indigenous Peoples, who were among the most studied groups in the world during this period (Smith, 1999). To this end, Beckett (1994) states that Indigenous Peoples have been silenced, while experts have been talking *about* or *for* them. The scientific research of this phase, as perceived by Indigenous Peoples, is highlighted by Wilson (2008):

It inevitably continued to view, interpret and represent Aboriginal lands and Aboriginal people, their worldviews, their cultures, their experiences and their knowledges through western eyes and ears, using a colonial worldview as the dominant and sole research discourse (p. 50).

#### *The Recent Phase (1990-2000)*

The Indigenous research paradigm emerged in the 1990s, following a succession of four pivotal periods (Steinhauer, 2001). In the first (1990s), Indigenous researchers integrated Western paradigms without questioning them.

The second period (late 1990s) was marked by increased reflection: Indigenous researchers openly stated that some paradigms were in contradiction with their worldviews. However, most of them chose to include their research within those paradigms for fear of being marginalized by the scientific community: “they were reluctant to admit, both to themselves and publicly, that their ‘non-lettered’ compatriots, shoved to the lower rungs of society, were indeed repositories of valuable primary knowledge “ (Emeagwali & Dei, 2014, p. 3). The dominated groups thus compelled themselves to favour a certain epistemological and methodological tradition to the detriment of their own worldviews.

A change of direction ensued, marked by numerous investigative reports, multiple instances of resistance and political events (Wilson, 2003). The third phase (early 2000s) was described as a period marked by the desire to decolonize research, with Indigenous researchers opposing

ideological and intellectual hegemony by suggesting that change was needed (Emegwali & Dei, 2014). It was followed by an “epistemic mobilization” (Beauclair, 2015, p. 68) during which several Indigenous researchers formally denounced the harm caused by certain research paradigms, which had ignored Indigenous belief systems and worldviews on the grounds that they lacked a scientific basis (Smith, 2012).

The fourth phase (2000s) was marked by the creation of a paradigm, presented by researchers as the result of experienced oppression, resistance and an attempt to rebalance power, so that research would be done *by* and *for* them (Wilson, 2008). The notions of epistemological pluralism and respect for all forms of knowledge (Feyerabend, 1975) are reflected in the aims of Indigenous researchers. Today, several of them refer to the Indigenous paradigm in their research. However, some point out that colonialism is far from being a closed undertaking, since the universalism and standardization advocated in research paradigms are, in their view, still present (Smith, 2012). The notions of resistance, oppression and coloniality of power (Quijano & Wallerstein, 1992) have therefore been used throughout the historical periods and are still perpetuated today in the field of research, where the Indigenous paradigm is not yet formally recognized by the supporters of the other paradigms. In other words, colonial structures continue to marginalize Indigenous Peoples “from both a socio-economic and an epistemological and subjective point of view; we can therefore speak not only of the coloniality of power, but also of the coloniality of knowledge and being” (Beauclair, 2015, p. 68 - unofficial translation).

### **The Indigenous Paradigm**

If history makes it possible to understand the outset of the Indigenous paradigm in context, it seems essential to explain the various parameters that constitute it. In addition, researchers place it in specific social contexts, using expressions from their Indigenous language<sup>1</sup>. For example, Ghel (2017) uses the Anishinaabe term *Debwewin*, which could be translated as “a personal truth that is rooted in one’s heart”. Thompson (2008), on the other hand, uses the terms *Hede kehe’hotzi’kahidi*’ to describe the Tahltan Nation’s paradigm, which she translates as “ I am coming to know and that feels right to me “ (p. 24). Given the heterogeneity of the researchers’ cultures, the historical and political roots of the territories in which they are located and the languages used, it is possible to observe various influences in the description of the Indigenous paradigm. As within any paradigm, proponents may be located on a continuum, where some may be closer to some other existing paradigms while others may be further away. However, as Kuhn (1983) points out, they share similar preconceptions and epistemologies, which will be detailed in the following sections.

*A Holistic, Relational, Ecocentric and Spiritual Ontology*

First, the Indigenous paradigm has its own ontology, shared by many researchers (Gill, 2002; Rice, 2005). This term refers to the nature of reality (Lincoln & Guba, 2000), divided into principles of equal importance (Hart, 2010; Simpson, 2000a).

For some authors, at the heart of the Indigenous paradigm is a relational pragmatism, based on the assumption that the world is a system of interconnected elements (Ruwhiu & Cathro, 2014). Knowledge is not a linear representation of facts, but rather a circular one, one where there are relationships between objective structures and subjective constructions. Objectivity, according to Maori scholars, is not seen as a single reality or verifiable facts, but rather as the visible world (that can be seen, touched and heard) necessarily influenced by both subjective and invisible constructions (of intuition, feelings, spirituality and energies) (Ruwhiu & Cathro, 2014). This is a holistic, inclusive worldview, taking into account various spiritual, physical, emotional and mental aspects (Weber-Pillwax, 2001; Martin, 2003).

While knowledge is holistic, it is also relational (Owusu-Ansah & Mji, 2013; Wilson, 2008). It cannot therefore belong to a single person (the researcher, for example) since it is shared with everything that the Creator has placed on earth (Cajete, 2000). This worldview differs greatly from that of Western societies in general. According to Descola (2005), Westerners adopt a so-called naturalistic ontology, which separates society (composed of humans) and nature, giving superiority to the former. On the other hand, the proponents of the Indigenous paradigm do not see such a division where nature is dominated by humans (Keewatin, 2002) and their ontology could be qualified as ecocentric (Smith, 1999). This term means that they conceive the individual as part of an ecosystem, shared with other life forms where nothing is at the top of any hierarchy. Many Indigenous Peoples describe animals as non-human (Feit, 2000) and Andean peoples describe mountains as “entities comparable to humans, even in their physical construction” (Beauclair, 2015, p. 70 - unofficial translation). Realities are thus plural and encompass multiple relationships, whether interpersonal, environmental or spiritual (Wilson, 2008). Indigenous knowledge is unique to cultures, localities and societies, and is acquired by local populations through daily experience (Dei, Hall and Rosenberg, 2000).

Moreover, territory is seen as sacred and the relationship between the researcher and their environment is of paramount importance to the proponents of the Indigenous paradigm (Keewatin, 2002). Anchoring oneself to the territory makes it possible to remain connected to the present and the future, as well as to the energies and spirits of the ancestors who live there (Cajete, 2000). Mayan author Carlos Cordero (1995) summarizes these worldviews by indicating that Indigenous



knowledge is contextual and encompasses aesthetic and spiritual issues; Indigenous science does not have to be separated from art or religion (in the broad sense of the term). This ontology is in line with Feyerabend's (1975) comments that science is necessarily understood in a subjective way, with "aesthetic judgments, taste judgments, metaphysical prejudices and religious desires" (p. 320 – unofficial translation). In the same vein, Latour (1991) points out that Western modernity's attempts to separate the social (governed in particular by politics), the natural (governed by "science") and the spiritual spheres are a failure, since many phenomena overlap all these spheres.

### **A Relational Epistemology Anchored Within Cultures**

Epistemology refers to a way of studying the nature of knowledge. It also allows us to discover the nature of the relationship between the researcher and what they may know. Each research paradigm thus has its own epistemology (Lincoln & Guba, 2000), which is also the case for the Indigenous paradigm.

According to the proponents of this paradigm, epistemological systems are socially constructed and influenced by socio-political, economic and historical contexts (Ruwhiu & Cathro, 2014). Indigenous epistemology is also defined as a reactive (or resistance-based) effort to the hegemony of Western epistemologies and is seen as a continuous conversation between conflict and change, shaped by the duality between structures (which influence opportunities) and agency (which is the ability of people to act independently and make free choices) (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2001). The construction of knowledge is thus based on structural influences and individual experiences. For Baskin (2006), Indigenous epistemology, like its ontology, is linked to the researcher's introspection. Prayer, fasting, dream interpretation, ceremonies and silence are seen as introspective strategies, unique to each individual. This means that knowledge is never neutral, and the identity of the researcher has an important role to play. In this sense, epistemology is intrinsically ideological and subjective, and there can be no detachment between "the knower and the known" (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2001, p. 62).

Moreover, Indigenous epistemology emerges from traditional languages (Hart, 2010). Several authors have stressed the importance of words in Indigenous languages, which reflect Indigenous worldviews and often have no equivalents when they are translated. For example, Ermine (1995) reports that an Indigenous epistemology is a subjective process described by the Cree term *mamatowisin*, which may be translated as "the capacity to tap the creative life forces of the inner space by the use of all the faculties that constitute our being; it is to exercise inwardness" (p. 104). Similarly, Wilson (2008) indicates that knowledge is directly related to ways of being and doing, ways of

thinking and ways of feeling. Baskin (2006) and Wilson (2008) thus speak of a relational epistemology, where realities are relationships with ideas, with the visible and the invisible world, and with the environment and the Cosmos.

*A Relational Methodology That Is Both Participative and Pragmatic*

As with ontology and epistemology, each research paradigm also has its own methodology. This term refers to the way knowledge is acquired (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). The researcher's point of view on what reality is (ontology) and how he can gain knowledge of this reality (epistemology) has an impact on ways of acquiring knowledge about this reality (methodology). While the methodology can embrace both the knowledge system and methods, the *goal* of the research can exemplify the convergence of these aspects (Kovach, 2015).

Metaphorically, Wilson (2008) sees research as a ceremony or a journey into learning, in which methodology is the means of transportation. In this process, the researcher is actively involved and is considered as one of the participants (Weber-Pillwax, 2001). Motivations, influencers and inspirations should be clearly described (Kovach, 2009).

For proponents of the Indigenous paradigm, the methodology must be relational, and the choice must necessarily be made for so-called participatory research. The methodology can then be modulated to adapt to the context, the people and the environment (Chilisa, 2011). This approach implies that research is not *about* a phenomenon or people, but rather *for* something. In this sense, a researcher's objective must be part of a social action aimed at liberation and emancipation for Indigenous Peoples (Owusu-Ansah & Mji, 2013). Research has a pragmatic purpose and should therefore only be carried out with a view to giving hope, promoting transformation and social change for Indigenous Peoples who are historically, politically and socially oppressed (Hart, 2010; Wilson, 2008).

For Ruwhiu and Cathro (2014), Indigenous methodologies are not so much about methods *per se* but are rather a philosophical position towards research participants which includes cultural protocols. For this reason, the methods typically employed include dreams by the researcher, as well as sharing circles, stories and observation strategies (Baskin, 2006; Ghel, 2017). For Kovach (2009), the use of a so-called narrative and self-reflective approach, which is embedded in Indigenous epistemology that honours several truths (or realities), is in tune with the *nisitohtamowin* paradigm (a Cree word that refers to "understanding with others" or "self-in-relation"). In addition, Indigenous methodologies must consider the political and historical context from a decolonizing perspective: "Indigenous people now want research and its designs to contribute to the self-determination and liberation struggles as defined

and controlled by their communities “ (Rigney, 1997, p. 1). This process of decolonization requires, among other things, the historical recognition that it is legitimate to define distinct methodologies for studies that affect Indigenous Peoples (Baskin, 2006).

In addition, some researchers have conceptualized Indigenous theories and models that are rooted in their worldviews. For example, Wenger-Nabigon (2010), a social work researcher, advocates including an ecological position linking healing issues to a holistic vision of human development, through the Cree Medicine Wheel. Jiménez Estrada (2005), an Indigenous researcher of Mayan origin, uses the Ceiba, or tree of life, as a conceptual framework for his research. This representation honours both Mayan cosmology while giving visual form to the idea behind the research design. Kovach (2009), for her part, places Cree epistemology at the centre of her methodology, presenting its components in a circular manner. These include preparing the researcher and the research, ethics and the decolonizing perspective, the means of gathering knowledge and making meaning, and the way of giving back this knowledge. African Indigenous authors (Mkabela, 2005; Owusu-Ansah & Mji, 2013) illustrate these stages by referring to a *spiral* methodology, where participants (here, the term includes community members, researchers and decision-makers) are involved from beginning to end, and interact in synergy and in a dual direction.

Other authors have integrated the main dimensions of Indigenous systems of thought into theoretical models described as eclectic (Guay, 2017). Such is the case with the Indigenous ecospiritual approach to social work proposed by Coates and colleagues (2006), which incorporates insights from both Western and Indigenous approaches. They emphasize the importance of a holistic and spiritual vision, while including anti-oppressive and systemic theories in their work. Kovach (2009) notes that not every research project may require a purely “Indigenous” methodology: the choice depending on the purpose of the research and the context in which it is carried out.

#### *An Axiology Based on Respect, Reciprocity and Responsibility*

As in any other research paradigm, the Indigenous paradigm contains an axiology. This term refers to the ethics underlying the search for knowledge (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Determining how an Indigenous axiology specifically informs and guides this paradigm is difficult because a wealth of values, ethics and principles have been identified by researchers who situate their work in other paradigms. However, in our opinion, some elements deserve special attention.

First, ethics must be based on principles of non-interference and non-directiveness (Wilson, 2008). This means respecting the pace of

participants and not insisting on a direction to follow (Guay, 2017). Many researchers focus on the three Rs, which are essential: respect, reciprocity and responsibility (Weber-Pillwax, 2001; Wilson, 2008). For example, research must not only take, but it must also give back. Offerings (such as tobacco or sage) are part of such a process that respects Indigenous cultures and beliefs (Keewatin, 2002). The researcher's ego cannot be involved, since the actions of giving and receiving are considered equal (Cajete, 2000). Research is thus perceived as a co-construction, where the researcher is tasked with maintaining relationships throughout the research process (including the analysis, interpretation or dissemination of results). The proponents of the Indigenous paradigm are not only ecocentric (as mentioned above), but also cosmocentric (Beauchair, 2015). Indeed, reciprocity and respect transcend human relationships, the environment and non-human entities. Again, this refers to the principle of overall relationality (Wilson, 2008).

African Indigenous researchers talk about collective and interdependent ethics (Mkabela, 2005; Owusu-Ansah & Mji, 2013). The notion of respect also implies different ethics with respect to confidentiality when participating in a research project. For example, it is seen as respectful to name, if they so wish, the people involved in order to clearly position them as knowledge holders: "we need to honour the relationships *they* share with the knowledge *we* are writing down for our research. We don't claim ownership over it then" (Wilson, 2008, p. 115).

In addition, specific protocols for research involving Indigenous Peoples have been developed and guidelines are grouped under the acronym OCAP® (Ownership, Control, Access and Possession). This means that researchers must recognize that Indigenous Peoples collectively own the results, that they can exercise control over the research, that they can access the data and that it does not belong to the researchers, but to the communities themselves (First Nations Centre, 2007).

### **Comparing the Indigenous Paradigm with Other Paradigms: A Useful Exercise?**

In order to better inform social work researchers wishing to integrate their studies into the Indigenous paradigm, we initially wanted to make an exhaustive comparison with other existing paradigms. However, several authors disagree as to whether this benchmarking effort is truly useful and necessary. On the one hand, some reiterate the importance of setting paradigms in opposition to one another (Hampton, 2000), since the researcher must make a paradigmatic choice by considering all the dimensions underlying it: "deciding to reject one paradigm is always simultaneously choosing to accept another, and the judgment leading to this choice involves a comparison between the two paradigms" (Kuhn, 1983, p. 115 – unofficial translation). In addition, many researchers

have reaffirmed the importance of research involving Indigenous Peoples being based on their own worldviews and their own knowledge systems (Sinclair, Hart & Bruyere, 2009; Smith, 2005). In this context, going through the effort of comparing them could be seen as a way of rebalancing power, with a view to globally achieving potential harmony in the world of research.

On the other hand, some researchers argue that comparing or contrasting two thought patterns is equivalent to trying to prove that the Indigenous paradigm is legitimate, which is unnecessary and may even disempower it (Singh & Major, 2017). To this end, Wilson (2008) states: “ Critiquing other research paradigms or justifying my own through citing others would constitute a recognition of their jurisdiction over Indigenous research. It would be giving away the power” (p. 42). Moreover, criticizing other paradigms as a strategy to promote the Indigenous paradigm would erode the underlying beliefs on which it is based: the fact that everything is seen on the same footing makes comparisons pointless (Wilson, 2008). Thus, several Indigenous authors seek to demonstrate the coexistence of different systems of thought, rather than perpetuating confrontation or opposition between them. This seems to be a conundrum: justifying or comparing the paradigm may suggest a subordinate relationship to dominant paradigms, but not doing so may isolate research conducted within the Indigenous paradigm from the intrinsic relationships within science.

While there is no unanimity on the comparative effort, it may be possible to make some observations as to the points of convergence between certain dominant paradigms. For example, Kovach (2009) and Wilson (2008) highlight that both the constructivist and the Indigenous paradigms emphasize the multiple realities that are socially constructed. Moreover, a growing body of literature by Indigenous researchers attests to the interpretive, subjective, relational and participatory nature of Indigenous knowledge (Hart, 2010; Kovach, 2009; Little Bear, 2000), which can be reflected in the constructivist, critical and participatory paradigms. The Indigenous paradigm appears to have other points of convergence with the critical paradigm, both of which emphasize that realities are shaped by social, political, cultural and economic contexts. The notions of resistance, decolonization, struggle and emancipation are also at the heart of these two paradigms (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Indigenous researchers have acknowledged the arrival of the critical paradigm because it challenges the ideological hegemony of science, and some even mention that feminist and anti-oppressive research has inspired the development of the Indigenous paradigm (Ghel, 2017).

In addition, the multiple interactions between people and the Cosmos (the visible and the invisible, the living and the non-living) as well as the relational and holistic aspects at the heart of the Indigenous paradigm,

seem to be found, to some extent, within the participatory paradigm. It should also be noted that some Indigenous researchers (Ghel, 2017; Kovach, 2009) recognize the contributions of qualitative research in general, developed by Western trends, since they have helped create a space for relational and narrative methodologies in which Indigenous methodologies are partly embedded.

Of course, these points of convergence also reveal the fundamental differences between the Indigenous paradigm and others. The positivist paradigm appears to be its counterpart, since it seeks to generalize experiences and identify universal truths that minimize differences (Thomas & Bellefeuille, 2006). Considering objective realities as superior to subjective ideas is disputed by various proponents to the Indigenous paradigm (Keewatin, 2002; Hart, 2010). In a similar vein, Tafoya (1995) explains that positivist and post-positivist research encourages researchers to silence a part of themselves (their intuitions, dreams, emotions) in order to fit into a rigid framework that denies the reliability or validity of knowledge acquired through non-objective or unverifiable means (such as spirituality and the invisible world). Moreover, Simpson (2000) argues that for most research paradigms, spiritual knowledge is not recognized and treated as the foundation of knowledge. While Indigenous methodologies may sometimes approach qualitative methodologies, some researchers mention, in light of the differences presented, that they are unique methodologies, with a distinct epistemological (relational and spiritual) basis (Kovach, 2009; Saini, 2012).

### **Indigenous Paradigm in Social Work: Overcoming Challenges**

The creation of the Indigenous research paradigm has given researchers a voice and affirmed the value of Indigenous knowledge, which has long (and still) been marginalized. Disciplines such as social work, which have played a major role in developing general perceptions of the “Indigenous problem” (Blackstock, 2009), are now being challenged by academics and practitioners who are calling for a decolonization of both research and practice. Indeed, social work is largely influenced by dominant culture and ideologies (Hugman, 2009). Twenty years ago, Indigenous issues were virtually absent from university social work programs in Quebec (Guay, 2017). Although Indigenous epistemologies and approaches are increasingly “accepted” within the profession (ACFTS, 2014), they remain “marginalized or seen as subordinate to emerging strategies and techniques of the dominant paradigm” (McKenzie & Morissette, 2002, p. 262 – unofficial translation). Universities continue to teach essentially Western paradigms, which may be explained by the fact that the academic world is not culturally, politically and ideologically neutral. For many, social work still acts as an agent of colonization, attempting to apply inappropriate theoretical and practical models (Baskin 2006; Gray,

Coates, Yellow Bird & Hetherington, 2013). This contributes not only to intellectual colonization, but also to the devaluation and marginalization of the Indigenous research paradigm.

It is therefore essential to overcome this persistent Western influence within the profession by including Indigenous theories, models and epistemologies. To do so, the latter must first acknowledge its complicity in the colonial project, collaborate with Indigenous Peoples and make room for them to showcase their knowledge and understanding of research (Blagg et al., 2018). Non-Indigenous researchers and practitioners must learn to operate in a new relationship with Indigenous Peoples, where they retain the freedom to determine their own paradigms, theories and approaches, as well as how they wish to institutionalize (or not) this knowledge (Baskin, 2006). Given the relatively recent creation of the Indigenous paradigm and its still “marginal” nature, there is still only limited research in this field of social work to date. However, some Indigenous researchers are pioneers in the profession, such as Kovach (2006) and Absolon (2011). These authors have undertaken research projects using the Indigenous paradigm to engage with Indigenous doctoral students, particularly in social work, who place their work at the heart of this same paradigm and use Indigenous worldviews in their quest for knowledge. The primary objectives of these research projects are to highlight the Indigenous paradigm and methodologies and make them visible (Absolon, 2011) while emphasizing the many challenges faced by students when conducting their research. Sinclair (2009), on the other hand, builds on her research on transracial adoption experienced by Indigenous children to suggest culturally safe approaches to social work (Baskin & Sinclair, 2015). This reflects the pragmatic and empowering nature of studies within the Indigenous paradigm. Other researchers such as Hart (2010) and Wenger-Nabigon (2010) have conceptualized social work theories that are rooted in Indigenous worldviews, that draw on their traditions and that work in synergy with Western theories of social work. This enabling of Indigenous perspectives stems from their desire to assert their autonomy by questioning the dominant society’s power, in terms of both research and practice.

Thus, contemporary social work faces significant challenges and must not be limited to mere “cultural adaptation”, as Blackstock (2009) points out: “[t]he social work profession needs to stop saying they are applying culturally appropriate services to Indigenous peoples by simply adapting social work mainstream model, values, beliefs and standards” (p. 202). In 1996, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) reiterated that respect for Indigenous knowledge and worldviews should not be exclusively part of a “special” project or program but should be

one of the main responsibilities of educational institutions. Promoting the existence of the Indigenous paradigm in educational institutions (through Indigenous researchers, for example) is one of the first steps in reconfiguring the profession and integrating worldviews that are different from, but equally legitimate to, Western thinking. These efforts could help update self-determination, social justice and respect for cultural diversity, which are all values of social work. Many university social work programs (particularly in Quebec) are still a long way from this objective, with no Indigenous teachers and no mandatory courses on the realities of Indigenous Peoples or their specific epistemologies.

### Conclusion

This article has provided a better understanding of the historical context in which the Indigenous research paradigm has emerged. Those researchers quoted herein highlight the fact that Western thought, particularly in social work, has dominated the development of ideas, research and epistemologies through an oppressive colonial power (Guay, 2017). In this regard, some Indigenous researchers have chosen to reject existing paradigms and highlight their differences; others have instead drawn inspiration from them and developed their own paradigm. The emergence of alternative ways of thinking and doing science allows it to move forward one step: different - and sometimes incompatible - perspectives compel each other to a greater articulation of their ideas and contribute to the reflection and development of new knowledge. Many supporters of the Indigenous paradigm call for an epistemological plurality, where differing frameworks of thought coexist. This brings to mind the principles of wampum belts: two rows represent Iroquois canoes and European ships, which sail in the same direction, respecting each other's laws, customs, traditions and independence (Guay, 2017). These two rows are often separated by white lines, meaning friendship, peace and respect, to illustrate how the two distinct nations are continuously interconnected (Anderson & Neumann, 2012). Social work research and the inherent values of the profession are well positioned to reconcile these two worlds, giving a place and legitimacy to the Indigenous paradigm. As Keewatin (2002) points out, "in order for a shift to occur in our society's way of being, we must first understand that other ways of perceiving the world exist and we must be open to experiences of the heart that can help our mind move" (p. 82).

### NOTES

- 1 It should be noted that the vast majority of the literature reviewed for this text is in English, with the inclusion of some Indigenous words or expressions. This may be a strategy used by researchers to make their work accessible to international readers, while trying to preserve the symbolic,



cultural and spiritual aspects of their research. Smith (1999) might call these strategic concessions allowing two different worlds (Western and Indigenous) to enter into a relationship.

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