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Indigenising & Decolonising Social Innovation: Lessons for Systemic Design

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> Ninanâskomon enahipayik ôta kâwîcihitâsoyân, ôma kahatoskâtamân, kawihtamâtakok niya niteyihcikewin kahkiyaw ohci kiyawâw.
>
> Sâkihitowin ahcahkowan.
>
> I give thanks for the opportunity to be here, to do this work and to share my thoughts with each of you.
>
> In the spirit of love.

Indigenous worldviews have been rooted in systems thinking for thousands of years. Many Indigenous epistemologies are based on holistic, universalist, and de-centralized modes of perceiving the world and its natural systems. These stand in contrast to dominant Western epistemologies which are based on linear, hierarchical, and discrete modes of thinking. The creation and imposition of settler colonial systems from these modes of thinking, rooted in values of competition and dominance, bear responsibility for many problematic events that occurred under colonization such as the creation of the Indian Residential School system.

Viewed this way, I remember that systemic design is a tool envisioned to leverage social change but, even as a well-intentioned application of mostly Western philosophies for making systems change, I can clearly see the systems it

purports to reform have harmed and continue to cause harm to Indigenous peoples today. Additionally, where Indigenous perspectives have informed and shaped Western epistemologies about complex systems, it has often been done without credit. An example of this is in our own backyard, with Abraham Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs" based in some part (and largely unacknowledged) on the Blackfoot teachings from Southern Alberta (Blackstock, 2011) that Maslow himself experienced.

Given these impacts, we must tread lightly. Social innovation shows promise as an important tool in the reparation of our customary laws, our languages, our kinship practices, and our cultural traditions. It can reform and reimagine policy work in ways that are flexible, adaptable and can support our communities' and nations' needs, given the right contexts. It would be a mistake to seek out a pan-Indigenous approach, but engaging in multiple Indigenous epistemologies, building relationships and grounding our work in relational accountability provides a valuable first step in working together under right relations. As Indigenous communities and the Canadian state untangle complex issues such as child and family service systems, or address the needs of nations like constitution-building, or ask ourselves how might we create a fully immersive school system rooted in the land, social innovation represents a way in which Indigenous communities can come together and explore the magnitude of where we are now, how we got here, and what we will need to move forward.

Keywords: systemic racism, colonialism, antiracism, oppression, Indigenous, decolonization

RSD Topic: Cases & Practice, Methods & Methodology, Society & Culture

Description

Indigenous social innovation is not a new practice as Indigenous people have always had to adapt to changing environments. Indigenous people hold the wisdom to address complex issues; however, they live in systems that privilege certain groups. In order to do good work, everyone must understand the reality of Indigenous folks on Turtle Island and ensure that they are not coming from the place of the saviour. In order to do this work, 'allies' must accept that this process is critical of the systems that serve you so it may be an uncomfortable process. Most often, non-Indigenous peoples (with settler backgrounds) rely on the emotional labour of Indigenous peoples and organizations to help them work through their own racism. This workshop can provide a greater understanding of this dynamic. For these reasons, it is intended to be held in person for maximum effectiveness.

This workshop will share an understanding of models of social participation from a (Canadian) Indigenous point of view including understanding key concepts and identifying effective examples of decolonial practises in action based on my work with the Edmonton Shift Lab, the Wahkohtowin Law and Governance Lodge at the University of Alberta, the Skookum Anti-Racism Lab and other systemic design initiatives in Canada. For those practitioners who work with Indigenous communities but aren't sure how to proceed, it can introduce the concept of bringing a Reconciliation lens to their work. Though our work draws from the teachings of the Cree, Salteaux, Dene, Nakota Sioux, Metis and other Indigenous communities here in Treaty 6 Territory in Alberta, sharing these learning with an international audience can provide insights into larger themes of decolonization, anti-oppressive practises and anti-racist actions they can take.

Provisional Schedule

1. Historical Context: Brief backgrounder on the shape of Crown-Indigenous relations
2. Current Realities: Examples of systemic failures today.
3. Future Imaginings: Reconciliation, Decolonization and System-level interventions.
4. Conclusion: Extractive knowledge is the old paradigm. The new paradigm is about building relationships and reframing the problems.

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