

INDIGENOUS RESEARCH METHODS

Margaret Kovach starts by telling us “Indigenous research is about discovering new understandings as these relate to Indigenous peoples,” that “Indigenous research” is “an inclusive term” that includes both “qualitative” and “quantitative” research.¹ Concerning the former category, we learn that “qualitative methodologies applied in Indigenous research may include, but are not limited to, grounded theory, ethnography, and action research,” as well as “projects integrating Indigenous methodologies.”² Kovach notes that “consistent with the above definition, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) defines Indigenous research as research that may encompass different research methodologies,”³ that “researchers who conduct Indigenous research, whether they are Indigenous or non-Indigenous themselves, commit to respectful relationships with all Indigenous peoples and communities.”⁴ Such research is “respectful” insofar as it is conducted “from an Indigenous ethical stance.”⁵

“For a methodology to be correctly identified as an Indigenous methodology,” Korpach continues, “it must be anchored in Indigenous epistemology, theory, ethics, story, and community,” a criterion, she adds, that is “not always met in Indigenous research.”⁶ While both “Indigenous methodologies and Western research methodologies can both fall under the umbrella of Indigenous research,” Korpach continues, they nonetheless “are methodologically distinct from each other.”⁷ She explains that “the thinking (philosophy) and doing (method) in research methodology are guided by the research purpose, question, and aim,” and while “within qualitative research, the methods may be similar across different methodologies; however, philosophical and theoretical perspectives will often differ.”⁸ “The theory choice will be influential in all aspects of research but specifically so in analysis and interpretation,” she writes; “therefore, it is consequential to pay attention to theory within a given methodology, including Indigenous methodologies.”⁹ More than paying attention, Korpach’s commitment is “to focus, make visible, and uphold Indigenous knowledge systems.”¹⁰

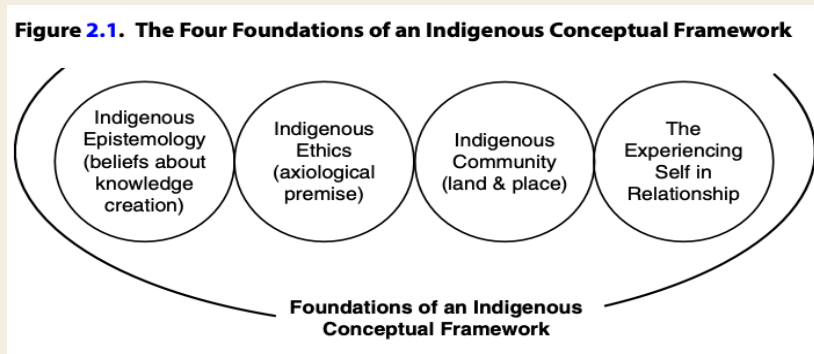
“A clearly articulated conceptual framework in research makes visible our assumptions about the world and how we will proceed in conducting and interpreting our research from that perspective,” Korpach continues, “thus, self-referent knowledge will coexist alongside framework theories from existing research (e.g., Indigenous, feminist, critical, postmodern, and so forth).”¹¹ Moreover, “a conceptual framework will make, or ought to make, transparent the beliefs (theories) that are guiding method choices and the interpretation and dissemination of the research,” as “explicit conceptual frameworks allow us the opportunity to be honest about our perspective as researchers and to illustrate how this perspective impacts the methods chosen.”¹² She

tells us that “a conceptual framework is a plan that guides the researcher in developing a research question; contemplating epistemology, theory, and ethics; engaging with community; self-situating; considering existing knowledge; hearing story; choosing methods and analytical strategies; and presenting the research and arranging for reciprocity in disseminating findings.”¹³ Korvach emphasizes that “a conceptual framework is fluid with a cyclical sequencing – it is not a linear endeavour.”¹⁴

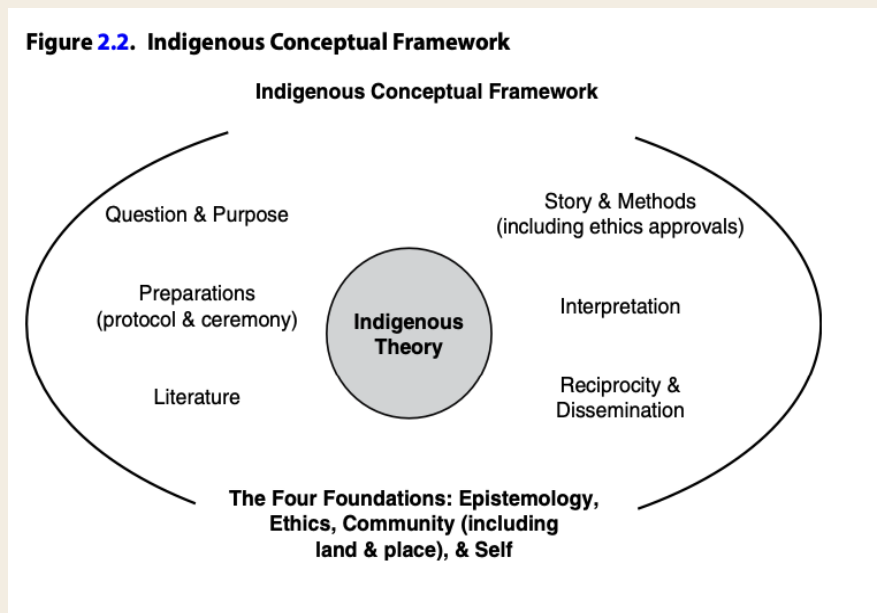
Korvach recalls her own “doctoral research, when I was considering several metaphoric possibilities to conceptually frame my overarching research design, I initially considered the symbolism of alder posts in a Nêhiyaw ceremonial teepee,” as “posts (or poles) offer a structural foundation for the hides or branches that enfold them.”¹⁵ We learn that the “ceremonial teepee gives shelter and holds ancient knowledges inside,” this among “many examples for conceptual frameworks expressed through metaphor found in Indigenous methodological research.”¹⁶ Despite herself using standard social science concepts like “framework,” Korvach warns that “when applied to Indigenous research, Western research conceptual frameworks heighten the potential for a Eurocentrism that reproduces deficit theorizing of Indigenous experience.”¹⁷ Not only the term “framework” seems out-of-sync with her commitment to “focus, make visible, and uphold Indigenous knowledge systems” (see above), so does her use of “applied.” Aoki points out that “applying is reproducing something general in a concrete situation. This reproductive view of application embraces the view that application is separated from understanding, and, in fact, follows it. It is an instrumental view.”¹⁸ But then Korvach seems to share Aoki’s critique, writing that “applying conceptual framework language to Nêhiyaw ways of knowing is a strategic concession,” as the

“term does not capture the relational, holistic flavour of this worldview, and the term *conceptual* privileges thought as the sole pathway to knowledge, placing intuition, spirit, and experience as secondary.”¹⁹ That issue acknowledged, Korvach still decides that “the structure and form of Western research framework language can offer a portal for the inclusion of visual, symbolic, and metaphorical representations of a research design that mitigates the linearity of written text alone.”²⁰

Korvach explains that “there are at least four core foundations in an Indigenous conceptual framework: Indigenous epistemology, Indigenous ethics, Indigenous community (including land and place), and the self”;



“Figure 2.2 is one way to present an Indigenous conceptual framework; there are others using culturally grounded metaphors.”²¹



“Within Indigenous methodologies,” Korvach continues, “metaphor and symbolism are used to express Indigenous conceptual frameworks,” reminding us that: “Conceptual ideas live in the realm of the intangible until expressed in tangible form. Metaphors are an effective technique for giving ideas form.”²² She suggests that “metaphors often arise from place and facilitate holistic, abductive interpretations,” that “within Indigenous societies, metaphors and symbolism are common communication techniques,” adding: “As Indigenous peoples, we use metaphors in our

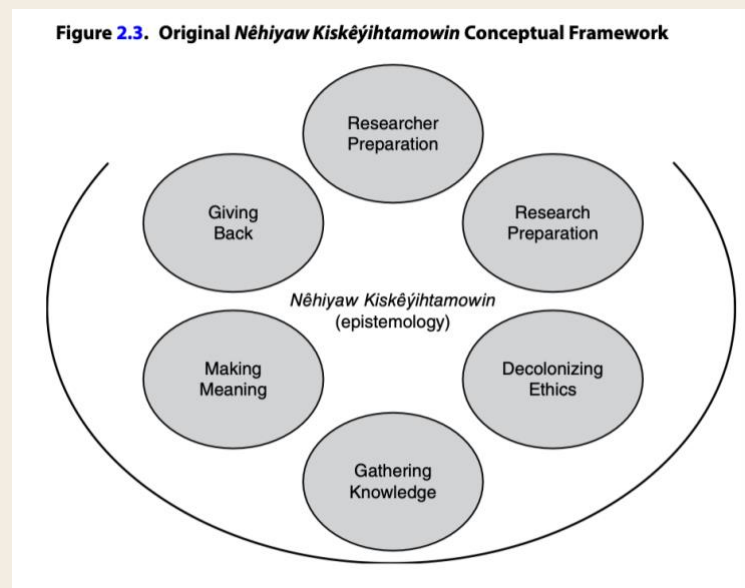
speech all the time,” as “the use of metaphor in Indigenous conceptual framing allows for a variety of expressions representing diverse experiences and symbols from place.”²³ Then Korvach returns to her earlier reservation concerning “framework,” writing: “Because so much of Indigenous ways of knowing is internal, personal, and experiential, creating one standardized framework for Indigenous research is impossible and inevitably soul sapping for Indigenous people.”²⁴ Actually, “reservation” understates her concern: “Too often Indigenous methodologies have been equated with the inclusion of particular methods, such as sharing circles, community-based partners (e.g., Indigenous advisory circles), or auto-ethnographic study, alongside a statement on ethical guidelines involving research with Indigenous people and/or communities,” adding that these “methods” are “problematic because the conceptual framing propelling these methods is often embedded in a normative, thus invisible, Western intellectual tradition.”²⁵ The concept of “framework” maybe problematic – as it was for Aoki – but “metaphor” is not; Korvach cites Ahenakew, who asserted that using metaphor and poetry to disrupt sense-making and prompt sense-sensing in the experience of readers,²⁶ a view Korvach considers a “helpful approach to revealing the contradictions and limitations of introducing Indigenous knowledge (and methodologies) in Western contexts.”²⁷

That concern acknowledged, Korvach then proceeds to present a “Nêhiyaw conceptual research framework,” referencing again her dissertation research, wherein she was “exploring a question steeped in Indigenous culture and sought to learn about this question from an Indigenous insider perspective,” clear that “no matter how simpatico the Western research design, a methodology couched in a Western conceptual framing would result in a Western gaze on the analysis,” adding: “Western conceptual framing would take me down a road, but to a different destination than my research purpose intended.”²⁸ As a consequence of this realization, “I put aside Western qualitative research methodologies with their abstract words and returned to Indigenous teachings,” at least to scholarly ones: “Based upon the scholarly writing at the time, Indigenous scholars were referencing Indigenous thought as an interpretive form of inquiry,”²⁹ akin to Aoki’s reconceptualization of “application” as “mindfulness of the situation allows the person in the situation to recognize that application is a hermeneutic act, remembering that being in the situation is a human being in his becoming”; such “mindfulness allows the listening to what it is that a situation is asking.”³⁰

Despite her concerns, Korvach still uses the term “framework,” reporting “I began to conceptualize a research framework based upon Nêhiyaw (Plains Cree) knowledges,” relying on “Nêhiyaw scholar Shawn Wilson’s ... influential writing on Indigenous methodologies to think through an Indigenous conceptual framework.”³¹ “Alongside this intellectual and theoretical foraging;” Korvach reports, “I was drawn to non-traditional, abductive forms of knowledge found within Nêhiyaw teachings. I started dreaming about my research. One night I dreamt of a sheet of paper with a

circle nested in a circle. I knew it was about my research. I woke early in the morning hours and quickly scrawled the dream image in my research journal.”³²

“The remainder of this chapter focuses on the Nêhiyaw conceptual framework: (1) “Nêhiyaw Kiskêyîhtamowin (epistemology)”, (2) “decolonizing ethics”, (3) “researcher preparation (involving cultural protocols)”, (4) “research preparation (involving the standardized qualitative research design)”, (5) “meaning making (of knowledges gathered)”, and (6) “giving back.”³³ Quite the mix of Indigenous and non-Indigenous concepts, I worry that “standardized qualitative research design” possibly obscures the specificity of the others.



Concerning “Nêhiyaw knowledge epistemology,” Korpach raises the question of what constitutes knowledge, including “whether subjective knowing can count as legitimate knowledge.”³⁴ She writes: “When I speak of Nêhiyaw knowledges (e.g., values, language), it should be assumed that they are nested, created, and recreated within the context of relationships with other living beings.”³⁵ Scientific research also takes place “within the context of relationships with other living beings,” but these relationships must remain contextual, that is not influencing research procedure or outcome. In humanities and qualitative social science research relationships are also assumed, but their nature might be made explicit – self-positioning on occasion almost obligatory³⁶ - especially if they have contributed to “findings,” whether theoretical or “empirical.” Perhaps the qualitative research design that Korpach employed was not so “standardized” after all. Indeed, Korpach reports that “a decolonizing ethical imperative is integral to this Nêhiyaw conceptual framework.”³⁷ What this means is that “Nêhiyaw epistemology, ethics, and theory are centred,” enabling her to claim that her “research framework incorporates an Indigenous theoretical positioning with a

decolonizing emphasis,” adding: “A decolonizing emphasis is capable of understanding the felt experience of colonialism and its impact on Nêhiyaw peoples and knowledges.”³⁸

“The term *researcher preparation* describes the experiential aspect of the research,” Korvach continues, “including space for the inward knowing arising from personal experience.”³⁹ She refers to “these personal preparations as *miskâsowin*,” explaining that “*miskâsowin* is a Nêhiyaw word that means to go to the centre of your-self to find your own belonging.”⁴⁰ “From the oral teachings and writings of Indigenous peoples of different nations,” Korvach adds – sounding somewhat like René Descartes⁴¹ – “the message is consistent – all we can know for certain is our own experience.”⁴² “The Nêhiyaw conceptual framework, as presented, includes methodological space for reflexivity and acknowledges inward knowledge,” the latter also the focus of the method of *currere*,⁴³ itself derived from exclusively European sources. As in *currere*, “from “a Nêhiyaw point of view, the attention to inward knowing is not optional,” as “inward knowing is about spiritual preparation,” implying a “connection with our most sacred inner self.”⁴⁴ “Spirituality,” as Korvach defines it, “is a connection to a larger force external to one’s self, whether this be a god force or the power of nature.”⁴⁵ “From a traditional Nêhiyaw perspective,” she explains, “seeking out Elders, attending to holistic epistemologies, and participating in cultural catalyst activities (dream, ceremony, prayer) are means for accessing inward knowledge and the spirit force.”⁴⁶ She notes that “Indigenous scholars speak about personal preparations in other ways, such as the inclusion of ceremony in guiding their research.”⁴⁷

“In line with Nêhiyaw epistemology, which honours sharing story as a means for knowing, conversation is a non-structured method of gathering knowledge,” meaning that “the term *interview* does not capture the full essence of this approach.”⁴⁸ What Korvach undertook “was very much a combination of reflection, story, and dialogue,” very much a “conversational method.”⁴⁹ She invokes the “Nêhiyaw word, *tâpwê*, which means to speak the truth,” implying “trustworthiness or, relationally speaking, credibility.”⁵⁰ In Korvach’s judgment, “presenting the conversations and talks through a condensed conversation format meets the Nêhiyaw criteria of *tâpwê*.”⁵¹ Moreover, “participants reviewed and approved their transcripts.”⁵² Was that review ceremonial, or was trustworthiness a consideration? In any case, with approval Korvach “inwardly reflected on the stories (i.e., interview conversations),” then “undertook a thematic analysis,” what she characterizes as “a Western method of thematic analysis.”⁵³ “This was not an Indigenous method, which I acknowledge,” Korvach admits, adding: “I experienced some uneasiness in the analytical process at times because it felt like I was extracting the findings from the context of people’s stories,” appearing to ascribe the decision to others (perhaps her doctoral supervisory committee?): “In externalizing the data, I was cautioned about the limitations of an Indigenous conceptual framework for research in a textual universe.”⁵⁴ Defending her compliance, Korvach asserts: “It is Indigenous theorizing in the analysis that

differentiates Indigenous and Western research findings from one another.”⁵⁵ Returning to the former, Korvach points out that “disseminating Indigenous research findings requires guardianship responsibilities.”⁵⁶ She notes that “it can be difficult for Indigenous researchers to determine how much cultural knowledge to include in a textual format,” but Korvach, as a “Nêhiyaw researcher, ... had access to documented accounts of Plains Cree culture by Nêhiyaw Elders in a variety of published forms ... [who] allowed this knowledge to be shared in the public domain.”⁵⁷ Still, Korvach remains concerned:

The language in this chapter uses contemporary research vernacular to communicate Indigenous thought because words have power – research words have power. But the thing is, if we rub away the layer of powerful research lingo from Indigenous conceptual framing, what lies beneath is Indigenous knowledges – knowledges that have existed since time immemorial and will prevail so long as Indigenous peoples walk this earth.⁵⁸

I don’t share Korvach’s sense that terms like “data” and “frameworks” and “application” have power, but even to the extent they do, I’m unsure Korvach escapes what is for her project – for much Indigenous scholarship – what seems a dilemma of cultural contamination.

A dilemma contamination was not for the early Pier Paolo Pasolini,⁵⁹ for whom “*contamination* was a literary technique”⁶⁰ – as it appears it was for Korvach. if leaving her “uneasy” (as she reports above). Maybe more for her as it was for Fanon, as Gendzier points out: “He [Fanon] concluded that a racist society contaminates all of its subjects, and that the individual resolution of the problem was not possible within a social context that perpetuated the condition.”⁶¹ I’m guessing Korvach can take little comfort from either Pasolini’s embrace of contamination or from Appiah’s pronouncement that contamination is inevitable: “When people speak for an ideal of cultural purity, sustaining the authentic culture of the Asante or the American family farm, I find myself draw to *contamination* as the name for a counter-ideal,”⁶² as for Appiah “cultural purity is an oxymoron.”⁶³ While no counter-ideal, contamination is deemed inevitable by Harootunian: “In its desire to turn away from the global forces of capitalism, another suspect Western narrative that works to hegemonize, it trades in stereotypes and holism and the fantasy of locating a genuine, anticolonial nationalism uncontaminated by either the colonial epoch or capitalist penetration.”⁶⁴ Clearly it is not only “Western” – if by that term Harootunian means Europe or European-descent peoples – but also Indigenous, although North American Indigenous peoples are, geographically speaking, “Western,” a fact that returns us to the issue with which Korvach is concerned. Recall that Korvach is confident that “if we rub away the layer of powerful research lingo from Indigenous conceptual framing, what lies beneath is Indigenous knowledges.” The concept of palimpsest was not only metaphoric for Pasolini; also denoted the nature of reality, as Sartarelli notes:

The poet has come full circle, from the sacred language of pure poetry in his youth, through its contamination by time and history, and “back” to *hierosemy* – that is, the holiness of the sign, in all its complexity and “impurity,” its philological substrata. The sacred, at least for Pasolini, is still preserved alongside its profane form. But for how long?⁶⁵

Recall that, for Korvach, Indigenous knowledges are not “alongside” but “beneath” that “research lingo.” Buried, for how long can Indigenous knowledges breathe, survive as living metaphors⁶⁶? Or, being buried, are Indigenous knowledges embalmed inside non-Indigenous conceptual coffins?

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ENDNOTES

¹ 2021, 41. Rather than “new understandings,” I should have thought “Indigenous research” would be about recovering old even ancient understandings, possible pre-contact ones?

² Ibid.

³ 2021, 42.

⁴ Quoted in 2021, 42.

⁵ 2021, 42.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ 2021, 43.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ 2021, 44.

¹² Ibid. The concept of “self-referent” knowledge is what Gouldner termed “domain assumptions” (1970, 29-35).

¹³ 2021, 45.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ 2005 (1987), 154.

¹⁹ 2021, 46.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ 2021, 46-47.

²² 2021, 47.

²³ 2021, 47-48. Metaphor is pervasive in non-Indigenous thought as well, including in curriculum studies: Kliebard 2000.

²⁴ 2021, 48.

²⁵ 2021, 49.

²⁶ Quoted in 2021, 49.

²⁷ 2021, 49.

²⁸ 2021, 50.

²⁹ 2021, 51.

³⁰ 2005 (1987), 155.

³¹ 2021, 51.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ 2021, 52.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ See, for instance, Simpson 2002.

³⁷ 2021, 53.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ 2021, 54.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ “Cogito ergo sum” is his (in)famous line - <https://www.britannica.com/topic/cogito-ergo-sum> - but Descartes’ accomplishment is considerably more variegated: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes/>

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ https://search.yahoo.com/yhs/search?hspart=iba&hsimp=yhs-3&type=teff_10019_FFW_ZZ&grd=1&p=method+of+curre

⁴⁴ 2021, 54.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ 2021, 54-55.

⁴⁷ 2021, 55.

⁴⁸ 2021, 56.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ 2021, 57.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ 2021, 58.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ 2021, 59.

⁵⁹ Jewell (1992, 46) points out that “in the 1960s, when Pasolini begins to identify the ideology of freedom with the false liberatory values of neocapitalism,” a “crisis” occurs for him, as “total contamination” meant the “death of poetry.”

⁶⁰ Jewell 1992, 46. The “crisis” which Jewell names must have occurred in the late 1960s, as in 1965 Pasolini invokes “contamination” in his formulation of cinema as “the written language of reality.” Bruno (1994, 93-94) explains: “Conceiving of the real and cinema as systems of signs, inhabited by the trace of other signs, Pasolini inscribes them in a process that eludes definition, and affirms endless textuality. Based on polysemic signification, his semiotics enacts the play of contamination and intertextuality.”

⁶¹ 1973, 52.

⁶² 2006, 111.

⁶³ 2006, 113.

⁶⁴ 2002, 172.

⁶⁵ 2014, 50.

⁶⁶ Krall 1979.