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## Indigenous Identity in the Canadian University

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Indigenous Identity in the Canadian University

Jamie S. Powless

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## Abstract

The Head and Heart program has provided me, along with other Indigenous scholars at Western the opportunity to explore the foundations of Indigenous research and then a chance to conduct our own research projects. Through this experience, I had the chance to begin my research project from scratch, and for my own research question as opposed to joining an already existing project. For my research I took a personal approach and examined the Indigenous scholar experience and how the topic of Indigenous identity is challenged within the Canadian post-secondary education system.

*Keywords:* Indigenous, identity, education, post-secondary, Canada

## **Indigenous Identity in the Canadian University**

*She:koli, Jamie ni:yukyats, Ohkwa:li niwaki'talo:t^, On^yota'a:ka niwakuhsyo:t^*

Hi, my name is Jamie, I am bear clan and from Oneida Nation. I am an undergrad student at Western University, going into my second year in the faculty of social science. My approach for my research involved reviews of journal articles and literature reviews. Towards the end of this paper, I included aspects of a self-study methodology, mainly to reflect on my own identity.

### **Terminology**

#### **Encompassing Language**

Navigating the academic world as an Indigenous person requires a connection to identity, however in the academic world there have been several changes to the terminology that we use to describe ourselves, and for others to identify us. During my qualitative research consisting largely of literature reviews and journal articles, there was not a singular term that is used consistently. For instance, many resources from the 2000's and 2010's, as a product of their time, typically use *Aboriginal* to identify people as an umbrella term those of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit nations. Language is an everchanging facet for knowledge and identifying language for Indigenous people has evolved in academic spaces since settlers arrived. In my own life, I have found myself using each of these different labels interchangeably, however for the purposes of this research paper, and within academic contexts, I will use *Indigenous* as my primary term for identification (with some exceptions). *Indigenous* is more accepted as the scholarly term as it is notably used in legal documents and recognized by the United Nations (Henry, 2012), as well as being a term that is used internationally.

## **The Homogenization of Indigenous People**

Encompassing language creates a sense of inclusion and community for most, however, for Indigenous people in Canada, it can be limiting at times. In Henry's (2012) study which conducted interviews with Indigenous faculty at Canadian universities, several different opinions on terminology were recorded. Respondents that were positive toward using *Indigenous* do so because of a common history we share, which gives us strength in unity. However, the participants that rejected it did so because it was not specific to Canada. Some participants preferred the broad identifying language, while others would prefer a more specific referential.

*Aboriginal* is the legal term used in Canada that refers specifically to the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) (Henry, 2012). In the study, some faculty members rejected this term because it only includes the FNMI and can be limiting Indigenous people to being labelled by what the government pushes as an all-encompassing label. As one Indigenous faculty member put it; "I think that is rather homogenizing. Those groups are very distinct and come from distinct places" (Henry, 2012). Distinctiveness is important for any aspect of identity, and not every Indigenous person embraces the same labels to define themselves. Indigenous people have the autonomy to identify with a label or to reject one entirely that tries to reduce them under one large label. In academic settings, terminology is especially important, and as language is ever evolving for Indigenous people, there can be instances where using outdated language can be harmful to some.

So why is cultural identity important for Indigenous academics? There is the idea that a strong cultural identity can act as a protective factor in many situations, but especially within post-secondary education where it is viewed as "an educational system that is not necessarily constructed with the Aboriginal student in mind (Gallop & Bastien, 2016). The inherent

challenges to Indigenous identity that persist in the post-secondary education system, can be combatted by an individual's sense of self and culture. In addition to cultural identity, self-efficacy is a crucial factor in each student's commitment to education (Gallop & Bastien, 2016). Intertwined, those two factors can supplement success for Indigenous scholars and how they navigate their education, and in their belief that they can succeed.

### **History of Indigenous Education**

The origins of western academic institutions and the relationship with Indigenous people has not been a positive one. As Provost (2022) put it; "we understand education as the tool that drove assimilation process across so called Canada" in reference to the history of Indian residential schools.

### **The Residual Effects of Indian Residential Schools**

It is difficult to include the effects of residential schools in the history section of this research, as the lasting effects are still felt across Canada today. Historically, residential schools were meant as Canada's solution to ultimately erase Indigenous people and their identities under the guise of providing opportunities to the Indigenous youth (Pidgeon, 2016). Residential schools functioned under the belief that they could *kill* the Indian in the child.

"Perhaps as a result of the tragic experience of Indian residential schools, trust in educational institutions has not yet been fully rebuilt" (Henry, 2012). Residential schools were enacted to suppress Indigenous identity as well as to provoke fear, disgust, or disappointment in being Indigenous. Smoke (2017) pointed out that residential schools still had indirect effects on Indigenous people's viewpoint on education; "Being educated, being in the workforce already was seen as that this person is already assimilated into mainstream society, so no need to take their kids to residential school". When Indigenous people took agency over their own education

and entering the workforce, there was then the opportunity to take agency over their identity as well and did not have to go through the taxing experience of the schools.

### **Our Place as Indigenous Scholars/ “Walking in Two Worlds”**

Weenie (2010) detailed their own experience as an Aboriginal academic and could summarize the dilemma that is felt with the need to “reconcile my place between academia and my place of beginning”. Often, the Indigenous epistemologies do not align with Euro-Western ideologies (Louie, Poitras-Pratt, Hanson, & Ottmann, 2017) that are presented in the forefront of educational experiences, this can create a dilemma in how one chooses to express their Indigenous identity. The problem can stem from the fear of Indigenous knowledges and practices being devalued by people of authority, such as a university classroom (Louie, Poitras-Pratt, Hanson, & Ottmann, 2017). This issue can create a kind of dissonance and the idea that we need to separate our academic values and our traditional values, into separate entities.

### **My Story**

To reiterate the quote, used prior from Weenie (2010): “One of the dilemmas that I contend with is the need to reconcile my place between academia and my place of beginning”. This quote was interesting to me as a first-year undergraduate student who did not know what to expect when I started university. What I learned from my research, as well as from my fellow Indigenous students in the Head & Heart program, is that everyone is at a different place in their journey whether that be in terms of age and life experience, as well as discovering or embracing their Indigenous identity. And with that, there were a diverse group of FNMI students, mostly from different nations.

In honour of my self-study methodology, I would like to share some of my own story that inspired my research and details my journey. Starting in this brand-new environment at the beginning of the year was an intimidating experience. I have lived on the reserve for my whole life, but at the beginning of the 2021 school year, I moved to London, Ontario, away from my family for the first time. It was relatively easy considering that the campus is only about a forty-five minute drive from my home, so I was not necessarily isolated. However, there is undoubtedly a significant difference in living on reserve versus off reserve as a student. Of course, there is a sense of community living on the reserve, however the community is based entirely around people of the same background. When moving into a dormitory on campus, there was inevitably a very tight knit community built since our living spaces were all so close in proximity, with people of all different backgrounds. Now this may sound ignorant, but I never truly had friends that were not Indigenous, I have had my same group of friends since preschool. So, when it came time to for new relationships in this new setting, I found myself suppressing my Indigenous identity to try and be more relatable to these other students. People tend to have preconceived notions about Indigenous people, and I suppose I was trying to distance myself from people's ideas of how I should be. Another issue I noticed was within the classroom. Perhaps not to the extent of the examples I explained above, but there have been outdated language in textbooks, and inaccurate representations of Indigenous people in lecture. In one of my tutorials, we discussed how Indigenous people are often spoken about as if they're "other worldly" or like fictional people from a story, without considering that there is one sitting in that very classroom.

To be fair, my issues were not what I would consider extreme, and my experience overall was quite positive. However, there was always this nagging feeling that I was not being truthful,



and in part I was not. This was more of an omission of information issue. However, this experience inspired me to examine the deeper-rooted issues within the post-secondary system for Indigenous students and led me to this point in my journey.

### **Conclusion**

As I learned through my experience in the Head & Heart program, research is all about unanswered questions, and my research question did not necessarily have a straightforward answer. However, for myself, I was able to find a meaning for my research, drawing from my own first-year experience in post-secondary education. The importance of research also involves finding meaning in what you do, and to examine what you would do differently. In the future of my research journey, I hope to expand on my learning here and potentially participate in larger scale research projects that go beyond just myself. I think that this was a great first exposure to Indigenous research practices and I hope to carry the knowledge I gained in the Head & Heart program with me throughout the rest of my post-secondary journey.

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