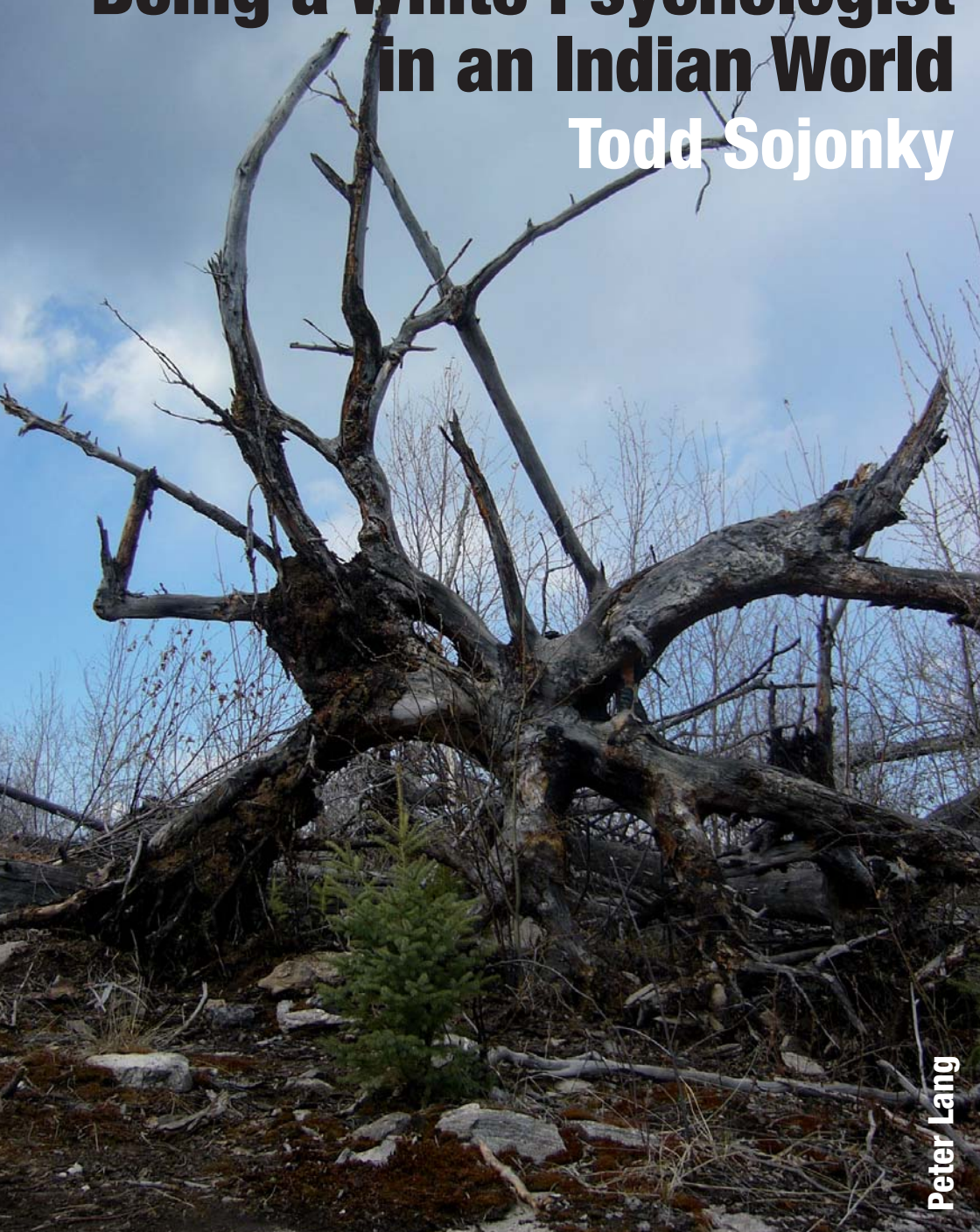


A Self-Study: Being a White Psychologist in an Indian World

Todd Sojonky



Who am I as a psychologist? This book examines the role of psychologists in cross-cultural settings and explores the value of self-knowledge in the practice of psychology. Today many indigenous people are still experiencing a colonial type of therapy that is rooted in power imbalances and a managed health care system. Through narrative, story, poetry and psychotherapy this book shows the importance of personal growth and informs the practice of being a 'good psychologist.' It asks the reader to consider how cross-cultural experiences influence professional psychology discourse and practices as well as to explore the relationships between dominant psychology systems and cultural enactments.

"Dr. Sojonky's dissertation is an exemplary demonstration of how academic research can be pursued with a story-telling approach to language, especially with attention to how language in all its manifestations both constructs and deconstructs our understanding of human being and becoming."

Dr. Carl Leggo, Professor University of British Columbia, Vancouver

Todd J. Sojonky holds a Ph.D. from the Educational Psychology program at the University of Regina (Canada). He is a registered doctoral psychologist with extensive experience in marriage and family counselling rooted in a transpersonal and relational approach to healing. Todd is well known for his motivational presentations and workshops. He has extensive clinical experience in the mainstream healthcare system and with the First Nations people throughout Canada. He currently works as a psychologist for Correctional Service Canada and operates a private practice in marriage and family therapy.

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Dedication

The years of work and hundreds of hours of therapy that brought these pieces together are for my wife Arlene and our children Jacob, Misha and Tia. Thank you for being there.

Abstract

This dissertation is a self-study that addresses my work as a psychologist, the impact of self upon client contact and the importance of psychologist awareness in a therapeutic experience. The context of my practice involved primarily, but not exclusively, indigenous peoples throughout Canada. The critical significance of the colonial experiences of First Nations people is a second lens through which my identity as white male psychologist is interpreted. The understanding of personal healing and spiritual growth as a part of the therapeutic experience are uniquely a part of the First Nations peoples and became central to the research process (Duran & Duran, 1995). The research story is not about First Nations peoples rather the impact a white male psychologist carries as privilege into clinical situations. First Nations people informed my practice and challenged me to consider who I am as a psychologist.

As a methodological framework I utilized narrative, story and personal psychotherapy to deconstruct self and interpret clinical practice. Personal development of an individual is highlighted by Northfield (1996) as an important outcome of self-study. By examining my motives, feelings, fears, and interests in relation to my work as a psychologist, I came to a better understanding of myself and, in turn, enhanced my practice and was able to offer insights for others in the “psychologist culture.” It became apparent that the white male view of psychology practice did not fit well within First Nations communities and that a typical office based approach would not be effective. Spirituality, understanding white privilege, and alternative approaches in how therapy was conducted were central research findings.

Preface

Self-study for purposes of self-understanding and professional development is an intensely personal experience. It has demanded that I deconstruct what I do, how I think and how I work as a professional. It has also required that I carefully protect the individuals with whom I worked and ensure their understanding of my intentions and ultimate goal. Indeed, the issue of hurt and harm is one of the central guiding ethical principles of practising as a psychologist. My *self* can not be separated from those I have come in contact with.

The people I worked with were mostly, but not exclusively, First Nations people and came from various communities throughout Canada. From my earliest point of contact, I was directed by the committee who hired me to consult with four community elders who would guide my work as a psychologist and assist me on a spiritual journey. The importance of spiritual growth was assumed. I was instructed to take four colors of cloth and a pouch of tobacco to each of the elders and ask them if they would help me with my “psychologist journey”. I was also directed to a sweat lodge keeper who would work with me while I was there. I was told that meeting with elders and participating in sweats would help me work with people in therapy more effectively. It is my understanding that these were traditional types of self-care.

I met with the four elders from different communities for a period of three years, often in their homes and occasionally at the various health stations in which I worked. Usually I made these journeys alone driving long distances and entering quite remote First Nations reserves. On two occasions a traditional helper went with me to introduce me to the elder in their language. We sat at a kitchen table sipping coffee as I listened to guidance in the form of stories and read many of my narratives to them. On each occasion my research was discussed and challenged; the idea that self-study would focus on me and what I was learning about being a “good psychologist” was clearly important to each of the elders. They instructed me to listen carefully to my life through prayer, meditation and sweats. Over the research period of five years, I attended approximately forty sweat lodge ceremonies where my research was blessed and I was challenged to be a better psychologist.

On four occasions I visited elders as a group so they could listen to my research proposal and offer their thoughts and feelings about the work. They felt strongly that I did not need permission to complete this research. Self-study was seen as a spiritual part of my growth as a psychologist, something that all psychologists should do. In fact, the process was seen as completely natural to them. The sweat lodge and pipe ceremonies were places that “everyone should go” in order to gain understanding. The only permission that I needed would come from the creator. To them this was a personal spiritual journey that would make me more effective working within their communities.

The stories and poems that comprise the body of this work are based on my memories and my journals. They have been modified to ensure anonymity of the people I am talking about. They are a merging of experiences that occurred over a seven year period in Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador. Characters in poems and the various narratives are compilations of numerous people who had similar experiences over a period of years. No real community or personal names are used in this study. Quotations are used primarily as literary tools to express ideas of what I heard. They represent my recollection of stories and conversations and are not direct quotes or verbatim from recordings or text.

CHAPTER 1 BEGINNINGS

Introduction: *Wasieun* (Dakota: White Man)

Our home in the suburbs had yet to be landscaped. Acres of dirt and wild grass covered the prairie around us. The house was new. We began the process of turning rough earth into garden and grass. Occasionally, neighbours would stop by to help. We shared rakes, shovels, wheel barrels and occasionally hard labour. Sam and Blaine came from two houses down to help me plant a tree. It was the first tree on the block. Blaine and I positioned the tree as Sam directed us to move it this way and that until we found something that resembled straight. We patted the ground around the roots adding dirt as needed. Six hands, pulling and pushing dirt.

The area we live in is often described as an area where the wealthy live. The houses are newer, fairly large and typically have two car garages stretching forward to the sidewalk. The rumour was that my neighbour had bought his house with money he had won at the casino, a super jackpot from a slot machine which included a car. He was an unlikely neighbour. He and his friends were Indians. He said he preferred being called an Indian because his grandfather used that name to describe who they were. "Aboriginal, First Nations and Indigenous people were labels attached by and created by the White government."

We talked as we worked, shovelling and shaping yards of topsoil, crusher dust and sod. The tree we had planted was nourished with water and sunshine. It seemed to me to add a sense of hope to the block and marked the beginning of our friendship. As we lounged on the newly laid sod looking with pride at our tree, Sam asked me if I had ever worked in a First Nations community. He implied that my unique background as an ordained minister and a psychologist would be of special value in the First Nations world – a background which I had found made most psychologists and academics uncomfortable.

I hadn't thought of it before. As a psychologist I treated whoever called me. I had never considered *them*. I never considered the fact that in

Saskatchewan there were groups of people living in isolated communities who “desperately” needed help. The next week I received a telephone call asking me to meet with a group of health officials on a nearby reserve. I had never been on a reserve before.

The brief background information I received was that the community was in need of assistance. The kids in the community “used drugs, were violent and never listened,” the adults were binge drinking regularly and the elders were being neglected. The advertisement for the position said that a community mental health therapist was needed on a part time basis to respond to the diverse needs of an active First Nations community. That’s when I found out that Sam had sent my name into the band office.

My practice in the city had been steady, but not full. It would be to my benefit to spend two days each week working out of town on the reserve and still maintain my practice in the city. I believed I was well equipped to help. I was a psychologist. I had training, clinical experience, a respect for the spiritual and some street sense from the big cities I had grown up in. I never considered that the work I would do there would change the way I view psychology or that my sense of self would be significantly informed by my interactions with the people in the communities where I served.

I attended an interview for the position shortly after Sam sent in my name. As I drove to the reserve, my thoughts drifted back and forth between my youth, my training and where I was going. I didn’t feel grounded. I had a romantic vision of a unique culture, but knew little else. My mother and I had watched John Wayne movies when I was a kid. I always cheered for the Indians. Now I was going to work with them. Beyond such youthful memories I had no reason to want to work with Indians. In the community where I live, Indians are seldom seen and are associated with inner city crime and poverty. I convinced myself that this contract would be like any other. I was taking it to pay the bills and develop my practice as a psychologist. I had clinical skills that I thought I could apply to help a people in need and was naively confident I could make a valuable contribution to the community. I had submitted a strong resume and had prepared to answer the questions I thought they would ask. Looking back some years later, I realized that I was really a child when

I began work out there and that I had not yet learned that it is all right not to be always sure of everything. I realized, as Hammerschlag (1988) that being a psychologist did not mean that I had the right answers to every question or that I knew more than those who had less education than I had.

I was given directions to the reserve by the health station secretary. Health stations, schools and band offices are guaranteed by treaty for each reserve. The health stations provide the management for community care which typically includes a nurse, a youth worker, an addictions worker, a community health representative who promotes healthy living, van drivers to take community members to and from doctors appointments and a mental health worker. On numerous reserves, these centers have been recently rebuilt and are well constructed as well as visually impressive. Together with the band office and the reserve school, they are a center of activity for the community. I would learn sometime later that they are also carefully avoided by those who want to protect their privacy and stay away from tribal politics. The health center where I worked is surrounded to the north and the south by large rolling hills dotted with scrub brush and fields of wild grass. To the west and east are lakes and beaches which are populated by wealthy cottagers.

On my way to the interview, I missed a turn and ended up in a nearby town. I called the health station to clarify the location. A woman with a strong voice and a "First Nations accent" took my call. She had little tolerance for me being late or lost. It seemed incomprehensible to her that I could have made a wrong turn. "How could you possibly get lost, the reserve is nowhere near the town." I was surprised and taken aback by her response. I assumed I would be treated with more respect. With some hesitation, I continued the drive and eventually came upon the sign, *You Are Now Entering an Indian Reserve*. The health station and school were at the intersection of two gravel roads. The hills around the health station were dotted with carbon copy homes in various stages of ill repair and in significantly worse condition than the cottages I had passed on the way through the valley. Many of the reserve home yards were strewn with abandoned cars, toys and an array of bicycles. Three dogs ran out of the ditch to chase my car. I recall thoughts darting through my