‘On Being Indigenous’ as a Process

Commentary on Chandler

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Cultural change · Cultural identity · Indigenous people

What, exactly, goes into actually experiencing one’s self as a Squamish or Mohawk person (or as a First Nations or indigenous person more generally), and what is the likely fate of such an identity as time and urbanization and globalization pile on? [Chandler, this issue]

What does *being Indigenous* or being French, or Japanese, or Armenian mean? And what, in particular for Indigenous people of the Americas, can it mean to experience a personal or group sense of continuous identity in the face of the destruction of prior ways of life? Chandler [this issue] has provided us with a thoughtful and important essay pointing out some challenges in conceiving of cultural identity and offering a focus on *process* – ways of being and thinking – as a solution to those challenges. In our comments, we discuss his ideas and point to some further challenges: especially, how to characterize Indigenous processes.

An Ongoing Challenge in Thinking about Cultural Identity

A central challenge for the study of human development is how to understand cultural aspects of development. For many years, cultural variation was little noticed. Highly schooled European-heritage researchers studied their neighbors’ children and assumed that their findings automatically generalize to all children. When it came to their notice that there was variation in how people around the world think, act, and develop, cultural ‘factors’ – usually static, given-at-birth ethnic or racial labels –

sometimes got added onto what was still regarded as generic human development [see also Rogoff, 2011; Rogoff & Angelillo, 2002].

Now the field is at the point of needing to get beyond these static characterizations of individuals. Chandler quickly dismisses self-ascription and ascription of identity by others as options for understanding culture.

Chandler further critiques an approach that focuses on ‘cultural *contents*’ – constituent objects or customs such as feathers or coup-sticks or specific holidays separated from the lifeways that give them meaning. An object such as a Crow coup-stick can and has become separate from the referential ecology in which it was originally devised and used [Lear, 2006].

As Chandler suggests, cultural artifacts often have a ‘shelf-life,’ or specific historical horizon beyond which their use has no meaningful contextual relevance. This principle applies not only to objects that held meaning in the past for Indigenous people, but also to objects and other cultural contents of the present for all peoples. Witness the continual change of living languages such as English as well as Indigenous languages [Baugh & Cable, 1978; Mantica, 2003]. With equal rigor, the same principles can be meaningfully, although probably less comfortably, applied to other cultural artifacts, such as schools, teaching methods, or even broad scientific research programs themselves.

Chandler particularly argues that for Indigenous people of Canada and elsewhere, many of the ‘contents’ of their cultural ways have lost meaning because so much of their recent lifeways has been destroyed by the colonization of their lands and forced ‘acculturation’ of generations. Cultural contents may be nostalgic reminders of times past, but they do not always represent continuing meaning in the present or for the future.

This situation, Chandler argues, is different than for many cultural communities in diaspora, when people move to a different locale but can refer to a homeland that continues to exist. For Indigenous Canadians, and many Indigenous people throughout the Americas, the homeland no longer exists and self-determination of their communities was destroyed by forced removals from ancestral lands and by foreign government and missionary inroads to force changes in Indian lifeways and values. Many cultural contents have thus been stripped of their cultural meaning.

In addition to this stripping of many cultural contents from the meaning of their lifeways, cultural communities everywhere continue to transform with successive generations. For example, the Cherokee Nation newspaper *The Cherokee Phoenix* was for some part of its 184 years typeset and published in the Cherokee syllabary. The newspaper has transformed over successive generations to publications typeset in English, to online versions in English, and to online versions in English and Cherokee – in an ongoing process of cultural change.

Chandler argues that some cultural contents such as coup-sticks and buckskin can lose cultural meaning other than for nostalgic purposes. Still, Indigenous people are Indigenous. So, asks Chandler, what makes people Indigenous when they speak English as their only language, take part in the same national institutions as their non-Indigenous neighbors, and use the Internet to communicate? (See also James Clifford’s [1988] telling article on Indigenous identity as it was contested in a court land claim case in Mashpee, ‘Cape Cod’s Indian Town,’ to determine whether a group referring to itself as the Mashpee Tribe was actually an Indian tribe descended from the same tribe that had lost its lands in the mid 1800s.)

Cultural Processes as a Solution

Chandler's proposal is to focus on the *processes* rather than the contents of culture: "software" trumps "hardware." Focus on *how* people do things, rather than on what things they do: 'those distinctive ways of knowing and being, and those ideals and standards of excellence, that have traditionally accompanied being members of just such an Indigenous community'.

This proposal resonates with many other proposals in social sciences that argue for examining people's cultural *practices* [e.g., Goodnow & Kessel, 1995; Lave, 1988; Rogoff, 2003]. The recent book, *Developing Destinies: A Mayan Midwife and Town* [Rogoff, 2011], argues that cultural changes and continuities can be understood by historical cultural analyses of people's activities across generations. The ideas are illustrated with research in a Guatemalan Mayan community where childbirth and childrearing practices in some ways continue to echo the practices of 500 years ago and, at the same time, reflect local inventions and the influence of Western schooling, Western medicine, and Western missions.

Chandler's process approach, like that of Rogoff [2011], brings attention to the historical dimension of cultural identity: Cultural communities continually remake themselves as they re-instantiate the ways of prior generations, take on ways of other communities, invent new approaches to handle new conditions, and adapt to forced changes.

This historical-cultural approach is also consistent with other work that has followed on Vygotsky's approach. For example, Sylvia Scribner [1985] built on Vygotsky's distinctions between microgenetic, ontogenetic, sociohistorical development, and phylogenetic development, pointing out that culture is not in opposition to individual development or to biological aspects of development. Rather, these four views of development are simply different grains of analysis of any particular phenomenon. Scribner offers some ways to describe the continual regeneration of culture by its constituent participants within an intergenerational historical context.

Taking a process approach requires a paradigm shift to get beyond either/or thinking (e.g., nature vs. nurture, culture vs. biology, individual vs. community, and other binary oppositions or polarities). This paradigm shift has been seen in other scholarly approaches. For example, Dewey [1938] called for getting beyond either/or thinking and instead focus on what he called *experience*. Pepper [1967] distinguished the *contextual* worldview from mechanist, formalist, and organicist worldviews. Chandler discusses related ideas of Rorty, Bruner, and Kuhn.

Interestingly, to make the paradigm shift to thinking of culture in terms of process requires the same kind of understanding that is involved in apprehending some of the central distinguishing cultural ways of thinking of Indigenous people of Canada and elsewhere. Unfortunately, 'staunch defenders of culturally mainstream views are not particularly inclined to make way for competing alternatives but, instead, work assiduously to rule them all out of court' [Chandler, this issue; see also Kuhn, 1962]. This, we contend, is true in both the realms of normal science and of understanding Indigenous ways of thinking.

For example, a feature common in mainstream theoretical traditions is the view that cultural change and persistence are nothing more than adaptation to linearly improving technology and institutions; some new paradigms in social sciences – as well as Indigenous ways of thinking about process – tend to militate against this view.

Some Indigenous peoples hold a cyclical view of time and process [Christenson, 2001]. Such a theory of cultural change and continuity was offered by Nicolás Chávez, a leading Guatemalan Mayan artist, to explain the process by which Mayan people have fused Mayan and Catholic deities over the past 5 centuries: With the arrival of the Spanish, he explained, the ancient gods and the earth died, in a process of death and rebirth of the world that has occurred many times across history, prior to the arrival of the Spanish and currently. Each time that the earth and the gods die, when they are renewed, the gods again attain their power, along with new gods:

The saints today have Spanish names because the old earth died in the days of the Spanish conquerors. When the spirit keepers of the world appeared again they were the [Catholic] saints, but they do the same work that the old gods did anciently. [Chávez, in Christenson, 2001, p. 135]

In Chandler's terminology, the cultural contents (the specific gods' names) disappear but the cultural processes (the work the gods do) endure along with some changes. The process is not a linear one of acculturation or 'progress,' but rather a cycle.

In fields as diverse as developmental psychology, history, and archaeology, robust, theoretically progressive research programs focus on cultural processes rather than their ostensive products or contents [Lakatos & Musgrave, 1970; Lomawaima, 1994; Perdue, 1998; Rogoff, 2011; Wilcox, 2009]. These approaches challenge the linear, atomistic models that tend to pervade the broader research traditions in which they are situated. Each seeks to construe cultural processes as dynamic, evolving over time, and mutually constitutive of the currently evolving human beings who both participate in and are constrained by them [Rogoff, 2003, 2011; Smith, 1999].

In the words of Marta Navichoc Cotuc, a Tz'utujil Maya from San Pedro la Laguna, Guatemala:

Many people want to conserve Mayan ways, but they don't put it into practice, they just talk. [For example,] if we don't stick with the [traditional midwives], this practice and knowledge will be lost. *The world is constructed of the acts of each one of us.* [quoted in Rogoff, 2011, p. 286; brackets in the original]

Chandler briefly reviews two well-researched ideas regarding cultural processes that distinguish the ways of Indigenous people (of Canada and beyond): Indigenous lifeways and ways of thinking tend to be *holistic* and *relational*. Chandler points out that these two aspects of Indigenous epistemologies are only some of the features that form an 'integrated package of mutually interdependent thought processes'. He notes that 'whole cadres of Indigenous scholars and knowledge holders' have contributed to understanding the package of Indigenous ways of knowing, citing Battiste and Henderson, Ermine, Gegeo, Meyer, Quanchi, Smith, West, among others.

Chandler argues that '*procedural* ways and means by which endangered groups have traditionally thought and reasoned (their *ways of knowing* and chunking and organizing their world)', such as Indigenous holistic and relational ways of thinking, are more resilient in the face of cultural changes than are cultural contents, which more easily lose their meaning. As an example, he points out that monolingual English-speaking Indigenous Canadians use English in ways that stem from the Indigenous languages used by prior generations.

Another example is that *mestizo* (mixed heritage) populations in Central America may not identify as Indigenous and may use many non-Indigenous ways (such as

being monolingual in Spanish), but nonetheless carry forward many Indigenous practices across generations [Rogoff, 2011]. For example, the form of Spanish used throughout Nicaragua has many features that are adopted from Nahuatl, the Aztec language that was the *lingua franca* of the whole region prior to the arrival of the Spanish, such as the way of forming diminutives and superlatives with repeated syllables (e.g., *chiquititito*, *grandotote*) [Mantica, 2003]. Another example is the use throughout Mexico and Guatemala of gestures emanating from a sign language that has been in use by both hearing and deaf Indigenous people for over a thousand years [Fox Tree, 2009].

The Next Challenge for Scholarship

Once we accept the importance of cultural processes (rather than static contents), an important challenge becomes deepening our understanding of the implications of an Indigenous ‘integrated package of mutually interdependent thought processes’ [Chandler, this issue] – especially holistic-relational thinking – for theory and research on human development. How can scholars better understand this way of thought and use it in research and practice?

This is no small challenge because many research tools are built on the study of contents and static characteristics. (For example, the ANOVA table assumes separate factors; research design often tries to ‘control’ for all but a few aspects of whole phenomena; standardized testing tries to isolate individuals from others and from cultural practices.) Such tools are useful, but if they are regarded as the gold standard of how to understand human development, ‘staunch defenders of culturally mainstream views’ [Chandler, this issue] can dominate in ways that prevent the use (or publication) of other methods that are more consistent with understanding whole, relational phenomena.

We would nominate descriptive analyses of patterns as a key method, employing both numerical analyses across cases and ethnographic analysis of cases [see also Angelillo, Rogoff, & Chavajay, 2007]. Indigenous scholars nominate a set of methodologies that they argue are compatible with Indigenous worldviews, where ontologies of holism and relationalism are afforded central relevance in phenomena of interest and methodology [Smith, 1999; Wilcox, 2009]. The current dominant paradigm and its perspectives on culture and learning could benefit greatly from a perspective of Indigenous holism and relationalism.

We would love for Chandler and others who are engaged with holistic, relational ways of thinking – especially Indigenous scholars and others who understand this approach in depth – to help articulate the implications of a process approach for research and for understanding human development. In particular, how can holistic, relational ways of thinking be understood by people for whom these cultural traditions are foreign as well as by future generations of Indigenous people?

A combination of insiders and outsiders may be helpful for making use of the fruitful model provided by Indigenous ways of thinking and learning. Although many Indigenous people likely use this way of thinking on a minute-by-minute basis, their understanding may be so commonsense that it is difficult even for Indigenous scholars to articulate. Most people take for granted their own lifeways. The contrast available to the endeavor from outsiders who try to understand Indigenous ways of think-

ing may yield fruitful collaboration with cultural insiders in the effort to articulate this way of thinking and being. The two of us hope to make use of this tool in our collaborations, Barbara as a European-heritage researcher who has studied Mayan lifeways for many years and Andrew as a Cherokee graduate student who has lived multiple lifeways.

Articulating this way of thinking and being is important for both cultural insiders and outsiders. On the one hand, it is a key tool in the advancement of research on human development. Allowing for this way of thinking is also crucial for the identity of the next generations of Indigenous people, many of whom live in two worlds. Often, imposition of the dominant society's way of thinking in institutions such as schools (as well as more bellicose actions) stifle the use of what Chandler identifies as Indigenous processes. As Chandler briefly mentions in this article, human development is much healthier in Indigenous Canadian communities where engagement with processes of self-determination is possible. For example, the prevalence of youth suicide is significantly lower among such Canadian Aboriginal bands [Chandler & Lalonde, 2008, 2009].

So, we are grateful for Michael Chandler's contributions to the understanding of cultural identity, for both the aims of Indigenous people and for making progress in understanding human development. Questions of identity, Indigenous or otherwise, we and Chandler argue, must depend at least in part on participation in specific cultural practices, not because these need necessarily to be preserved but because they make us who we are – and in turn constitute what it could mean to belong to a specific culture. We hope that Chandler and the rest of us take on the challenge of developing and articulating a deeper understanding of (sp) specifically what is involved in Indigenous ways of thinking and being.

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