

Cultural Perpetuity Through Survivance:
An argument for Blackfeet epistemology in social research

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Introduction

Blackfeet Nation is an Indigenous population with a contentious past. With a long-standing history in conflicts with other Indigenous Nations and so-called treaty agreements with Canada (The Government of Canada, 2010), we have played a large role in what it means to be Indigenous in Canada today. The structure of Blackfeet knowledge has been examined in the past, though not given the credit it deserves in the development of theoretical frameworks in social research. Abraham Maslow, the well-known psychologist behind “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs”, spent a mere six weeks with the Siksika branch of the Blackfoot community, distilling their entire culture into a conceptual model that continues to be misinterpreted today (Ravilochan, 2023). This meta analysis into both academically “unconventional” sources and scholarly sources, aims to work towards amending this misunderstanding and point towards a new direction; one that facilitates the start of a more proper understanding of the Blackfeet knowledge structure and allows for practical use in social research.

The analysis conducted for the purposes of this paper has been inductive in nature. A broad research question was asked, “What is Blackfeet Epistemology?”, with sub-questions formed along the way as literature has been uncovered. These subquestions, “Does Blackfeet Epistemology hold similarities with existing social theories?” and “How can Blackfeet Epistemology be utilized in future social research?” have been addressed to contribute to the rising anti-colonialist movement in Canadian research and policy. This inductive approach follows the holistic model of both social theory and Indigenous epistemologies to address the full context of the impacts of settler-colonialism in the reproduction of knowledge.

Methods

The inductive analysis of the existing literature is rooted in my own identity as an Indigenous person with my own standpoints considered throughout the process. This standpoint, in combination with an ongoing theoretical framework that I have been constructing, has served as the lens through which the data in this study have been collected. The primary methods employed have been analysis of historical records and Indigenous knowledge in cross-comparison to existing sociological and anthropological theory. From there, the impact on both existing and future research has been explored. The data addressing the research sub questions acts as supporting evidence for a postmodernist approach to the creation of future research and policy.

Ultimately, the use of Blackfeet epistemology in social research will be explored in this analysis. Though, the uses in my own theoretical framework, “ontotheological socio-anthropology” will be identified and discussed as well. As a social constructivist approach to social research, ontotheological socio-anthropology aims to utilize a multidisciplinary approach in applied anthropology. It aims to highlight spiritual understandings of reality and knowledge organization in the fields of both medical and environmental anthropology. These understandings can be applied in addressing environmental injustices that Indigenous people in North America have faced.

My paternal lineage belongs to the Peigan subset of Blackfeet Nation (Siksikaitsitapi); a community divided by borders drawn by colonizers in the 1800s. This division split us apart from half of our culture, forcing us into a reservation in the United States, while the other half (now known as Blackfoot) were forced into Canada. In my postgraduate studies, I aim to focus on the impacts of colonization and Western ideals on Indigenous health. This is largely due to my

own desires to reconnect with my own culture, though also informed by the decolonial movement within modern social research today.

Literature Review

Indigenous epistemologies, primarily “Indigenous Knowledges” and “Traditional Ecological Knowledge” are “tools for the sustainability of self-determination and decolonizing settler-colonial narratives” (Montgomery, 2022, p. 53). This makes them “post-modern” theories in that they take the social world and history of their own community into context when structuring their own epistemology (Agger, 2013, pp. 36-37). Pepion (2020) utilizes their own experience as a Blackfeet Indigenous person to understand Blackfeet epistemology in the context of Traditional Ecological Knowledge. They note that Blackfeet epistemology is holistic, stating that all existence is “interrelated and having a life force”. Additionally, they remark that Blackfeet ontology is understood in the context of “animate expression of power, dreams, and personification of the inanimate” (p. 35). Thus, this cements Blackfeet epistemology underneath the umbrella of postmodernism as well.

The holistic nature of Blackfeet epistemology persists throughout the entire culture. In a historical analysis conducted by two members of the community (in an attempt to reconstruct Abraham Maslow’s misunderstandings), it was identified that “self-actualization” was only the beginning. Self-actualization, achieved through the fulfillment of all of a person’s needs within their environment, serves as the foundation for actualization of the community and “cultural perpetuation”. This cultural perpetuation, depicted as the “top of the pyramid”, is not necessarily the only ultimate goal within our culture. Rather, it contributes, alongside the other mentioned aspects, to an “expansive concept of time and multiple dimensions of reality” (Ravilochan, 2023).

Self-actualization, as uncovered by Ravilochan (2023) is *not* about becoming “the best version of yourself” through a step-by-step process of meeting certain needs, as seen in Maslow’s model. Instead, it is grounded in an understanding that a person is already born as their own “best version”, and over a lifetime, it is the responsibility of both the individual and community to allow for the “truest version” of one’s best-self to take up space. This perpetuates culturally, as was explained by Ryan Heavy Head (one of the Blackfeet scholars highlighted in Ravilochan [2023]’s article), that

The one thing that [Maslow] really missed was the Indigenous relationship to place. Without that, what he’s looking at as self-actualization doesn’t actually happen. There’s a reason people aren’t critical of their tribe: you’ve got to live with them forever.

The “Indigenous relationship to place” that Ryan Heavy Head describes is not unique to Blackfeet communities. Tuck et al. (2014) identify these relationships to place as “land-based”. It is mentioned that these land-based understandings are historically linked to the connection to nature; i.e. the earth, the trees, the rivers, the ocean. However, in a modern world, there is plenty of evidence to support “urban Indigenous land-based pedagogies” (p. 8) that take the environmental changes as a result of settler-colonialism into context. Given that “land” and therefore “place” “refers not just to the materiality of land, but also its ‘spiritual, emotional, and intellectual aspects’” (p. 9), it is crucial to understand how settler-colonialism has shaped Indigenous spaces to contextualize their current epistemologies and well being.

A prominent example of these impacts is that of the people of Grassy Narrows in Northern Ontario. As is explained by Vecsey (1987), a litany of issues created by Western ideals, forced relocation and “resource management” on behalf of the Canadian government (pp. 290-291), paired with the poisoning of the waters by Reed Paper Mill (p. 294) contributed to nearly the entire population to mercury poisoning. Reed Paper Mill’s ecological disaster poisoned all of the fish with mercury, but with no other options for subsistence thanks to

government environmental laws and ecological destruction from extractivist corporations, the people of Grassy Narrows had no choice but to consume the fish anyway. As of 2023, an estimated 80% of the population still suffers from mercury poisoning (Mergler et al., 2023, p. 1).

These laws are symptomatic of Western notions of environmentalism in Canada. Such notions have had long-lasting impacts through the enforcement of policy through the creation of national parks and removal of Indigenous people from their own land. Canada's first national park, Banff national park, kickstarted this process through the removal and relocation of the Stoney Nakoda that severed them from their own land. This was justified through a rhetoric that only Europeans were capable of understanding the true value of nature and how to preserve it (Mason, 2014, p. 50). Such a western rhetoric is built upon the positivist and white-supremacist notion that Indigenous people are "lesser", and therefore less knowledgeable. The imposition of Treaty 7, a legal process that allowed for the creation of reservations in Canada (The Government of Canada, 2010), was made possible partially through the "negotiations" with Siksika Blackfoot leadership. Additionally, this treaty has contributed to the ongoing subjugation of Indigenous people seeking to subsist off of the land through the implementation of hunting and trapping laws, impacting communities such as the Stoney Nakoda (Hildebrandt et al., 1996, p. 152).

It is important to note, however, that these so-called negotiations with the Canadian government with the Blackfoot confederation were not made for the purposes of surrendering land. Fabris (2025) utilizes Blackfoot oral tradition to contextualise the jurisdictions around treaty making (p. 8). Through Fabris (2025)'s own historical analysis, the establishment of Treaty 7 is rooted in a difference in understanding. This understanding, explained by a scholar of the Blackfoot confederacy, comes from Blackfoot philosophy. This scholar "describes Blackfoot

philosophy as relational, wherein things are in constant flux, and ‘everything is animate, that all creation is interrelated, that reality requires renewal, and that space is a major referent’” (p. 12). Additionally, this scholar mentions the word “*Innaisstsisini*, [meaning] ‘strangers who come into the territory of a Plains Indian tribe will respect the relational network in place in the territory’” (p. 14). Fabris (2025) takes this information into context, ultimately arguing that the presence of the Blackfoot Confederacy in the creation of Treaty 7, while informed by the communities’ concerns about their land being encroached upon by neighboring nations and the dwindling bison populations, was made in the interest of preserving as much Blackfoot land and culture as possible (p.13). This interest of preservation was made on the pretense that the settler-colonial British Crown would be respectful of the Blackfoot Confederacy; they never expected to lose their “ownership” of the land, they had hoped to prevent that through the treaty itself (p. 17).

Such a misunderstanding goes back to the root of Indigenous notions of place and Blackfeet self-actualization. Tuck et al. (2014)’s breakdown of the Indigenous “*land-we* ontology” of “land as collective” is summarized as follows,

Similarly, we might imagine [the] ontology of place-based paradigms is something like ‘I am, therefore place is,’ in contrast, the ontology of land-based pedagogies might be summarized as ‘Land is, therefore we are.’ (p. 10)

With this much in mind, the “land” is not simply connected to the individual, it *is* the individual. Existence through the more accurate conceptual model of Blackfeet epistemology portrayed by Ravilochan (2023) illustrates individual self actualization as but one piece within an interlinked circle of needs. This circle encompasses “community and self actualization”, “food, water, housing, safety, and security”, “belonging and relationship”, and “spirituality and life purpose” as feeding into one another, categorized into “cognitive”, “physical”, “emotional”, and “spiritual” needs. Community and self actualization, if following the models given by Ravilochan (2023), help to fuel cultural perpetuation, where “the good of other people must be

invoked as well as the good for oneself”. Taking into account Indigenous conceptions of land seen as part of the human experience, and cultural perpetuity through the lens of the Blackfeet, it is possible that the Blackfoot Confederation didn’t consider the fact that the land could be “owned” in the colonial sense. Rather, it isn’t hard to see that the Blackfoot Confederation’s role in Treaty 7 was altruistic in nature. The leadership involved were attempting to find the best way to move forward, with *everyone’s* well being taken into consideration. Community actualization in this way lies at the root of Blackfeet culture, as stated by Ravilochan (2023),

Being in conflict with permanent neighbors, while also living in such a communal culture, can prove costly and stressful. Learning to cooperate, forgiving wrongdoing, and pursuing the sharing of resources and wisdom make life much more tolerable in these conditions.

Unfortunately, despite our community’s best intentions, we have still been subject to genocide through mass murder, multiple disease outbreaks, residential schools, and even the theft of medicine bundles to be sold to museums at the hands of the settler-colonists. Even today, Blackfeet Nation faces generations’ worth of “chronic mental and physical health conditions” (Henderson-Matthews et al., 2022, pp. 1-2). These chronic mental and physical health conditions can perpetuate across generations (p. 2).

Discussion

Pierre Bourdieu’s social constructivism and interest in understanding the “ontological foundations of epistemology and to formulate a ... socio-logic of science” (Robbins, 2014, p. 32) as discussed in week five of the course materials in combination with western sociological conceptions of epistemology, especially in regard to a shift from “metatheories” to smaller-scale theories with more practical implications (Harvey, 2018, p. 127) as discussed in week nine of the course materials, facilitates the connection of Blackfeet epistemology into social research.

Blackfeet understandings of the world being “animate”, self-actualization, and even acknowledgement of the “other” in the term *Innaissstisini* feed into this.

The conceptual model provided by Ravilochan (2023) aligns in some ways to Bourdieu’s habitus in his theory of practice, though it is important to note that he created his theory of practice as a critique of social constructivism; he aimed to explore how wealth and status are perpetuated throughout the upper-class (Jain, 2015, p. 76). Despite this limitation in Bourdieu’s work, it is useful to refer to his explanations of internalizations in the perpetuation of habitus. Building off of Lizardo (2021)’s social theories on the enculturation of the individual, culture is either “in people” or “in the extra-personal world” (p. 1177). If projected onto Blackfeet epistemology, it can be seen that this applies in the sense of Ravilochan (2023)’s conceptual model that portrays four basic categories of needs influencing and being influenced by the external world as understood through Indigenous conceptions of place.

Thus, it is proposed that not only Blackfeet epistemologies *do in fact* hold similarities with social research, they are already applied in social research in ways that have yet to be identified as such. Blackfeet epistemology is social constructivist, postmodernist, and land-based in a sense that holistic information on the lives of the individual and their community are taken into account. Blackfeet cultural perpetuation is achieved in a fashion very similar to that proposed by Bourdieu, though Blackfeet conceptions of wealth and power vastly differ from his. In tandem with other nations (such as the Navajo), wealth comes from what you can give to the people in your community and the connections and family that you have (Ravilochan, 2023). If an individual has a wealth of these “resources” at their disposal, they can perpetuate that wealth within their culture in the same way that economic class is perpetuated in Bourdieu’s theory of

practice. Internalized beliefs, such as the importance of family and altruism, become part of who a person is, and those internalizations are externalized onto their culture (Lizardo, 2021, p. 1182).

These facets of Blackfeet epistemology, perpetuated in the lives of the people in Blackfeet communities today, can prove to be resilient in the face of genocide. As was identified in Henderson-Matthews et al. (2022)'s collaborative quantitative study into the well being of the Blackfeet community of Northwest Montana, the ACE scores¹, cortisol levels, and mental health of participants was examined over a period of two weeks (pp. 4-5). It was found that engagement with Blackfeet culture in the form of listening to elders and visiting sacred locations enabled a significant drop in cortisol levels in participants with higher ACE scores. This holds implications for the positive benefits of enculturation on members of the community with trauma that may come from generations of settler-colonialism (p. 6-7). If tied back to the overall Indigenous understanding of place, including both natural and urban space, there is room for discussion about the connections between mental health and the *type* of connection Indigenous people (in this case, Blackfeet) hold with the environment.

This is why the implementation of Blackfeet epistemology in social research could prove fruitful in the endeavor to improve the lives of Indigenous people in Canada. In the realms of medical and environmental social research, particularly medical anthropology, holistic understanding of the environment in which people live is crucial. Panter-Brick & Eggerman (2018) classify medical anthropology as “[fostering] approaches to social and structural models of health and wellbeing in ways that are critically reflective, cross-cultural, people-centered, and transdisciplinary” (p. 233). This is reflected in ethnographic research, as it incorporates not only long-term and deeply saturated research into the context of a given culture, but that it is also

¹ “ACE scores” are collected on a scale of 1 to 10, where instances of “adverse childhood experiences” such as abuse or neglect are tallied as social determinants of ill health, such as chronic diseases in adulthood (What aces/pces do you have? – aces too high, n.d.)

reflexive. It “seeks to showcase ambiguities, conflicts, and turning points that matter to people's lives in society” (pp. 234-245). This can enable crucial research into the environmental determinants of health, such as in the case of the people of Grassy Narrows and even the Stoney Nakoda, as a way to “cure” the disease in the environment itself. Using Blackfeet epistemology as a guiding framework, the medical anthropologist can pathologize determinants such as the pollution of the environment, dismantling of the infrastructures of local ecologies as a result of development, and isolation of a people from their traditional lands; just as a doctor might diagnose a patient with food poisoning, a disorder of the autonomic nervous system, or even the extreme social isolation that comes from a major depressive disorder. Furthermore, synthesizing Blackfeet epistemology with Bourdieu’s theory of practice, the negative determinants of health in the loss of culture in urban settings can perpetuate generational trauma as is recognized in studies such as the ones conducted by Henderson-Matthews et al. (2022) and Urrieta (2019).

However, *too much* emphasis on these generational traumas can have a negative impact as well. As explained by Urrieta (2019), “simplified” portrayals of Indigenous trauma only serve to perpetuate narratives of Indigenous people as helpless victims of settler colonialism, powerless to reclaim their own humanity (p. 1). They identify one of the main issues of portrayals of Indigenous trauma as “the contrast between self/other; the self often implying the Western center, while the subaltern usually the marginal Other” (p. 11). More often than not, Indigenous genocide and death is highlighted, while stories of resilience and survival are limited. Urrieta (2019) emphasizes a need for centering “stories of survivance [as] vitally important” (p. 12) to allow for those alive today to grieve the past properly and find ways to move forward. This problem of alienation is not unfamiliar in the knowledge held by Blackfeet scholars, as was mentioned previously in Ravilochan (2023)’s article, cultural perpetuity (i.e. “survivance”)

through community and self-actualization is crucial. Additionally, in situations such as the attempts for peace in the making of Treaty 7, the acknowledgement of *Innaistsisini* not only as the “other”, but as living beings within the ecosystem that warrant respect as well, attempts have been made to cease the perpetuation of violence and move towards the actualization of the self and community.

Such actualization could potentially be achieved through the practices in Urrieta (2019)’s examples within the Indigenous communities in Mexico. They highlight this perpetuity in “an Indigenous philosophy based on a personalized exercise of, and reflection on experience, individual and collective memory, and struggle...Through the use of oral traditions, the body as a historical collective archive, and yes even community-committed politically active social research” (p. 12). In other communities in Mexico, such as the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca, the urban spaces themselves were transformed as a symbol of anti-government rebellion. While the specific group eventually disbanded, the overall culture of rebellion has “perpetuated” throughout the state to this day and served to represent the overall “failure of social inclusion” within the state (Hesketh, 2015, p. 219).

These examples of survivance, guided by Blackfeet conceptual models can help to address the duty to social justice that current social research faces. Fassin (2013) acknowledges the duty ethnographers hold towards the communities they work with, noting a “double debt” that anthropologists face in fieldwork. The people as subjects of study and the people subjected to oppression as uncovered within the data are owed a level of politicization in the final results (p. 20). Fassin (2013) says, “carrying on an ethnography is accumulating debts. Making it into an intellectual production is repaying them - at least in part” (p. 20). All social research, especially any social research that I personally seek to conduct with oppressed Indigenous peoples is

subject to this form of debt. Though as Urrieta (2019) highlights, it is a careful balance. Too much politicization could lead to an oversimplification of suffering and reinforcement of stereotypes. No politicization is, for lack of a better term, entirely tone-deaf and bad research; it lacks the depth of holism that qualifies the data collected.

Overall, with the context of Blackfeet history in mind when approaching social research with other Indigenous communities in North America, limitations must be considered. Blackfoot Confederation's role in Treaty 7 could inhibit researchers such as myself, and many communities may have a "bad taste in their mouth" in working with an individual or theoretical framework that could become "the oppressor". Regardless, Blackfeet knowledge structures and cultural perpetuation can act as a crucial component in decolonizing Western research. Additionally, those with the bandwidth to see beyond the damages of the past may feel a sense of comfort in familiarity. The inclusion of Indigenous culture in difficult social research (especially around themes of suffering and death), such as the quantitative study conducted by Henderson-Matthews et al. (2022) can have a protective effect on participants.

In my own projects in the future, I hope to explore these knowledge structures with more depth. Pairing the historical and theoretical knowledge that exists today with lived experiences collected in field research could bolster the understanding that my own people were "negotiated" into generations of subjugation. Social policies could extend beyond borders and allow for the different communities of Siksikaitsitapi people to connect and reconcile. In an ideal world, the beginnings of healing that are seen today in my community can further be facilitated and platformed, instead of a spotlight highlighting our trauma with no assistance being shined upon us.

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