

ABORIGINAL WOMEN AND EDUCATION: OVERCOMING A LEGACY OF ABUSE

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Abstract / Résumé

This paper is concerned with why there is such low representation of Aboriginal people in Universities? While there are many possible answers ranging from lower socio-economic opportunities to a deficiency in culturally appropriate curriculum, all of which are extremely relevant to understanding the position of Aboriginal people in Canada, this paper addresses how abuse in human relationships impacts our perceptions of ourselves and how the subsequent perceptions affect representation in Universities. Of key concern in this paper is whether formal education can harness a legacy of abuse or simply exacerbate it.

L'article traite de la question de la grande sous-représentation des Autochtones dans les universités. Bien que de nombreuses réponses soient possibles, qui vont du petit nombre de possibilités socioéconomiques à des lacunes en matière de programmes d'études adaptés à la culture autochtone et qui sont toutes très pertinentes à une compréhension de la situation des Autochtones au Canada, l'article veut expliquer comment la violence dans les relations humaines a des incidences sur notre perception de soi et comment cette perception touche la représentation des Autochtones dans les universités. L'article examine particulièrement si l'éducation institutionnelle peut transformer positivement les séquelles des abus ou simplement les exacerber.

Why is there such low representation of Aboriginal people in universities? There are many possible answers ranging from lower socio-economic opportunities to a deficiency in culturally appropriate curriculum, all of which are extremely relevant to understanding the position of Aboriginal people in Canada. I am particularly interested however; in how abuse in human relationships impacts our perceptions or more specifically, the effect abuse has had on Aboriginal people's perceptions of themselves and whether education can harness a legacy of abuse? A few questions to consider are: can we explain the tragic mystery that holds an abused woman captive to her past? Can we teach her that she is far more than the sum total of oppression? How does one take a woman who cannot speak in the moment because she needs time to pull herself out of the quagmire of second-guessing that has become her constant companion to the point of self-validation and vocal articulation? Can education free her from the ghosts that haunt her moment by moment as she struggles to make sense of the world? Can education help an abused woman overcome the terror of the simple question: "so, what are you thinking?"

Normally when addressing the effects of abuse scholars tend to focus on women with little education and few economic opportunities. These problems however do not belong solely in the domain of the uneducated. Even the most educated Aboriginal women with every economic opportunity available to her can suffer a legacy of abuse. A legacy that creates a deep sense of self-loathing and failure. Take the following scenario for example:

I rub my weary eyes and push my chair away from the computer as your face comes into my view. Brown skin, haunted eyes and hungry, tell a tale no words can adequately describe and I wonder why I am writing this paper. It is so easy for scholarly works to define, describe, and prescribe solutions to the Aboriginal woman's life, but how many actually see the woman? I look again at the words upon the screen and wonder at my own temerity, thinking I have something to say when I know my cousins are struggling to feed their children and I can eat whatever I desire. Here lies part of the problem. It is within my own internal questioning as I stumble through artificiality, wearing the right clothes, doing the right things, saying the right words, all the while denying myself the freedom of truth. I cannot put vocality to my thoughts without dread. Indeed I often run from my thoughts in terror, fearing someone might guess what I'm really thinking.

What perceptual limitation would guide this woman's process of terror? I believe it is the same perceptual limitation that guides many Aboriginal women's mental processing. In this paper I focus on perceptual experience and how it precipitates fantasy [thoughts] that may or may not be based in reality but nonetheless take on gargantuan proportions [and truth] in the mind of an abused woman. The discipline of Western Philosophy has long studied questions of reality in attempts to determine ultimate truth. Unfortunately these attempts are usually devoid of, or minimize human relationships and human relationships are a necessary feature of life so I doubt we can ascertain anything useful in absolute truth that does not revolve around the truth of relationships.

Some ancient cultures on the other hand, have stories whose philosophical underpinning reveals a relational significance. For example, we are all familiar with the story from India, about the elephant and the blind men whereby without sight there are limits to perceptions. To understand the reality of the elephant (at least in terms of its physical properties) in its entirety we would need the physical perceptions of those people whose picture of the elephant encompasses sides ours does not.¹ Arguably there are far more than physical properties to understanding the elephant in its entirety. Still, to have even a limited understanding of the elephant it would seem necessary to engage the perceptions of others. A key component to a positive interaction is the ability to move in relationship with someone else's perception. And, an essential ingredient to moving in a positive relationship is the ability to trust. One must trust that they in fact perceive only a leg and someone else perceives a trunk or body. Together they can come to an appreciation of what an elephant in its entire physical form looks like. In terms of relational perception are we willing to trust their perception or are we even willing to trust our own perceptions? This question speaks directly to the destruction of trust experienced by many Aboriginal women.

The story from India was about blind men but what happens when we have full physical capabilities yet still see and hear different. Is it possible to see and hear the same thing but have internal interpretations that are guided by our own perceptual (or experiential) reality? Take the following story about wolverine and wolves. They have different perceptual experiences of the same object lying upon the ground. Their conversation goes like this:

There is dung on the ground

"Well, well, wanam

"A fur coat, big brother, pick it up." [Dog addresses
Wolverine]

"I'm not dirtying my hands on wolf dung!" [Wolverine]

“Hey, what’s this big brother of ours saying?” [Wolves]
A wolf vigorously shakes it [dung] free of debris...a fur coat.
“Well, a fur coat. I didn’t know it.” [Wolverine]²

This story unlike the one from India has the perceivers looking at the same physical object in its entirety and still seeing something different. Without the relational trust exchange both parties would likely have moved on certain of their own particular truth. Both stories contain an important lesson in relational sharing to critical thinking. The use of force would have resulted in a negative relational interaction and loss of trust. The story about the Elephant reveals at a metaphysical level how much greater our knowledge base would be if we could move in relationship with other cultures and their ways of knowing and doing, that is, if we could move in relationship with their perceptions rather than trying to force a sameness of perception. The story about the Wolves and Wolverine comes from the ancient Cree and like the story from India can teach us the importance of interpersonal relationships. These stories provide a basis with which to examine the legacy of abuse that haunts many Aboriginal women today.

Like Wolverine, we hear or see something that immediately triggers a dialogue within our head. But what happens when we are afraid, I mean really afraid, terrified, to make a critical assessment in the first place? Wolverine was at least willing to express his thoughts; he had a confidence in his own perception and was not adversely affected by criticism. Not only did he move in relationship in spite of the realization that the Wolves saw things differently but he was able to move into their perceptual field without damaging his own internal thinking processes.

For many Aboriginal peoples, unlike Wolverine, the willingness to express oneself is seriously hampered and confidence in one’s perceptions is almost impossible to achieve. Too often there is a tendency to accept someone else’s opinion or perception or to be negatively affected by challenge to one’s perceptions. This tendency seriously hampers success in education and can lead to such a deep self-hatred that even the individual who has internalized self-hatred is not always aware of doing so.

How do Aboriginal people get to the place of inner turmoil where they cannot trust their own perceptions, where they come to need someone else to tell them how to think and what to think about? What is it that spawns a terror so deep it keeps one frozen to the thoughts of others? How do perceptual relations work to undo or foster such helplessness? For example, in the above story what if rather than expressing his thoughts about the possibility of the dung actually being dung, Wolverine had simply accepted what the Wolves were telling him as the

truth of what he was seeing? Wolverine would have shied away from presenting his own perception, maybe doubting his own experiential knowledge. Or, he may have waited for the Wolves to tell him how to think, or he would have waited for the Wolves to provide a context within which he could make an accurate guess according to what he felt would meet with their perceptual approval.

What I am describing is in fact; a behavior exhibited by many Aboriginal people, particularly women who have experienced years of traumatic abuse. What happens to an abused woman who has learned to completely silence the voice inside that gives rise to her rights? How do perceptual relations work to undo or foster such helplessness? What role does trust or the absence of trust play?

On a cultural level when the Europeans first came to the Americas they set about with force to destroy the perceptions of the Aboriginal peoples. Words like: Indian, Savage, Heathen, Squaw, Primitive, and Evil became commonplace. Aboriginal people were not allowed any other perception of themselves and to ensure this distortion of perception Residential Boarding Schools and numerous Government policies were created, not to mention the countless books and articles full of stereotypical nonsense.

There is an intimate link between colonial abuse and personal abuse in that each forces an alien perception upon us. According to Joe Couture an Aboriginal Psychologist: "Aboriginal communities present, in many cases, a damaged collective self, reverberating through community and its component families" (Couture 1994: 15). In the case of colonial abuse, Indigenous peoples had their perceptions of themselves as a group devalued which has impacted communities in countless ways. In the case of personal abuse the individual has his/her perceptions of himself or herself devalued. In both cases a relational interaction creates an experience that becomes internalized and acted upon in later perceptions.

Thinking is not as innocuous as we might suppose. There is a process that requires a prerequisite of allowedness that is necessary for the process to flourish. When a child is left alone without security and rewarded for thinking what the other wants, the child learns to shut down his or her own internal thinking process and begins to rely, no depend—much as we depend on water for survival—for someone else to tell them how to think and what to think about. In the past we had stories like the one about the Wolves and Wolverine to help us negotiate multiple perceptions—to learn the strength in our thinking while honoring other's thinking. For as Greg Cajete notes, "Receptivity to our surroundings combined with creativity characterizes our perception" (Cajete, 2004: 46).

The Wolves and Wolverine demonstrated openness to receptivity and relational creativity, which resulted in a positive interaction. When natural receptivity and creativity are damaged by others our natural ability to interpret what we experience may become skewed because “we cannot misexperience anything, we can only misinterpret what we experience” (Cajete:52).

Today, we are trapped in a one-sided perceptual field where someone else’s perceptions are valued like fur and our perceptions are dismissed [by ourselves] as mere dung. Colonization has done much to sever the ties that bound us to our early knowledge and strategies for negotiating the world. Today, we have teachings but they mostly stem from Western standards. Therefore we are not only caught between perceptual distortions culturally, we are also caught between perceptual distortions individually thus our own thinking process can pave the way for personal and community destruction.

Before I go any further it is important to qualify, I am not claiming that we do not know how to think. No, not at all, but what I am claiming is that many if not most of our thoughts become safe only if never allowed to reverberate in sound waves within the presence of listeners. Internally we cannot trust our own instincts, or our perceptions. Rather, we learn to second-guess every thought we have. We do not trust our thoughts to have any basis in reality. For example, how many times during conversations with others have we heard the words, “that’s not what you’re thinking. What you’re really thinking is....” or “that’s not how you feel. What you really feel is...” and then completely accepted the other’s words as to the truth of our feelings or thoughts? Has not our receptivity to our surroundings and our creativity to engage perceptually been denied to us? With enough invalidation there is no doubt for me that we would come to accept someone else’s perceptions. If this is the case then we may be at the point where we think we need others to think for us. None of this is done in full consciousness, at least not until we come to terms in some minimal way with our own mental processing problems.³ Once we arrive at this point we may be able to realize the depth of what our second-guessing is doing to us. We may even be able to engage in super-human efforts to curtail this tendency.

Imagine an Aboriginal person who struggles with this thought processing, or what others are in the habit of noting as mental deficiency? What do we do or say about such Aboriginal people? Too often we are attributed with having low self-esteem, or lack of intelligence, or laziness, or any number of mental disorders such as that criticized by Judith Lewis Herman whereby victims of trauma, terror and abuse are often misdiagnosed by the mental health professions as having person-

ality disorders” (Herman: 1992). But, in reality, the person may actually be a survivor of distorted perceptual relations stemming from within the family or culture. Consider how a “child trapped in an abusive environment...must find a way to preserve a sense of trust in people who are untrustworthy, safety in an a situation that is unsafe, control in a situation that is terrifyingly unpredictable, power in a situation of helplessness” (Herman 1992: 96). How do abused children survive? According to Herman they must go to extraordinary lengths, such as physically hiding and running away, internalizing the abuse and blaming themselves for being bad, or even cooperating in the abuse to avoid even more severe punishment” (113). Crucial to my paper is the fact that through “pervasive terror...trust is sacrificed” (113).

How does this differ from the non-Aboriginal? What about the non-Aboriginal who has been beaten all his/her life? What about their own insecurity? Trust for these children is also sacrificed as is the development of positive self-identities compromised” (Herman: 113). How then are they different from the Aboriginal student, or are they different? I believe there is a significant difference. For the non-Aboriginal, the world they live in is the world of their reality regardless of any or all fears. The world is structured according to their worldviews—it is a linear world—an evolving world, and a world of their maker or creator. It is a world that has taught them what is expected for success but success however difficult to achieve, is something nonetheless that they are entitled to. Trauma of any sort “destroy[s] the victim’s fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world, the positive value of the self, and the meaningful order of creation” (51). Fundamental assumptions regarding safety are equally shared with Aboriginal children but the assumptions of the world and creation may be vastly divergent. For many Aboriginal students this is not the world of their structuring and certainly not a world that offers entitlement.

Colonization helps destroy cultures perceptual abilities such that one culture can come to see another culture as more valuable, learning to rely solely or almost solely on the decisions (worldview of that culture). This is a normal pattern stemming from the principles of colonization which deliberately sets about to destroy the worldviews of another culture.⁴ The same process occurs within the family once that family is conditioned into self-hatred. If we grown in a world that devalues us we internalize that devaluing to the point where we see ourselves as nothing, worthless, mere dung. According to Joanne Arnott, “In body and mind, we’re endlessly divisible, and we do become divided when our experiential worlds and the spoken, agreed upon reality are consistently incongruent.”⁵ When a woman is viciously punched in the face and bru-

tally assaulted on a daily basis for opening her mouth, or when a partner threatens to kill her child unless she toes the line and social agencies are ever ready to take her children away from her she learns silence, a deep and terrifying silence. When she is punished severely for expressing herself she not only learns to shut down verbally but begins to fear her own thinking which becomes internalized as the source of her pain. When a woman or child has experienced years of “intimate violence ...[which] is a breach of the relationship of deep trust presumed to exist among family members, between intimate partners, between caregivers and children, and, ultimately, between any adult and child” (McGillivray and Comaskey, 1999: xiv) they can hardly be expected to perceive the world the same way as someone who has not experienced abuse.

Yet, abused children are then expected to attend schools and universities and develop the critical thinking skills desperately needed to combat colonization, find gainful employment and be fully functioning members of society whether that society is urban or rural. What do we do? We can take their tools and try to run with them. Some of us are successful but for too many others our conditioning—into otherness thinking—does not allow for complete success.

Consider what happens when we arrive at university and are expected to begin critical thinking yet have not been allowed to think [or value our thinking] in even mundane terms? How can we be expected to move into the realm of the critical? Everything takes on the idea of threat. We freeze at the thought of putting our thoughts out there into the open where they can be heard, evaluated and subsequently punished. Terror rides in our souls and we feel utterly helpless to stop the disintegration into nothingness. We need professors, we need lovers, we need friends, and we need family, to draw the terror away, to encourage our thoughts to fruition. In other words, we need community. But mostly, we need context for it is only within understanding of the context that we can move forward.

Perceptually, we are handicapped. How is this disability overcome? Can it be overcome? We have learned this perceptual limitation from our earliest years. We have learned to respond to external stimuli. Ask any abused child and they can affirm knowledge, an intuitive sense that says how to respond in the face of preeminent danger. Ask any abused woman and she likewise can affirm the same knowledge and intuitive sense for responding to perceived danger. This intuitive sense becomes a finely honed skill. Unfortunately this skill is also transferred into everyday thinking and rather than allowing ourselves the freedom to express our innermost thoughts, we shut them down and ask the world to tell us how to think and what to think about. When an abused woman (or male)

who has not had the benefit of love and security as a child with the accompanying benefit of being allowed to think for themselves is asked for example, at a university, to think and to write they find themselves in a dilemma. Someone wants them to think! But how does one go about thinking about what to write?

The following scenario is an example of partial success:

I am being asked to write a paper—to think—to cite and I don't know how. I look at sources but how can I write my thoughts when they have already said it so well? So I cite in full, lengthy, lengthy passages full of another author's words. My professors get frustrated and try to teach me how to think for myself, to learn to paraphrase. But how can I paraphrase when all my life I have needed the full context to make sense of my danger? I am being asked to create my own context independent of others but no one has ever taught me this skill.

So, I flounder and try my best to write a paper that can get me a decent grade. Sometimes I am successful and sometimes I am not. Second-guessing continually rears its ugly head to remind me that my own thoughts are subject to weakness, to stupidity, to pain, to another punch in the face. I might balk in disgust at my own impertinence, thinking I have something useful to say. I freeze. I run to someone else for confirmation that I have a right to think and that I am capable of thinking. With constant affirmation I make it to the end of the paper only to realize that it must be submitted. Terror, oh no, someone will be reading my thoughts. They are no longer private and safe. I have put myself out there in public with the possibility of rejection, dismissal and ridicule. My hope and my future lay in the hands of someone else, my professor.

Unlike Wolverine who readily accepted the perception of the Wolves many Aboriginal students have not learned what critique is. Instead the student has learned criticism, a criticism that comes with horrendous abuse. What happens to this student when or if the professor says "this is good but...?" Do they feel encouragement or terror? Do they run and escape the pressure of feeling the walls are closing in around them locking them into eternal hell? Do they become a statistic of failure? Or do they freeze then summon the courage to discover the professor's context? Do they learn to formulate their thinking according to what the instructor wants? Do they move as far away from critical thinking as possible and center their works on pleasing the professor? If they settle

for this last strategy of survival, while it may result in good grades what has it taught them about critical thinking? More importantly, what has it taught them about their ability to think, to challenge, or their rights to even engage in such activity?

Are students such as this able to see that constructive critique paves the way for their own success in evaluation? Yes, certainly some of them are but sadly many more are not. It frustrates many professors and good professors struggle daily trying to make sense of their own skill building strategies never realizing the problem is not in the strategies per se although it could, in some instances be the source of the problem—the problem—as I've seen through my own experience and that of my students is within our perceptual relations. For some, critique is akin to the fist mashing in the face, it hurts, it terrifies, it crushes—and the professor becomes a threat to survival.

Similarly, what happens when an up and coming Aboriginal scholar at the request of others submits a paper for a conference? At first there may be excitement if it gets accepted. Then comes the horrible reality that many others will hear it. What if said paper is a particularly vehement critic of a non-Aboriginal? Upon writing the paper the scholar may feel justified in her/his critique but when faced with public reaction does she/he hold to their views with strength, courage and determination or does he/she believe the others will see it as an attack? Does the scholar withdraw at the last minute? Maybe they choose to go ahead with the conference and make themselves physically and/or spiritually sick in the process. Processing in this manner is not a mental deficiency; it is a perceptual and contextual problem.

Through force we have had our cultural perceptions of ourselves altered. Through family abuse, a direct link with residential schools, we have had our personal perceptions of ourselves altered. Thus we become afraid to speak our minds. And, while it may be obvious to an observer that the down and out suffer from severe self-esteem problems what is not so readily available to the perceiver is the destructive perceptions on the most visibly successful Aboriginal.

Too often women are challenged for not speaking out immediately when something happens that they disagree with. Why don't they speak out? Why don't they stand up for themselves? Why is the ever-present fear of the next beating not diminishing in their consciousness? I spoke recently with an amazingly strong Aboriginal woman who holds a position of power within the political world. She exudes sophistication, is articulate and highly respected for her opinions. No one would guess that she walks with the same perceptual fears as other Aboriginal women. I was discussing this topic with her when she suddenly began revealing

a past that has kept her tied to silence and a feeling of “what is wrong with me?”

This woman has knowledge of her perceptions and can in most cases readily defend them, however, in other contexts she is paralyzed and does not know why. Her partner of many years asked her why she must wait days, weeks possibly even months before expressing her thoughts about certain events. He claims that she is deliberately creating a situation that she can control. I would agree to a degree. Control is crucial yes, but not control in the sense of providing a context with which to manipulate others. Her control is in the area of ascertaining a context within which she can safely articulate her thoughts feeling, and reactions. While there is any element of doubt as to her safety, whether physical, mental or emotional, the discussion will not take place. And if such safety does not occur for weeks, months or years then her thoughts will remain secluded in the safety of her mind. This woman admitted to feelings of alienation and a deep sense of aloneness. How does this woman, a woman with observable successes overcome her legacy of abuse?

Abuse or apathy both running rampant in many Aboriginal families does not foster critical thinking. Quite the opposite, it prevents critical thinking. It conditions us to see ourselves as dung. The skill of the Wolves in the above story, to confront the perception of the other is not called into being. Too often our internal dialogue is such that we must be wrong because we are not seeing like the other or thinking like the other. The very idea that they may in fact be seeing much like Wolverine does not enter our consciousness and we continue to make ourselves invisible.

It is through past colonial abuse, existent family abuse, and ongoing societal abuse that we lose our perceptual confidence and through confronting perceptual relations within the Aboriginal family and Canadian institutions that we can come to see what has happened to us. We must learn to see past the perception that we are human dung. We must courageously confront a Wolverinian attitude of Aboriginal worthlessness, that is, if we are ever to see ourselves being as valuable as the fur coats that brought wealth to foreign nations and destruction to Indigenous nations. We must not ignore the serious impact family and colonial perceptual relations have had upon our individual perceptual capabilities.

To overcome a legacy of abuse, both colonized and familial we need stories and perceptual checks and rechecks. Education is a key factor in disseminating stories whether that education comes through formal western training, traditional knowledge, or simply relating the story person to person. On the other hand, if formal education is to help us overcome the legacy of abuse we need to fearlessly confront historical distortions yet, this is where our greatest problem lies, in the confrontation.

Can we learn that confrontation does not always equal abuse? If we can take the perception of confrontation out of the abuse category and place it within the realm of critical thinking—along with the necessary allowedness to think—then we might have a chance.

Centuries have left us a legacy of abuse and confronting perceptual relations is a terrifying and equally painful endeavor. However if we can also recognize that what we label as low self-esteem, lack of intelligence, or laziness, is in reality, the effect of a person attempting to negotiate an environmental context that is new and novel from the one of physical, mental and emotional abuse, then maybe we can help undo a legacy of abuse that is further perpetuated in education by the assumption that we are all starting from the same place perceptually. And this is where personal stories can play a momentous role.

Like the story from India where multiple perceptions were needed to understand the elephant in its entirety, so too can Aboriginal women's personal stories reveal a multiplicity of perceptions that woven together can help us better understand the Aboriginal woman. For this to occur her stories must be told, validated and encouraged. She must be allowed to re-center the web of splits she feels within herself for as Joanne Arnott so clearly puts it, "In acknowledging the splits within ourselves, and between us, by locating the potent gaps and making space for them to materialize—by realizing them—we undermine the dissonance. We make sense, for ourselves, for everyone."⁶

One very strategic method for re-centering oneself is to hear honest, open stories from other women. When a woman with the ability to share her trauma and recovery does so other women begin to feel less isolated. They begin to see through the fog of deception they have been conditioned into and start to see a new truth a truth they then begin to act upon. "For Indians, the story conveys knowledge, knowledge does not convey the story...."⁷ Thus every woman's story conveys the knowledge that others of us need to hear. Unlike others whose directives are used to destroy our perceptions, when stories told by Aboriginal women are subjective and acknowledged as such it opens our receptivity. A subjective story is not threatening. It is not told for the purpose of altering or controlling perceptions but rather to provide an arena for others to share in the experience of the storyteller. Therefore it provides the space for our receptivity and creativity to work together in a healthy relational manner as opposed to being shutdown.

Notes

1. Denis McPherson & Douglas J. Rabb. *Indian From the Inside: A Study in Ethno-Metaphysics*. Thunder Bay, ON: Lakehead University Centre for Northern Studies, 1993. p.11.
2. Robert Brightman. *Grateful Prey: Rock Cree Human-Animal Relationships*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. p.45.
3. When I say “mental processing problems” I am not suggesting a mental deficiency but rather an effect of a relational deficiency.
4. James S. Frideres & René R. Gadacz. *Aboriginal Peoples in Canada* 7th ed. Toronto: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005.
5. Joanne Arnott. *Wiles of Girlhood*. Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1991:92.
6. Joanne Arnott. *Wiles of Girlhood*. (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1991):92.
7. Anne Waters. *Introduction to American Indian Thought* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004)p.xvii

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