# Toward a Sociology of the Reconciliation of Conflicting Desires

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Desire-based research provides people and communities the opportunity to share their dreams and hopes for a better future. However, conflicting desires are difficult to reconcile. We suggest that sociological research to understand conflicting desires is required to support reconciliation work by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada. Our contribution begins by identifying much of current and past sociological research about Indigenous people and communities as damaged-centered, that is, identifying problems and obstacles in the hope that the knowledge will lead to change. This model of social change is flawed. We believe that most Canadians desire justice for Indigenous peoples while at the same time desiring land and access to resources, desires that deny that justice. How we as a society reconcile these desires will determine the extent to which true justice for Indigenous peoples will be achieved. We propose a sociology of the reconciliation of conflicting desires and suggest some practical ways that this type of research could move forward.

WE BELIEVE THAT SOCIOLOGICAL research can contribute to justice for Indigenous peoples; however, the focus of the research needs to change. The starting point for our contribution is the analysis by Eve Tuck (2009) of the need to suspend damage-centered research in Indigenous communities. According to Tuck (2009), damage-centered research documents everything that is broken or wrong in Indigenous communities. The result

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is that Indigenous people see themselves as damaged. Much of the current and past sociological research on Indigenous communities is damage centered. The research can look at historical and political causes such as colonization to explain poverty, ill health, and social dysfunction in Indigenous communities but the result is the same: we understand Indigenous communities and people to be broken, needing to be fixed. The damage in Indigenous communities has also been documented extensively in reports from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC; 2015), the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Anaya 2014), and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP; 1996). The mass media also reports regularly on the damage, loss, pain, and deficits. Every Canadian is aware of the "Indigenous problem."

Tuck (2009) believes there was a need for damage-centered research in the past, to document the stories, but now it is time to shift, to craft research so that it focuses on desire instead of damage. Desire-based research captures the complexity and contradictions of everyday lives. It documents not only the painful elements but also the wisdom and hope, because Indigenous communities are so much more than broken. It remains important to expose ongoing structures of inequity; desire-based research does not ignore oppression but rather makes good choices available for people.

Tuck (2009) explains that many Indigenous communities participate in damage-centered research in the hope that it will bring about change. However, this approach is based on a flawed theory of social change: by establishing harm or injury, reparation will be achieved; by testifying that damage was caused, the perpetrators will be forced to be accountable. The flaw in this theory of social change is that reparation has never been achieved. We will add that at the time of writing, the newest federal government has stated its intention to enact all the recommendations of the TRC. It is good to hope that the government will make the changes required to achieve justice for Indigenous peoples; however, a review of the history of government action strongly suggests otherwise. Indigenous people desire to make decisions for themselves rather than have them made for them by the Department of Indigenous Affairs and Northern Development. Indigenous people desire to determine their own destiny and shape their own future. Fulfilling this particular desire requires colonial structures to be replaced with structures that recognize the principle of self-determination.

Crucially for our analysis, Tuck (2009) also makes the point that desires can be conflicting. We can desire to be critically conscious and also desire something that maintains oppressive social structures. Our contribution expands from that point: we believe that sociology has a unique role to play by doing research on these conflicting desires. All groups of people have desires that may conflict internally. How we as a society reconcile these desires will determine the extent to which true justice for all Indigenous peoples will be achieved. We propose a sociology of the reconciliation

of conflicting desires and suggest some practical ways that this type of research could move forward.

## OUR CONFLICTING DESIRES

Indigenous authors working across Canada are leading the analysis of settler colonialism, including Taiaiake Alfred (2005, 2009), Marie Battiste (2013), Jeff Corntassel (2012), Glen Coulthard (2014), Pamela Palmater (2011), Leanne Simpson (2014), and Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012), among others. A settler colonialism lens sees that Canadian state policies are designed to remove Indigenous peoples from their traditional lands so that the resources can be extracted for economic gain. For millennia, the Indigenous people in the regions where resources are extracted survived as hunters and gatherers with strong connections to the land and all that it provides; it is only in recent history that they are living on small reserve lands with limited access to the resources needed to develop their communities.

One way to ensure unfettered access to natural resources in Canada is to weaken the communities in those regions by removing the children and putting them into residential schools. Another way is to make living conditions in the communities so difficult that many people will want to leave and move to the cities. Underfunding for Indigenous education, health, social services, housing, and so on, have been well documented by Indigenous organizations over the years. As the housing manager in a remote Indigenous community interviewed recently said: "We receive just enough to fail" (Beaton et al. 2015:110). Tuck and Yang (2012) have argued persuasively that decolonization is not a metaphor: it is about land.

If decolonization is about land, then reconciliation is also about land. Resources taken from Indigenous lands maintain the Canadian economy. The unrestrained extraction of resources from Indigenous lands is directly responsible for the high standard of living experienced by most Canadians, the majority of whom live in cities. The fact that resource extraction is carried out with little regard for the environment is directly responsible for the relatively low prices we pay for consumer goods, especially petroleum-based products. We all have many desires. Below we list six that are central to our argument.

Desire 1: We want Indigenous communities to be healthy, strong, and thriving. This includes options for community members to live, learn, work, and play in Indigenous languages; follow Indigenous cultural practices; and create new ways of seeing and being Indigenous.

Desire 2: We want all development of lands and resources to be respectful, environmentally sound, and sustainable. This includes

meaningful consent with Indigenous communities and nations in whose traditional territories the development is proposed.

Desire 3: We want a safe and secure home for everyone in our families and communities. This includes having the choice to stay where we are currently living for as long as we want.

Desire 4: We want stolen lands to be returned to their rightful owners. This includes supporting the development of a process to repatriate unceded and unsurrendered Indigenous traditional territories as well as those recognized by treaty.

Desire 5: We want: to be able to buy fresh fruits and vegetables out of season that are grown far away and transported to local grocery stores and sold as inexpensively as possible; and/or we want a vehicle, preferably a new one, to be able to use whenever we want and we want fuel to be inexpensive; and/or we want to be able to take inexpensive flights to visit friends or family or to have fun in warm places when we need a break; and/or at Christmas we want to be able to buy things for our families that they do not really need; and/or at any time we want to be able to buy things for ourselves we do not need, including fashionable clothes and home furnishings and the latest electronic devices, and we want everything we buy to be at the lowest possible price.

Desire 6: We want a strong Canadian economy and to maintain a high standard of living so that we have enough money to afford Desire 5; and/or we want all Canadians and citizens of other countries to experience a similar standard of living if that is their desire.

Readers can see where we are going with this: most of us have conflicting desires, non-Indigenous people and Indigenous people. First, the way resource extraction occurs in Canada, with little or no respect for the land and the people who live there, gives most of us the level of wealth we desire (Desire 6). At the same time, we may also desire many material goods at inexpensive prices (Desire 5), which is also possible because of the way resource extraction occurs in Canada. However both these desires conflict with Desire 2, because the way resource extraction occurs in Canada does not have meaningful consent by and sharing the benefits with Indigenous peoples and is not respectful of the land, environmentally sound, and sustainable. They also conflict with Desire 1.

Second, most of us live on stolen land. Tuck and Yang (2012) and others have stated that decolonization (and therefore, reconciliation) will involve settling the land question, which is Desire 4 for some of us. Whether or not we have Desire 4, we believe most Canadians want Indigenous communities to be healthy, strong, and thriving (Desire 1), which in practice requires respectful and sustainable resource extraction (Desire 2) and stolen land returned to its rightful owners (Desire 4). This potentially

presents a big conflict of desires, especially again for non-Indigenous Canadians who want to be secure in the knowledge that they can continue to live where they are currently living for as long as they want to (Desire 3).

At the same time, it is important to analyze privilege and the ability to actually act on our desires: for example, the desire to buy fresh produce out of season at inexpensive prices should be understood differently for a person of privilege living in downtown Toronto and a person living in a remote First Nation or Inuit community where fresh produce is always prohibitively expensive and poverty levels are high. However, all of us have a stake in ensuring that these desires are reconciled in the best way possible to make justice for all Indigenous peoples a reality.

## DOING SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON CONFLICTING DESIRES

Research on desires and conflicting desires can take many approaches; we can see avenues for quantitative researchers although our own research methods are qualitative and we believe qualitative methods will offer the most results. What follows are points researchers should consider when embarking on this adventure; we see them as guidelines without being prescriptive. As this is a new research area for us, it is important to be as thoughtful and creative as possible with our approaches and be open to new possibilities. We believe all research toward justice for Indigenous peoples must support capacity building so Indigenous communities can participate meaningfully in the research and conduct the research themselves if they so desire.

1. Research questions: There are many possibilities although we suggest the core focus of this research is to understand the desires people have for lands and resources that conflict with their desire to want Indigenous communities to be healthy, strong, and thriving, and how they reconcile their desires. The high-level aim of this research is to develop a sociological analysis of the reconciliation of conflicting desires that can inform action. The different contexts of privilege and material wealth and geography and the ability to act on our desires will be an important part of the analysis.
2. Research participants: These can be people who identify as Indigenous or non-Indigenous; however, a good starting point would be to focus on non-Indigenous people who likely have the most conflicting desires. An obvious source of participants would be the non-Indigenous people who actively demonstrate their support for Indigenous rights, such as activists. In New Brunswick, for example, many non-Indigenous people supported the antifracking protests and continue to provide support for those who were arrested and their families.

3. Research partners: When doing research with Indigenous communities, our experience suggests the best approach is to develop long-term partnerships with regional organizations that support local Indigenous community development. These partners may or may not be interested in the research with non-Indigenous people unless the benefits to Indigenous communities are clear.
4. Research team: Work with your research partners on a vision for increasing research capacity in rural and remote communities. This includes using technologies effectively to build and maintain relationships with rural and remote communities. Plan research projects so that the primary objective is to support the development of local community research capacity. Find ways to build local capacity whenever possible. Invest in the local community infrastructure and businesses—when visiting the community, pay for the use of facilities such as broadband networks, meeting rooms, local caterers, local accommodations, and other local facilities. Include the regional partners and community leadership in the development of research projects and plans. Hire community researchers to work as research assistants and liaisons with local community members. Hire other community people whenever possible for ongoing research activities, for example, to develop Web sites, transcribe interviews, and organize events; pay them well.
5. Data collection: Use appropriate data-collection protocols. Design research data collection so that the information collected will benefit a wider range of purposes in Indigenous communities, such as information that can be used by community development staff for funding applications. When conducting research with Indigenous participants, develop and sign research agreements with community political leaders, with expectations and contributions of both parties clearly articulated. The community should own the data collected: learn from the OCAP protocol (Assembly of First Nations 2007) and Article 31 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN General Assembly 2007). If they do not have their own research ethics protocols, inform community leaders and members about the ethical requirements of research in the TCPS2 (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada 2014), so that they will always demand high ethical standards from us and future researchers.
6. Publications: Always include at least one Indigenous co-author in any publication about Indigenous people. When discussing a particular Indigenous community, a community member should be a co-author of all publications coming from that community. Figure out a way to provide financial support so that community co-authors can

travel to conferences to deliver presentations about the community. Recognize that publications other than academic articles would be useful in communities, such as posters, information sheets, and articles in community newsletters and Indigenous media.

7. Action: The findings about reconciliation of conflicting desires should lead to strategies to remove the conflicts with the central desire: healthy, strong, and sustainable Indigenous communities. This may involve being a public intellectual, using the position of privilege of being a university-affiliated sociologist to speak out against injustice to Indigenous people and communities and removing the conflicts we have to making things right.

## CONCLUSION: TOWARD RECONCILIATION

We have argued that to contribute to justice for Indigenous peoples, the focus of sociological research needs to shift from documenting the damage in Indigenous communities to understanding how Canadians have conflicting desires. In his preface to the challenging book by Paulette Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within*, Taiaiake Alfred observes that, in relation to settler colonialism, "Canadians are in denial, *in extremis*" (Regan 2010:ix). We agree and suggest that our denial can be largely explained by our failure to reconcile our conflicting desires: we want self-determination for Indigenous nations and we also want to own many things we do not need and to buy them at the lowest possible cost, fueling an economic system that requires unsustainable exploitation of resources on stolen Indigenous lands. Glen Coulthard (2014) writes, "For Indigenous nations to survive, capitalism must die" (p. 174). Perhaps this is the answer, perhaps not. We believe that a better understanding of how people reconcile their conflicting desires is part of the solution. How we reconcile these desires will determine our collective future.

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