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A Reconceptualization of the Self-In-Relationship: Contributions from Voices of Cherokee Americans

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A concept of Self that is fundamental to grasping the intersection of two worldviews cannot be translated as a word-for-word definition between American Indian and Western languages. This article is a conversation that summarizes the results of dissertation research that explored the concept of Self-In-Relationship as articulated in English by Cherokee Americans¹ (McVicker, 2017). Knowings about Self or Self-In-Relationship were held in focus by the lens of the Internal Family Systems (IFS) model as the concept emerged in two worldviews. The IFS conceptualization of Self was found to be similar to the study participants' narratives and to Cherokee literature about the Self-In-Relationship. Metaphors that overlap traditional Cherokee knowledge systems and Western scholarship re-center Cherokee conceptual frameworks as foundational for wellbeing.

Voices from Cherokee Descendants

Suzan and Polly: We, the authors of this article, wove a collaborative relationship with each other, both beyond and within academia. We shared our journeys of moving toward balance and harmony, walked together on the beach and in the Great Smoky Mountains at Cherokee Full Circle, and stood side-by-side blanketed by stars and sung to by the waves.

Suzan: My people, Cherokee and Euro-American, for generations have called the Allegheny Mountains home. My path led to reaching into the inner world, the Within Direction (Sams, 1998), to access the Self-In-Relationship as a way of healing the complex pain of historical trauma.

Polly: I am a Cherokee descendant and grew up on the traditional lands of the Mescalero Apache, on a ranch in the White Mountain Wilderness area. My coming-to-knowing focuses on *tohi* (peace in the Cherokee language) in particular the decolonization of the practice and study of conflict resolution.

Suzan: The voices of the study participants are like ours, voices of Cherokee descendants. Descending from Indian and Euro-American ancestry (or multiple ancestries) means contending with two meta worldviews in a time when Cherokee ways of knowing have been marginalized.

¹ The terms *Cherokee* and *American* are descriptive terms for two worldviews. All worldviews are partial and evolving. The term *Cherokee American* in our conversation describes how the two worldviews are brought together yet held in distinction.

Research Methodology: Holding a Fluid Concept in a Cherokee Doubleweave Basket

Polly: I resonate with your use of the Cherokee doubleweave basket as a metaphor to describe your research methodology. Could you say more about the meaning of this?

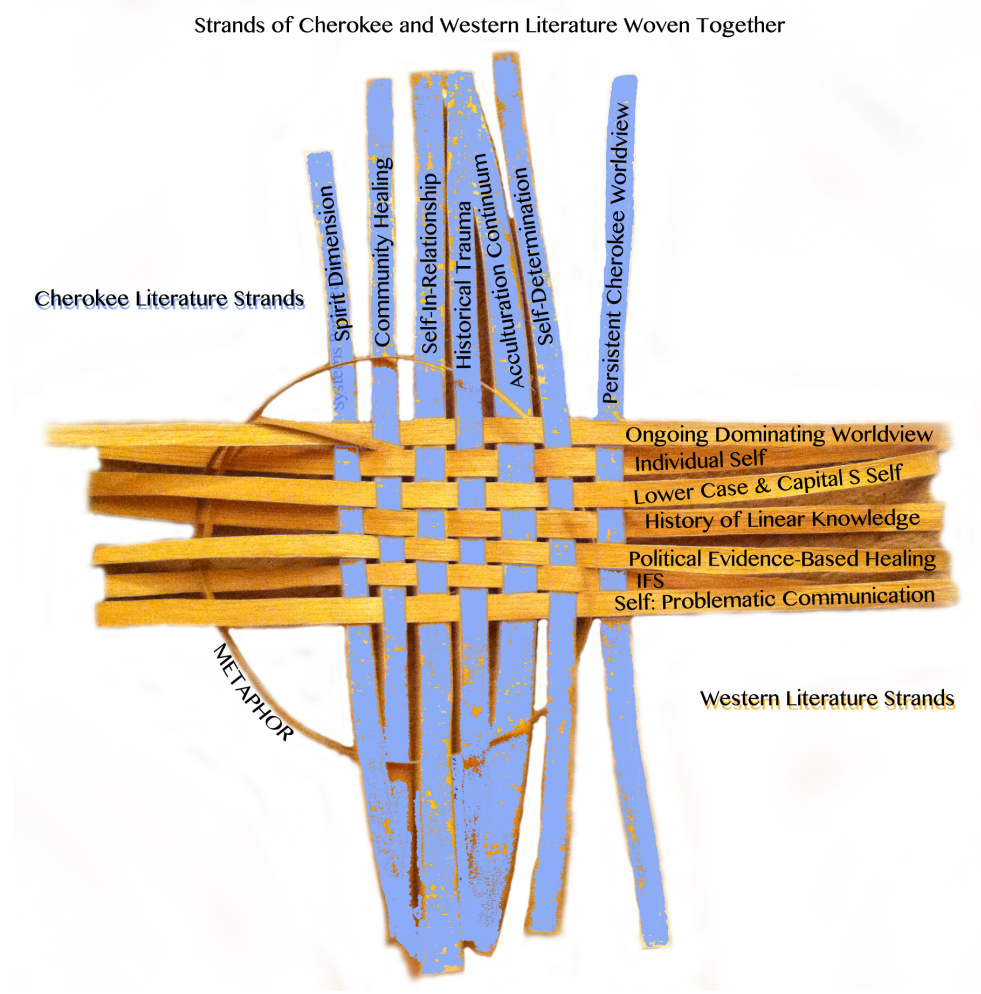
Suzan: The distinctive Cherokee doubleweave basket is a powerful image perpetuated in the Cherokee knowing field from Ancient Times (Hill, 1997). A Cherokee doubleweave basket can hold water. Its construction creates one seamless container where the design on the outside is different from the design on the inside. My study was a concept analysis, a weaving of knowledge from two different meta-worldviews. Metaphorically, I wove splits (cut rivercane basketweaving materials) from Cherokee Indigenous² Knowledge Research (IKR) with Western Science (WS) splits (See Figure 1). Metaphor is a tool that can bring up unvoiced knowings for examining a concept (Moser, 2000). I chose metaphor in part to align with Cherokee worldview: Cherokee language is richly metaphorical, verb-based, and fluid (Altman and Belt, 2009, 2011).

Crafting my methodology with a combination of a tangible Cherokee basket design and a metaphorical way of understanding a concept that is found in a traditional Native American language led me closer to bridging the two worldviews that Cherokee Americans must negotiate. Most Cherokees today must articulate their knowings in English. And, many Cherokee descendants remember that the doubleweave basket can hold a fluid concept as well as physically hold water. Metaphors sustain the culture from which they arise (Nelson, 1998). In my methodology, I honored a Cherokee metaphor, the doubleweave basket, in a way that was resonant with Western metaphors.

Two worldviews, two languages, two knowledge systems—inner world systems seamlessly interfacing with external world systems—all these dimensions can be woven into one metaphor, the time-honored design of the doubleweave basket. Weaving with a metaphor that connected the Cherokee past with a Cherokee American present moment, I could work in multitriangulations of data that gave rigor to my methodology.

While commonly understood to exist, the Self is uncommonly difficult to describe (Moustakas, 1956). My study looked at the Self-In-Relationship as it has been generated and regenerated where two major worldviews overlap (Smith, Strickland, & Smith, 2010). The metaphor of weaving supported an examination of gaps in understanding the overlap as well as entanglements and/or interconnections.

² The term *Indigenous* is used instead of Cherokee *Indian* to differentiate the worldviews and knowledge systems of those who are known as American Indians, First Peoples, Original Peoples, and First Nations in Indigenous Knowledge Systems as distinct from Western Science.



Cherokee

Self-In-Relationship
 Systems perspective with spirit dimension
 Historical trauma: violence against Native Self
 Acculturation continuum
 Self-determination
 Community healing
 Persistent Cherokee worldview

Western

Individual self
 Self: problematic communication
 Internal Family Systems model (IFS)
 Lower case & capital “S” self
 History of linear knowledge
 Political evidence-based healing
 Ongoing dominating worldview

Figure 1. Strands of Cherokee and Western literature woven together.

Two Knowledge Systems that Belong Together

Polly: Suzan, when I read your research findings—that weave together Cherokee American perspectives of Self-In-Relationship with concepts from the IFS model—I am reminded of what Grandfather Leon Secatero, of the Cañoncito Band of Diné, said about the times we live in. He said it is a time of all “five fingered ones” to come together and share their knowledge through respectful collaborations. What is your experience of how this might be related to your research?

Suzan: *Wah doh* (Thank you), Polly. My research purpose in its largest sense was to help restore mutual respect between holders of IKR and emergent Western ways of knowing. While most Western qualitative methods have been deeply concerned with individualist conceptions and ideologies, I observed that the emerging vocabulary of consciousness in relational research methodologies is ultimately a “reconceptualization of self” that is different from dominant concepts (Gergen & Gergen, 2000). The two knowledge systems, IKR and WS, belong together as proven ways of accessing information (Atleo, 2004; Sheehan & Walker, 2001) (See Figure 2). My study was designed to increase that sense of belonging together in safe and respectful ways through a deeper understanding of the concept of Self-In-Relationship from many voices.

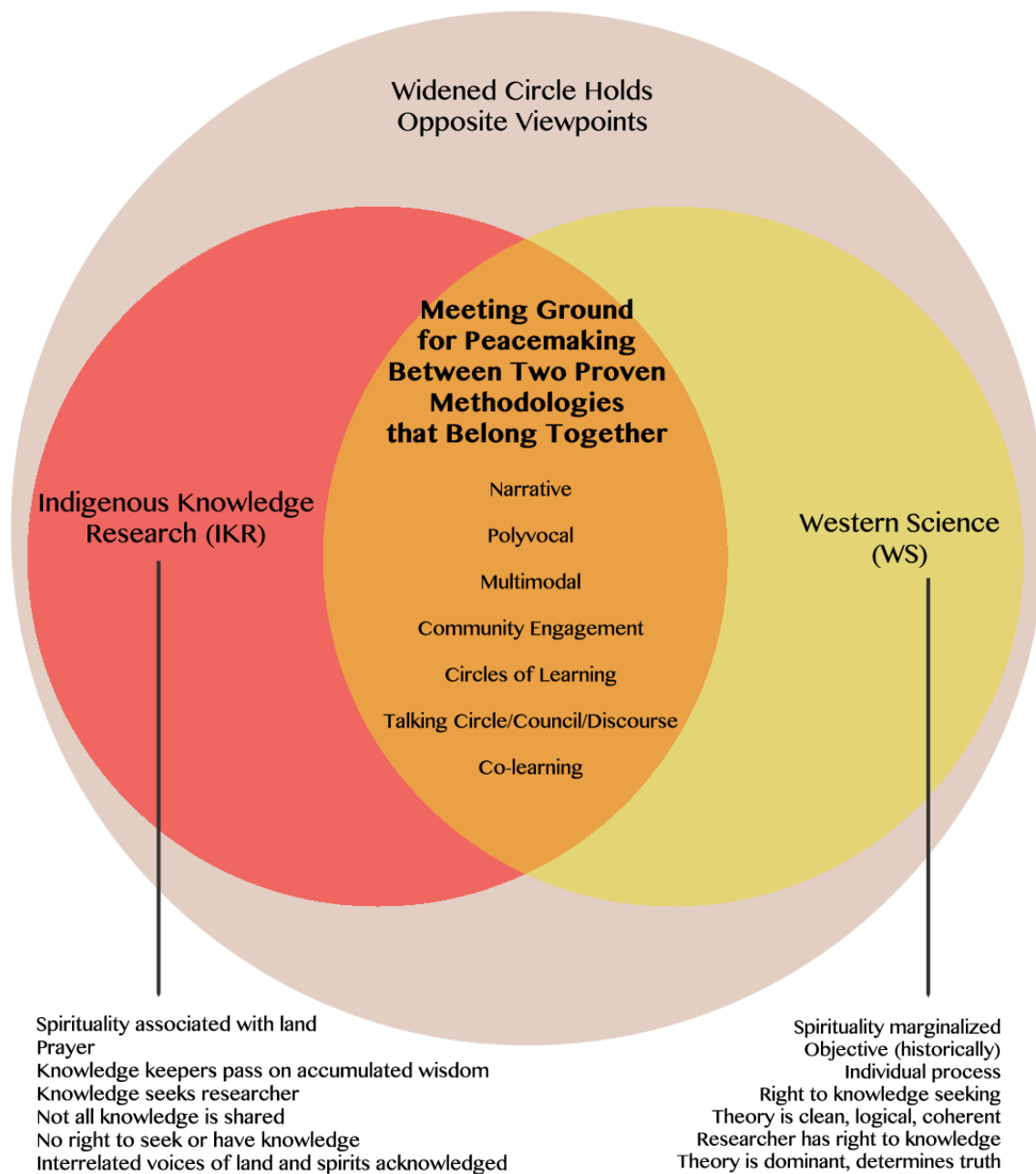


Figure 2. Meeting ground between two proven methodologies that belong together: Widen the circle.

English-speaking Cherokees must straddle Cherokee and Western lifeways. Cherokee Americans are embodiments of a crosswalk between Indigenous and Western ways. I invited 12 Cherokee American participants into a Circle of Learning (Garrett, J. T. & Garrett, M. T., 2002) to share through semi-structured individual interviews how accessing the Self-In-Relationship in the Within Direction might be similar in both worlds. How the Self is understood in a worldview is key to a collaborative process (Walker, 1999). So, yes, as Grandfather Leon Secataro saw, when we five-fingered ones collaborated as a Circle of co-learners, we found many similarities in the ways we understand healing by remembering and tapping into the Self-In-Relationship.

Polly: How does your study address Western researchers who have not been willing to respect IKR?

Suzan: My dissertation abstract is published in the Cherokee syllabary for all readers to see immediately that Cherokee voices are respected in the study. Then, early on I demonstrated how three major fields of inquiry are linked around the study of the Self-In-Relationship: Cherokee cosmology, the Internal Family Systems (IFS) model, and the study of metaphor. I wove my research design from a body of literature that included a balance of Cherokee, IKR, and WS voices, weaving over and under the ways that I collected narrative data, and weaving on into how I conducted in-depth analysis with content, theme, metaphor, and IFS lenses—I wove IKR and WS voices together so that they complemented each other in a conversational style.

I brought together areas where Western scholars and practitioners agreed with Cherokee scholars and practitioners that a conscious presence exists inside everyone, in every being, and is an innately healing place (Altman & Belt, 2011; Garrett, M. T. & Garrett, J. T., 2002; Schwartz, 1995). Through building on a concept, the Self, that is core to any worldview (Belk, 1984; M. T. Garrett, 1996), I aimed to extend respect by engaging Western scholar-practitioners in getting to know their Indigenous-descended colleagues better. American Indian and Western voices were welcomed into a deeper conversation as equals—into a wider circle that can hold opposite viewpoints in the discourse—a circle where Indigenous Peoples and their knowledge systems are re-centered. (See Figure 2).

Ever-Regenerating Self-In-Relationship Linked in Two Worldviews by IFS

Polly: Your research design upholds co-learning that presupposes awareness of an ever-regenerating understanding of Self-In-Relationship through past events, interrelational lenses, and a sense of a developing future that is present in participant conversations. How does the Internal Family Systems—or IFS model—work in weaving your concept analysis in ways that honor Indigenous conceptualizations of time (past, present, and future)?

Suzan: One of the biggest differences between Indigenous and Western worldviews is the difference between linear and circular time (Walker, 2007). In circular time past and present form a great circle of influence on current life (McMaster & Trafzer, 2004). Events are not perceived linearly like beads strung on a necklace (Altman & Belt, 2011). Using IFS to bring our Self present in the inner dimensions is an experience that begins to inform thinking about time as more circular. The IFS view and experience of time in this way links Indigenous and Western ways of processing events through time.

IFS is an interrelational lens. I wove concepts from this Western-developed lens that can telescope and microscope through past, present, and future coherently with the clearest concepts from Ancient Times and from today. Time in the inner landscape is not kept like measurement of the hours between sunrise and sunset across the land. The innerscape might be described as a vast and multidimensional complex adaptive system where all is interrelated with all else and all is accessible through a past, present, and future that exist concurrently (Altman & Belt, 2011). Time is another concept, like the concept of Self, that is commonly understood to exist, yet, troublesome to describe (van Manen, 1990). The Self-In-Relationship, like time in multidimensional awareness of it, is unfinalizable (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; Garrett, 2001).

The IFS way of seeing is based in a systems language that can weave together information from seen and unseen dimensions, and in which measured external time is understood alongside inner subjective time. Such a wide range of cross-worldview coherence about time across seen and unseen worlds may have the capacity to create alignment about the concept of Self-In-Relationship between the two meta-worldviews.

Polly: What were some of the strongest alignments that you found between Cherokee American ways and Western ways of describing the Self?

Suzan: The strongest alignments between the two worldviews were expressed in metaphors spoken by participants and appearing in IFS literature. I selected four metaphors that frequently appear in IFS literature to describe the experience of Self: Spaciousness, heart-led, storytelling, and transformation. Storytelling as an experience of the Self is more precisely about the Self witnessing the stories of parts³ (or subpersonalities) of the Self with compassion. I then chose three strong metaphors from Cherokee literature that were heard in participants' narratives: Fire, the circle, and connections. The metaphor alignments emerged as I created a large table linking the IFS quotations with Cherokee American participant quotations that described the Self-In-Relationship.

³A part of the Self is the IFS way of talking about a subpersonality and is not to be confused with the expression *part Indian*.

Metaphors presented...are coherent with Cherokee literature and the Internal Family Systems (IFS) model conceptualization of Self. Metaphors used by Cherokee American participants to describe Self-In-Relationship are similar to metaphors used in the IFS model to describe the Self. These metaphors may be representations of how Self is experienced in relationship with all parts of seen and unseen dimensions. As representations of experience, they provide language for understanding a concept in terms used for something else. (McVicker, 2017, p. 218)

Since I was not looking for a dictionary-style definition of Self-In-Relationship, it was exciting to see how metaphor surfaced embedded knowledge (Moser, 2000). The unvoiced knowledge that emerged was not in the quotations themselves. Rather, the new knowledge was found in many voices from Cherokee descendants placed in juxtaposition with many Western IFS scholars' voices. Moving those voices that had previously been heard chiefly in their own worldview spheres into side-by-side interrelationship allowed unvoiced knowings about conceptual alignments to be heard. When given voice through metaphor alignments a key concept, the Self-In-Relationship, became a crosswalk between worldviews. Such a crosswalk affords possibilities for the experience of Self to be more harmonized and balanced for those who straddle two worldviews.

Discussion: Harmony and Balance With Jagged Worldviews

Polly: Suzan, what is the relevance of your research for people who may be grappling with what Blackfoot scholar Leroy Little Bear (2000) calls “jagged worldviews” —the tensions that arise as a result of being connected to Native ways of knowing and being that are marginalized or obscured by Western educational systems and institutions?

Suzan: Any population whose consciousness has become a jagged jigsaw puzzle that leaves members vulnerable to those who compete for control of their thought and behavior might find the results of my research relevant. Cherokee Americans are one example of a People whose traditional worldview, as Little Bear (2000) describes it, historically was fragmented by colonization and replaced with a jagged worldview. Going inside or going to the Within Direction is a way to access healing qualities of the Self-In-Relationship (Altman & Belt, 2008; Schwartz, 1995). Going inside in this way is an act of decolonization (Waziyatawin & Yellow Bird, 2012).

When we talk about accessing and healing from core Self (IFS) or Self-In-Relationship, we are conceptualizing the use of resources that are innate in the inner world and are off the linear timeline. This explains why IFS and resonant

ways of healing are able to address historical or transgenerational trauma effectively. We are changing our neural systems by connecting to past traumatic events and directly resourcing the parts of us involved in such events with healing energies available when we go inside (Schwartz, 2011; van der Kolk, 2014).

Conclusion: Enduring Concept as Crosswalk of Understanding

Suzan: In the interconnection of Cherokee American and IFS Western worldviews and healing traditions, an enduring concept of Self-In-Relationship emerged as fresh and useful despite oppression of an Original People and sustained losses of their language. Awiakta (1993), Cherokee scholar who artfully perpetuates traditional metaphors, reminds us that knowing begins where the base splits—the first materials in starting a basket—cross. In this way, the crosswalk of understanding takes a shape that can result in a corrective design (decolonization) for jagged worldviews.

Polly: Your dissertation research brought to light new knowledge about how Cherokee descendants might help heal the wounds of transgenerational and ongoing colonizing encounters. The population of Cherokee descendants is quite large in the United States and individuals many struggle to find ways to understand, articulate, and balance their selves in relationship, both within themselves and with others. By exploring this terrain, you created a healing circle that has the potential to reverberate and extend beyond your study.

Suzan: Wah doh, Polly. The healing knowledge found in this study of the Self-In-Relationship has the potential to be “turned back around” (Conley, 2005, p.38) to re-center and restore the power of the medicine of the language back to the People. One way to turn the language back around is to explore how additional healing concepts that are connected to the Self-In-Relationship might be integrated into the IFS language in their original Cherokee terms. Terms related to Self-In-Relationship from numerous original Indian languages might be heard from many voices in a greater circle of study. Cherokee consciousness that is emerging into its proper place is a path of healing beyond the sphere of its own culture.

**Hawks invited me as a guest to write with the long views from a ridge above what is now an oxbow creek traditionally called the Slow River on the lands of the Oneota, Sauk, and Fox Peoples. Suzan*

***I write from the confluence of two rivers, where the Oneida Nation, the Onyota’aka People of the Standing Stone, had a village at the time of colonization. Polly*

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