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A Personal, Indigenous Feminist Experience with Centering Relationships during COVID-19

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I am an Indigenous woman, a mother, a researcher, a scholar, a partner, a daughter. In the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, the value and consequence connection with others has on my life has become more apparent. During this time, I am finding that technology can both help and hinder in building and maintaining relationships. Perhaps I can illuminate a bit for others who are struggling with the same things I am. I share Indigenous feminist theories and I believe these ways of knowing and being in the world help us to reclaim our past and to reimagine our futures.

Who I Am

I am an Indigenous woman, a mother, researcher, scholar, a teacher educator, partner, daughter. In the midst of this COVID-19 crisis, I am performing none of these roles well. It's as though I am pulled from one aspect of myself to the next, without ever really doing a task or job particularly well or completely. Within the intersections of my identities, I've always known the importance of relationships, and in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis the value and consequence that connection with others has on my life has become more apparent. I am finding that technology can both help and hinder in building and maintaining relationships.

Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) began a conversation around how our identities are intersectional, how race and gender and sex and ethnicity cannot be broken apart but must be considered in their interaction within and upon our lives. Patricia Hill Collins (2016) wrote about the social contradictions within these intersections. Sandy Grande (2015), Dian Million (2013), Leann Simpson (2016; 2017) and other Indigenous feminist thinkers and writers give us a view of intersectionality more directly related to Indigenous women. In light of this work, I acknowledge that in some ways I am quite privileged and in some ways I experience oppression. The current crisis has highlighted both the oppressions I encounter and the privileges I experience in my life, made them more visible and more materially real. I live in the intersections of identities and roles, and this is not always easy to navigate.

I tell you my story, which includes many intersectionalities, as a way for us both to learn because “stories direct, inspire and affirm (an) ancient code of ethics” (Simpson, 2014, p. 8). By sharing my story, I hold true to my Indigenous ancestors' ways of knowing and being in this world. I learn by

sharing, and perhaps you can learn through reading and gaining insight into a perspective other than your own. Sharing story is a way to build relationships and through relationship meaning can be made. “Meaning then is derived ... through a compassionate web of interdependent relationships that are different and valuable because of that difference” (Simpson, 2014, p. 11). In this way, technology and this crisis allow me to broaden and deepen the scope of my relationships, and to include you, dear reader, in a more meaningful way.

Mother

As I write this, my children have been out of school for 12 weeks. They have been home with me all day, every day. I am proud of myself in some ways; I have made these beautiful babies my priority. We have spent time doing their assigned school work (more on this in a minute), we have baked and cooked, put puzzles together, jumped on the trampoline, painted, played and snuggled with our cats, talked about serious things such as Breonna Taylor and George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery and Black Lives Matter, talked about silly things such as the latest TikTok video and what their next melty-bead project should be, planted flowers and veggies, gone for walks, planned for our upcoming move, played volleyball and ridden bikes. Sometimes my girls fight with each other, and they are unhappy that they can’t see their friends. I understand that this is hard and tell them so. I have found more patience than I ever thought possible. I am so incredibly grateful for this time to build and strengthen the connections I have with my children.

When I was a child, I spent quite a lot of time with my Oglala Lakota grandfather. He managed apartment complexes and we would fix toilets, paint walls, dig holes, pull weeds, put chemicals in the pool, and so much more. He showed me how to do all these things, was incredibly patient, gently teased me, always laughed and made jokes, and was constantly telling stories. My grandfather taught me through our relationship and often by relating stories. I find myself thinking of him often and am learning to teach like he did. I feel that much of this beautiful and deep work is being done because we are stuck at home together, and because we’ve left our phones, TV, and computer turned off and put away.

Teacher and Teacher Educator

At the intersection of my identities/roles as mother and teacher and teacher educator, I’ve learned about what I want to make sure I convey to my teacher candidates as we move forward. The single most important thing I can teach to them and demonstrate for them is that relationships are crucial. Building and maintaining relationships with your students is the biggest way to make a difference in their lives. My grandfather taught me that; my Indigeneity, the sense within myself of what I know to be good and right, as well as Indigenous writers and thinkers such as Michelle Jacob (2013), Heather Shotton (2018), Timothy San Pedro and Valerie Kinloch (2017), Vine Deloria Jr and Daniel Wildcat (2001), Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), Shawn Wilson (2008), and Brian Brayboy et al. (2014), teaches me that; working with my own children has reinforced this; and now the COVID-19 crisis has amplified it by showing how technology can be used to maintain relationships in this time of physical distancing.

My children attend a dual-language immersion elementary school, a school that is the most racially diverse in our district, and also has the highest number of free lunch qualifying families. The children who attend this school need the relationships they build with the adults in that building. I have strong criticisms of the way the district has handled some of their response to this COVID-19 crisis; their answer to continuing education was to mail a workbook and other packets home for parents to

work through with their children. Now, we can and we should talk about the struggles that many families are facing right now: parents forced to work with nobody to care for their small children, older siblings becoming responsible for younger siblings, lack of knowledge on the topics that are supposed to be covered, no internet access or device with which to access the internet for any supplemental work the students are supposed to do, etc. But here's my story with my kids. Forcing young children (or any children) to sit and do pages out of a workbook is not conducive to positive relationship building! Rather, it can create an adversarial situation in which the parent is trying to coerce their child to do something they can't or don't want to, bringing frustration and negativity to all involved. I know I was discouraged by interacting with my own children in this way. And this is coming from a teacher, I know this material and I know how to work with students. Quite frankly, this way of attempting to teach, well, as my 5th grader put it, it sucks.

Here's the thing, though. I am privileged. I can and do push back. I refuse to do hours of painful workbook pages and I tell the teachers "we did this other thing instead". I have the privilege and social capital to decide that this type of learning is not what's best for my babies, and the knowledge of how to fight back if someone in the school district decides they don't like it.

How many Indigenous, Black and Brown families, do not have this privilege? How many of these families are struggling to maintain relationships because of the harm schools are imposing upon them? I fully and firmly know and believe that these parents and families are trying their best to support their children amidst all the challenges being thrown at them. They love their babies just as much as I love mine. These parents are intelligent and educated and they value school, but within this COVID-19 crisis (and, really, all the time) the school is failing them by asking for them to perform education in their homes in a way that is unreasonable and that strains relationships with their kids. How do we, as educators, empower these families and students? As Eve Tuck writes about, how do we think of these families in ways that are not damage-centered? How do we turn instead to desire-based frameworks, which are "concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" (Tuck, 2009, p. 416)? How do we make their relationships with their children the priority?

Researcher and Scholar

Among my identities, I am a researcher, a scholar, and a writer. During this crisis I have struggled with never really being able to concentrate on my work or writing. To write I need a quiet space and a solid chunk of time. A potential 20 minutes with someone talking in the background and loud feet running through my little house just doesn't cut it. This stresses me out, and while I try to let go of the frustration, and yes, even anger, it's difficult. We are starting to see the research that women are (of course) bearing the burden of child, elder, and home care during this crisis, as in much of life, more acutely than men, and that "long-standing inequalities in both paid and domestic work appear to be exaggerated during the present pandemic circumstances in ways that disproportionately hinder the productivity of academic women" (Oleschuk, 2020, p. 502). In this case I'm referring to women scholars being "less productive" than their male counterparts, not submitting as many articles because of the increased time they are spending caring for others. This is no different in my household. Those children, whom I love more than anything, come to me constantly for every little need. I'm trying to teach them to do more things for themselves, or at least to think about if they can try it on their own before they ask me. But their dad is working from home too, and without exception they come to me first, even if they were sitting next to him on the couch only seconds ago. The work I do, the readings, the writing, I do because it is my passion and because I believe that it helps others, particularly other Indigenous folks, and it is frustrating to feel so stymied, so prevented from doing the work that I love.

I am in a relatively unique place in my life: at the very beginning of the stay home orders I finished writing my dissertation. And it's a good thing I did it right then because I don't think I could have finished it with my kids and partner at home all the time. During these stay at home orders I successfully defended my dissertation, and it was a weird experience to do that over Zoom. It was a challenge to prepare myself, because I had so many constantly competing priorities. The normal course of a defense entails being physically present in a room with your professors, standing and presenting your work to, and engaging with, them and other colleagues, as well as family members and friends. Having the ability to see their facial expressions and hear their mmm-hmms. Instead, I sat in my dining room and spoke to a computer screen. I deeply desired the personal interactions that I had worked so hard and waited five years to experience and felt the loss of the fullness of that event.

Now that the orders are being gradually lifted, I will not get to attend an in-person hooding ceremony celebrating that I have earned a PhD. As an Indigenous woman/mother/scholar ceremony is important, and this particular ceremony is meaningful for a collective celebration, to show that I accomplished something of value, that this work was with and for the larger Indigenous community, and that I had a large community of support surrounding me and they should be celebrated too. As Shawn Wilson (2008) writes, research is ceremony, ceremony is important, and both research and ceremony are for the greater community and not just the individual. I wanted my daughters to see a joyful recognition of the work and effort their mom has carefully begun and will continue to nurture, that it is meaningful, and for them to understand that they too can accomplish great things. Technology has made it possible for me to complete my dissertation during the COVID-19 crisis, to maintain relationships with my professors and colleagues. For this I am extremely grateful. And yet, I will not get to hug my professors and advisors and fellow students that have been so important to my journey. This hurts my heart. I find myself struggling with my emotions, it is a unique and poignant mix of celebration and grief, perhaps grief in celebration.

Relationships and Technology

Relationship is so critical, I've already said this. And it needs to be said again. I study Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and I do my very best to resist the settler colonial bullshit that has been drilled into my head and into my family for generations now. I resist the hyper-individualism, the narrow and misguided views of productivity, the conflation of capitalistic wealth with worth as a person so that I can try to live Indigenous ways of knowing and being. And one of the biggest, most important take-aways from all that is this: relationship *is* knowing and being. So now that I've been sitting in my house with only three other humans and two cats for the last three months, what does this mean? What does it mean for my students that are working to be teachers? How does technology, and the limitations that come with it, relate to relationships?

Many of us have been participating in Zoom meetings, and here again technology is allowing us to maintain connections with our coworkers and cowriters. Many of us have a child or children, or pets, that end up in our backgrounds; for some of us they end up as part of the meeting. And, really, I am enjoying this aspect of technology. Just yesterday, my oldest child, she's 10, got up and came to hug me as we always do first thing each morning, and it stopped a meeting with "aww's" and "how cute's!" from the folks I was talking with. I've seen colleagues' kitties and kids and partners, their kitchens and living rooms and bathrobes, and I appreciate that little insight into who the person is. As an Indigenous person, I believe that we are all connected and that relationships are the most important part of the work we do. So it feels right to have family members involved, to get to learn more about colleagues, to deepen that relationship. On the flip side, how many of our students don't want us to see their home

because it clearly displays their lack of capitalistic wealth? How many have locked themselves in their bedroom because it's the only way to get a little thinking space as they share 1200 square feet with four other people? How many are sitting in their cars outside of some Starbucks because that's the only way for them to access the internet? What about one of my students that lives on a reservation and only has internet sometimes and no Starbucks within 100 miles? This COVID-19 crisis coupled with technology is opening space for valuing and affirming relationships while also creating barriers.

We see many wonderful uses of technology by Indigenous folks, because that's what we as Indigenous folks do: we adapt, we use the technology available to us, and we continue our contemporary existence while remembering and honoring our ancestors and their teachings, as well as our place/land and what it teaches us. "Education and technologies have evolved along with humans since the beginning of time, were viewed as a means for survival, and are looked upon in the same manner in today's modern world" (RunningHawk Johnson et al, 2020, p. xvi). I've watched virtual powwows, which are incredible and that I wouldn't have been able to attend in person. I've attended seminars with Indigenous folks from around the world whom I wouldn't get to talk to otherwise. I have chatted via Zoom with friends and relatives and used that platform to collaborate with colleagues on a grant application and an IRB. I've emailed and texted and messengered with students while we cannot be physically together. So again, not being able to be physically present together, to have a relationship where I can hug my friend/relative/student is a hardship. And it is helping us learn new ways to continue and expand our relationships.

Hope and Questions

My story is important, not because I individually am important, but because perhaps I can illuminate a bit for others who are struggling with the same things I am. My story may allow us to learn together, for the benefit of our students. How do we help our Indigenous students to deal with the additional issues placed upon them by the COVID-19 crisis? These issues that I highlight are issues that our Indigenous students, women and mothers in particular, face in their regular lives, so what do we do about them? How do we use this crisis as a learning tool? How do we take the technological tools we have access to and use them to bring people together? And how do we combine that with our traditional Indigenous knowledges which give us a way to ground ourselves and to maintain relationship?

I am a scholar of Indigenous feminist writers and thinkers, and I am an Indigenous feminist writer and thinker myself. Indigenous feminist theories, these ways of knowing and being in the world, bring us ways to reclaim our past and to reimagine our futures. In a time and space that could be all about limits and deficits, they bring us hopeful ways to explore new and reclaimed possibilities. Hope is important, now more than ever, because it gives us a way forward, a way to use this COVID-19 crisis to make our teaching and learning better, and our relationships stronger.

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