**THE SHARED EPISTEMOLOGY MODEL**

**by Simon Moss**

|  |
| --- |
| **Introduction** |

**Epistemology in Aboriginal Australians**

When Aboriginal Australians converse about some topic, they often ask questions like

* Who has been granted the authority to speak about this topic?
* How do we know that some assumption or belief is right?
* What evidence can we use to help resolve this question?
* What should we regard as evidence?
* Who should decide whether the evidence supports this assumption or belief?

These questions might be discussed over an extended period, perhaps weeks or even months. These discussions show that Aboriginal Australians are very interested in epistemology—that is, the philosophy around how we generate and justify our beliefs.

**Epistemology in non-Aboriginal Australians**

In contrast, according to Dunbar and Christie (2013), non-Aboriginal Australians, including academics, do not contemplate epistemology as often, except in philosophy departments. Instead, non-Aboriginal Australians, and Western cultures in general, implicitly assume the correspondence theory of truth. According to this theory, statements that seem to accurately describe the world or reality are assumed to be true. Yet, although reasonable at first glance, this correspondence theory of truth raises several complications. The following table outlines these complications. You do not need to understand these complications entirely, but recognize this correspondence theory of truth is often contested.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Complication | Details |
| Our understanding of the world or reality cannot be justified | * To demonstrate that a statement is true, we need to know that our understanding of the world or reality is accurate * Otherwise, we cannot know whether a statement accurately describes the world or reality * Yet, to know that our understanding of the world or reality is accurate, this understanding, according to the correspondence theory of truth, needs to accurately describe the world or reality * Yet, again, we do not know our understanding of the world or reality is accurate—generating a circular argument |
| We cannot directly perceive the world or reality | * Many philosophers question the notion that we can directly know the world or reality * Instead, we can derive only perceptions of the world or reality * Therefore, the correspondence theory of truth reduces to the argument that our statements should accurately describe our perceptions of the world or reality * This principle, called the coherence theory of truth, is not especially stringent * Indeed, as Bertrand Russel showed, two contradictory statements can both cohere to the same perceptions and thus both be true |
| The theory of correspondence assumes that statements about the world—that is, our thoughts and language—are distinct from the reality—that is, actual features of the world | * Many Aboriginal communities do not differentiate or spilt language and reality in the same way |

**Implications of these disparities in epistemologies**

In short, this discussion indicates the epistemologies of many Aboriginal Australians diverges from the implicit epistemologies of many Western universities. Consequently, many Aboriginal knowledge practices are dismissed prematurely in the academic world. But, according to Dunbar and Christie (2013; see also Christie, 2006), to effect change effectively, research needs to integrate the knowledges and perspectives of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. In particular

* research that dismisses the knowledges and perspectives of Indigenous peoples overlooks key insights about the needs and insights of the communities—and thus will be misguided, rejected, and ineffective
* research that dismisses the knowledges and perspectives of non-Indigenous peoples may be dismissed by the academic world—and, for example, may not attract the requisite funding and support
* instead, research should embrace a transdisciplinary approach. Unlike inter-disciplinary research, transdisciplinary research does not blend existing disciplines. Instead, transdisciplinary research utilizes research practices that diverge from extant practices at universities.

Many Indigenous peoples around the world want their truths to be communicated to what they label as the white fella’s world. Many ancient universities, designed to preserve Indigenous knowledges, are designed to accredit traditional practices in ways that epitomise European perspectives.

|  |
| --- |
| **Phases to develop a shared epistemology** |

According to Dunbar and Christie (2013), to conduct effective research in Indigenous communities, researchers need to develop a shared epistemology—an epistemology that is consistent with both Western traditions and Indigenous perspectives. At the moment

* many Western researchers merely adopt Western knowledges and apply Western research methods
* some Western researchers have received training in Indigenous knowledges as well but tend to apply only Western research methods
* many Indigenous knowledge holders have not received training in Western academic perspectives

To develop a shared epistemology, researchers, regardless of whether they are Indigenous or non-Indigenous, need to apply a series of operating principles and ask a series of questions. The remainder of this document clarifies these principles and questions.

|  |
| --- |
| **Nine key principles** |

To foster a shared epistemology, researchers need to apply nine operating principles: deep listening, integrity, responsibility and accountability, deep respect for difference, reciprocity, patience, reflective practice, agreements, and the creating of opportunities. These principles, when followed, facilitate a shared understanding between people who espouse Western academic knowledges and people who espouse Indigenous knowledges. The following table illustrates these principles.

* the first column defines these principles.
* the second column offers some recommendations on how researchers can apply these principles—derived from a range of other sources, such as “Researching Indigenous health: A practical guide for researchers”.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Principles | Illustrations |
| **Deep listening**: Actively listening with both your head and your heart | * Deep listening involves watching and listening with a quiet awareness, devoid of judgment * To develop this quiet awareness, researchers should wait and contemplate rather than disrupt the stories of people with too many questions. * This style of listening is common in many Indigenous communities in Australia; the Ngengiwumirri people of the Daly River, for example, use the word *dadirri* to refer to this deep, contemplative, reciprocal listening (e.g., Atkinson, 2002) |
| **Integrity**: Honest communication about your motivations to conduct this research and how you will conduct this research with the community | * Utilize several platforms, such as flyers, oral presentations, and informal conversations to clarify the purpose and nature of this research as well as the experiences that motivated you to pursue this research |
| **Responsibility and accountability:** Consult extensively, and then construct and comply with agreements, to clarify how you should operate with the community |  |
| **Deep respect for difference:** Appreciate other sources of knowledge, motivations, choices, and actions—that is, ways of knowing, being, and doing. | * Question your assumptions and understandings about the community * Understand the historical experiences of individuals to appreciate their perspectives now * Embrace the research practices of Indigenous communities; Indigenous communities have conducted research over many thousands of years to promote physical, emotional, social, and spiritual wellbeing. * Embrace Indigenous knowledges—and recognize that Indigenous knowledge is not past knowledge but continues to evolve dynamically, derived from their close relationship with their environment * Similarly, recognize your categories or concepts may be misguided. If you want to study withdrawal of Aboriginal students from schools, you might question the scope and definition of schools, for instance |
| **Reciprocity**: Recognise the research is a shared journey that entails mutual understanding |  |
| **Exercise patience**: Schedule enough time to engage the community and to enable community members to consider the research comprehensively |  |
| **Reflexive practice:** Observe individuals and communities without judgment, but while checking your assumptions and understandings | * Arrange members of the community to check the transcripts of their interviews. * Regularly update members of findings * If possible, co-construct a resource the community can use in the future |
| **Agreements**: Constructs agreements around ethics, communication, publications, and other opportunities the research will grant the community | * Discuss and negotiate how data will be stored, managed, published, and used * For example, never display sensitive knowledge or objects that you receive from Elders without arranging agreement first, because these displays might break Aboriginal law. * Recognize that some Indigenous knowledges are maintained by Elders and can be transmitted only in accordance with community rules, laws, and responsibilities. |
| **Opportunities:** Whenever possible, create employment and learning opportunities for the community | * One of the aims of research in Indigenous communities is to build capacity sustainably—skills, resources, and commitment, for example. * But, researchers need to consult the community to ascertain which capacities are valued and whether the resources are available to build this capacity. * Capacity building must be customized to each community. Procedures that are effective in one community may be ineffective in other communities * Capacity building should extend the existing resources, strengths, and opportunities. * Learning should be bi-directional: both members of the research community and Indigenous community should build capacity * Consider opportunities for scholarships, traineeships, or professional development for Indigenous people * Ensure Indigenous individuals are involved in the research and leadership of this research at every phase. |

|  |
| --- |
| **Four guiding questions** |

Dunbar and Christie (2013) encourage researchers to ask four questions, designed to challenge preconceptions, foster interactions, and ultimately develop a shared epistemology. The following table outlines these questions and presents some examples. Researchers ask these questions to themselves—but can also seek insight from other people to answer these questions.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Question | Illustrations |
| What am I doing here—that is, what is my position, goals, and accountabilities? | * We need to recognize the distinction between academic imperatives—such as papers and grants—and the priorities of communities |
| What are we really discussing? That is, what are the actual categories or concepts of interest? What are our philosophical assumptions about knowledge? | * Are your categories suitable? * For example, if conducting research on English teaching in Aboriginal schools, you need to discuss these concepts. What is school exactly? How is English perceived? You might need to develop additional categories or refine existing categories during your research * You need to appreciate Indigenous knowledge traditions—and question the division between language and reality or research and action. For many Indigenous communities, research is intimately connected to action, called performative knowledge practice. |
| How do we conduct the research? | * You need to apply the nine operating principles * The procedures need to be collaborative, negotiated, iterative, and designed to effect positive change * The procedures might be similar to participatory action research—but you might need to consider how the research diverges from this methodology as well * To illustrate, participatory action research tends to be democratic; Indigenous communities, instead, might privilege the knowledge and authority of Elders |
| How do we formulate and validate our propositions? How do we effect positive change for participants of our research? | * The emphasis revolves around a negotiated solution to an identified problem rather than a general theory |

|  |
| --- |
| **References** |

Atkinson, J. (2002). Trauma trails, recreating song lines: The transgenerational effects of trauma in Indigenous Australia. Spinifex Press, Melbourne.

Christie, M. (2006). Transdisciplinary Research and Aboriginal Knowledge. The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education, 35, 78-89.

Dunbar, T. & Christie, M. (2013). Practical Epistemology for Australian Aboriginal Research. In Walter, M. (ed.) Social Research Methods (3rd ed. Online resources). Melbourne: Oxford University Press.