



REBUILDING IDENTITIES AND RENEWING RELATIONSHIPS: THE NECESSARY CONSOLIDATION OF DEFICIT- AND STRENGTH-BASED DISCOURSES

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Colonization. Cultural genocide. Trauma.

Gangs. Human trafficking. Incarceration.

Racism. Lateral violence. Drug and alcohol use. Suicide.

Inadequate housing. Boil water advisory. State of emergency.

Land-based activities. Holistic. Ancestors. Elders. Wisdom.

Traditional medicines. Country food. Family. Healing.

Language. Community. Culture. Spirituality. Ceremony.

Resistance. Identity. Self-determination. Power.

Indigenous peoples in Canada, and around the world, have been the target of colonialist practices and policies aimed at their subjugation, assimilation, and even eradication. Since contact with European traders, soldiers, and settlers, Indigenous peoples have been exposed to deadly diseases, corralled onto reserves as their lands were usurped and exploited, and controlled by laws not of their own making. Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities to attend Indian Residential Schools. There they were socialized to reject their own culture (to be replaced by Christianity), punished for the use of their own language, subjected to neglect, physical, emotional and sexual abuse, and provided an education more likely to entail learning menial farm labour or house work than reading (English or French), writing, and arithmetic.

Even today, Indigenous youth in Canada are more likely to be removed from their home communities and placed into foster care (at a substandard levels of federal funding) (Aboriginal Children in Care Working Group 2015). Rates of criminal victimization and incarceration of youth are excessively high (Matheson, Root, & Horn 2015). They are less likely to complete high school, let alone acquire a post-secondary education, and are more likely to be un(der)employed and to earn lower incomes (Lazar 2015). They suffer disproportionate rates of physical (tuberculosis, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, severe respiratory illnesses) and mental health disturbances (depression, posttraumatic stress, suicide) (Kirmeyer 2014).

The fact of these tragic inequities is not disputed. What is in dispute is the meaning that is derived from them, past and present, both by Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples in Canada (and indeed, globally) are increasingly framing the discourse in terms of their strengths, perseverance, and cultural distinctiveness. From their perspective, as a people, they have triumphed—the solution to the “Indian problem,” as envisioned by European settlers, was not achieved (Milloy 1999). There remain Elders who retain their language and traditions and are willing and able to pass them on to the younger generations. Indigenous peoples are rebuilding their communities, schools, and governance structures to establish thriving societies. Young people are actively seeking out their roots, and are using the power of voice to bring about change and the recognition of their right to flourish. Indigenous leaders, in all of their diversity, are collectively advocating for self-determination, justice, and respect as sovereign nations. In effect, Indigenous well-being continues to be firmly rooted in the relationships between children, family, and community, and a continued connection to cultural teachings and practices.

The deficit- versus strength-based discourses offer very different images of Indigenous peoples today, and so a fundamentally different understanding for how to move forward to bring about healing and reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and those who have settled on their lands. While both discourses hold truth, as will be considered in the sections that follow, which discourse is salient, for whom, and in what context, might have positive or negative implications for Indigenous identity and action, non-Indigenous attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, and for the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples as they seek to define a new relationship built on respect and equality.

Indigenous Identity



What one sees in an Indigenous community will depend on the lens through which a person is looking.

There are numerous theories, reflecting varying disciplinary roots, for understanding the evolution and meaning of cultural, ethnic, or social identities. In our work, we find Social Identity Theory (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel & Turner 1979) to be particularly helpful, as it allows us to understand identity from the perspective of both advantaged and disadvantaged groups, and provides insights into inter- and intra-group dynamics as identities are negotiated, shift, and evolve. In brief, social identity theory delineates the processes by which individuals identify with social groups, and how these memberships serve as a basis for positive self-worth and provide access to social resources (Haslam et al. 2009). Individuals hold multiple social identities (e.g., religion, occupation, gender, diagnosed illness, ethnicity) that vary in importance across people and

situations. Social identities have the capacity not only to mobilize support networks, but also to shape appraisals of events, and to furnish individuals with coping strategies to manage adversity. When a group's identity is threatened, group members will normally act to attain or retain positive identity status by favouring the ingroup (e.g., view their group's character as superior, acting to advance ingroup interests), and discriminating against outgroups.

From a social identity perspective, an Indigenous identity will be strongest when group members self-categorize as Indigenous (which may or may not be linked to 'status' as recognized by the *Indian Act*¹) and feel a sense of cultural pride, regard the identity is an important part of who they are, and feel strong bonds with other members of the group. On the whole, having a strong and positive social identity is associated with greater well-being (Haslam et al. 2009) and can provide a buffer against the negative impacts of discrimination (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey 1999; Ysseldyk et al. 2014) and trauma (Jones et al. 2012).

The valences of the elements of a social identity (pride, importance, group bonds) do not have to be consonant with one another. Such incongruities, however, have consequences for individuals' well-being. For example, if group members believe that they are strongly defined by an identity from which they do not derive a sense of pride, they may be more likely to internalize the stigma associated with the negative discourse associated with the identity. On the other hand, pride and connection to others can be protective in the face of adversity (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman 2010; Ford, Scholz, & Lu 2015). Connecting positively to other members of the group can be the basis of social support, may enable attributing negative encounters to the prejudices of others rather than the individual's own failings, and can be the basis for collective action-taking to confront adverse events (Matheson & Anisman 2012).

The qualitative meaning ascribed by group members to their identity depends on numerous factors associated with characteristics of the leadership of the group (e.g., Elders, chief and council members), the normative values and behaviours that are encouraged (or conversely, discouraged) by the group, and

¹ The *Indian Act* is a federal policy that has governed the lives of Canada's First Nations peoples (but not Inuit or Métis) since 1876. The *Indian Act* provides the Canadian government with the exclusive authority to define who has 'Indian status', stipulate how communities must govern themselves, determine where First Nations peoples are permitted to live, limit their resource and economic development, and oversee their education, health care, infrastructure, and social and family services. The *Indian Act* remains contentious, and an aspect of recognizing and respecting Indigenous peoples includes replacing it with a multilateral nation-to-nation relationship with Canada (Government of Canada 2017).

the cohesiveness of the group (including the ability to embrace differences or diversity) (Reicher, Spears, & Haslam 2010). How features of the group compare to other groups will also be important. For example, poverty may have little intrinsic meaning if everyone is in it together, and is only identity defining if group members believe they have less than others. Conversely, appreciating the strengths of one's group, such as a connection to the land and environment in which one lives, is appreciated in a remote community when compared to the crowds, smog, and noise of living in the city.

In light of the importance of deriving a positive and distinct social identity, Indigenous strength and resilience, cultural traditions, and relationships are highly identity affirming. A social discourse that brings to the forefront the group's strengths allows Indigenous peoples to dismiss their negative treatment as illegitimate, to counter negative stereotypes, to be empowered to bring about change, and to see hope for a future in which their children can flourish (Mooney-Somers et al. 2012; Restoule et al. 2010). Narratives of cultural pride, perseverance, and resistance are important because they provide a counter-discourse not centred within grief and colonization (Abramowitz 2005).

The challenge arises when young people, who often lack historical context, continue to see the difficulties faced by Indigenous people today (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman 2017). In some Indigenous communities, the disconnect between strength-based assertions and the social and economic gaps that exist relative to mainstream society become confusing and a basis for mistrust of 'all of the talk' (Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth 2014). Young people can see the beauty of their environment and they can appreciate the support of family. But in too many cases they also see impoverished living conditions, the trauma that continues to affect adults who have yet to receive the supports needed to heal, or the inability for their community to take advantage of the resources surrounding them to build a profitable economic base because the *Indian Act* presents legal obstacles to resource development and economic success (National Aboriginal Economic Development Board 2013). These are the day-to-day incongruities that young people face, particularly those living on reserve. Too many express the view that they cannot go forward until the traumatized adults overwhelmed by their past experiences are healed or gone (Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth 2014). Too many see the possibilities in mainstream society and wonder why their own communities flounder (LaFramboise, Albright, & Harris 2010). Too many discover when they leave their community elementary schools for the public school system that they do not have sufficient skills and background to meet expectations (Ontario First Nations Young Peoples Council of the Chiefs of

Ontario 2016). When faced with such comparisons, what are these young people to believe about who they are? How do they claim an Indigenous identity based on strengths when they see their own aspirations as unreachable, or their futures as fixed by an identity that they do not perceive to serve them well?

Reconciling challenges and strengths into an empowered identity involves a process of “identity entrepreneurship” that emanates from the socialization and supports provided to young people in the formation of their identity, and the effective leadership of those members of the group that they look up to (Steffens et al. 2014). Socializing each generation of Indigenous children by acknowledging their history (including well-established political, economic, and educational systems prior to colonialism (Richter 2001)) and its implications for Indigenous peoples today can provide a shared understanding of the external factors that contribute to the intergenerational consequences of systemic discrimination and colonization. There is little research concerning identity socialization processes in Indigenous families, but among other minority groups parental messages transmitted to children about their cultural heritage influence the evolution of positive identities. In addition, parents are more likely to convey positive cultural socialization behaviours when they themselves feel positively about of their own ethnic identity and are able to talk about their own experiences of ethnicity-related discrimination (Thomas, Speights, & Witherspoon 2010; Umaña-Taylor & Guimond 2010). Socializing children to understand their collective experiences, and enabling them to identify with models of resilience and survival is an important step in the development of a protective cultural identity.

As with any identity, Indigenous identities are fluid and change over time (Wilson et al., 2016). Young people exposed to traditional ceremonies, such as drumming circles or pow-wows, are more likely to embrace such cultural expressions when they have the power to frame them within their own experiences of the world. The group “A Tribe Called Red”² is a popular example of the modernization of Indigenous music in Canada. Wilson and colleagues (2016) similarly noted how young Indigenous people embraced hip-hop because for they perceived this medium to be as powerful as more traditional forms of expression (e.g., drumming), and as an extension of their evolving identities. Enabling such *integrations* of identity (distinct from assimilation to mainstream identity at the expense of traditional culture (Berry 1997)) encourages empowerment strategies centred on cultural reclamation. In so doing, youth develop the cognitive and emotional capacities to critically

² See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAEjW9J3_o.

assess their environment and to consolidate their experiences into a meaningful identity that has the ability to reconcile contradictions, change, and complex relations. In achieving this, Indigenous youth learn to have confidence in their own “power to shape, challenge, reclaim and create new cultural norms and traditions that fit with their own personal and communal visions for change” (Wilson et al. 2016, p. 83).

Indigenous leaders are key to reconciling the challenges faced by Indigenous peoples with a strength-based identity framework. Applying social identity theory, Steffens and colleagues (2014) depict the role of leaders as defining a shared sense of “we and us.” An effective leader is one who is seen as embodying what it means to be Indigenous (identity prototypicality), and acting in the collective interest. Although not all leaders will be viewed as “heroes,” in many respects those individuals who are perceived to typify the struggles that group members must overcome to succeed, who put the interests of the group ahead of their own, and who are perceived as moral and competent, might well constitute the heroes that young people can relate to and aspire to emulate. In fact, when people are asked who their heroes are, Goethals and Allison (2012) noted that 32% of respondents named family members, and another third named individuals who could be regarded as underdogs that overcame great odds to succeed. Thus, Indigenous leaders have great capacity to inspire young people to recognize and overcome the adversities that they will encounter, and to serve as role models that provide youth with the motivation and confidence to rely on their personal and cultural strengths to act in a good way.

In addition to embodying an Indigenous identity, leadership that integrates deficit- and strength-based discourses is more likely to be effective in achieving social change. In particular, status as an undeserving victim of illegitimate harm confers moral credentials, and a right to expect reparations, either symbolic or material (Sullivan et al. 2012). At the same time a leader is an identity entrepreneur who brings group members together on core values, norms, and ideals. It seems quite possible that both deficits and strengths are necessary to bring group members together to mobilize for social change and to achieve concrete outcomes. People are inspired by triumphant underdog leaders, are more motivated to work for them, to identify with their vision, and to believe in their ability to achieve long-term success (Allison & Heilborn 2011, cited in Goethals & Allison 2012). Strong leaders effectively become identity impresarios by organizing events, promoting relevant practices and rituals, and establishing structures that enable Indigenous peoples to have a presence and to matter (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow 2011).

Non-Indigenous Perceptions



*Media headlines shape perceptions of Indigenous peoples by applying a **deficit** or strength-based lens.*

Although groups have considerable power to shape their collective identity, as encapsulated by a social identity framework, they are nonetheless in constant and dynamic negotiations regarding their status in relation to other groups. There has been considerable theory and empirical research to understand and assess the impacts of negative stereotypes, racial prejudices, and discrimination. One does not have to look far to find evidence for such outcomes in Canada. Racism against Indigenous peoples ranges from the violence perpetrated by individuals to the systemic discrimination perpetuated by the policies and practices of the federal government. It has been suggested that Indigenous peoples are the most disadvantaged group in Canada, with instances of racism described as “alarmingly high” (Morrison, Morrison & Borsa 2014). In 2017, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) was forced to shut down online comments on any Indigenous story due to the extent of hateful and racist commentary (Bear & Andersen 2017).

That said, for the sake of argument, we must assume the majority of the population is not intentionally racist (with the relevance of “intent” being the

basis of another larger debate). This non-Indigenous majority has the capacity to influence public policy and legislation (voters), are often a part of the institutions that engage with Indigenous peoples (health, education, justice), and can be allies in action. What role does a deficit- versus strength-based discourse play in their perceptions and actions?

Just as group members are inspired by leaders who have overcome adversity to succeed on behalf of the group, people, in general, empathize with the underdog. This occurs not only in the cultural stories to which we are socialized (David and Goliath; “The Little Engine That Could”), but such “rags to riches” admiration is part of the fabric of Western meritocratic values. People often root for those who exert great effort to triumph in the face of an implicitly or explicitly advantaged opponent (Kim et al. 2008). Underdogs are not simply at a disadvantage, but are perceived to have invested substantial effort to overcome the odds, so that when they are victorious there is positive emotional gain. Because struggle is a widely shared human experience, the underdog is highly relatable. It becomes important for the underdog to win, and to believe that they deserve to win as a matter of social justice (Goethels & Allison 2012). This human predilection would suggest that perceptions of Indigenous peoples from a deficit perspective, in a continuous struggle to address the challenges they face, can affect non-Indigenous Canadians and inspire greater empathy with and support for Indigenous goals and aspirations.

There are many caveats to this perspective, however, and the stereotypes and characteristics of the dominant deficit discourse make these caveats especially salient. The underdog is expected to expend maximum effort. If they are perceived as “coasting” (as when stereotypes and myths depict Indigenous peoples as getting tax breaks, living off of social welfare, getting a “free” education), as complicit in their own disadvantage (as is reflected in expectations that Indigenous peoples should shut down their remote home communities and assimilate into more populated urban centres), or as provided with all of the resources that they need to succeed, but, due to alleged corruption or incompetence, have “squandered” them away, support will vanish (Goethels & Allison 2012; Vandello, Goldschmied, & Richards 2007).

Although underdogs are expected to struggle against the odds, they are not expected to succeed (otherwise they wouldn’t be an underdog)—not because they are not exerting the effort, but rather because they are perceived to have less natural ability, intelligence, or talent (Kim et al. 2008; Vandello et al. 2007). In other words, support for the underdog does not translate into respect (or ethos). Nor is it likely to translate into practical solidarity that results in change, especially if positive outcomes compete with the interests of the

perceiver, or if the outcomes have broad societal consequences (Kim et al. 2008). In effect, if Indigenous peoples' efforts to achieve social justice compete with the interests of non-Indigenous groups, they might have their sympathy but not their support (Atkinson et al. 2012, cited in Lashta, Berdahl, & Walker 2016). Indeed, Indigenous efforts to achieve equality and compensation for historical injustices, and their active exercise of treaty rights, continue to be opposed by many non-Indigenous Canadians (Denis 2015).

The salience of a deficit model also diminishes the likelihood that contact between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples will successfully reduce negative stereotypes or build a shared identity. The contact conditions that are most likely to improve attitudes include equal status between groups (Lashta et al. 2016). If the dominant discourse is one of deficits, non-Indigenous peoples may regard the individuals that they choose to interact with at a personal level as non-representative of Indigenous peoples in general (ibid.). This perception is reinforced if they primarily interact with Indigenous people who share their racial ideology, potentially stemming from the internalized racism that might be absorbed when a deficit model is salient (Pyke 2010). And when group members feel disempowered in a social context, they are unlikely to challenge negative stereotypes as a strategy for coping with racism (Denis 2015), in part due to the social costs associated with the claim to experiencing racism (Matheson, Raspopow, & Anisman 2012).

The accusations of harm intrinsic to a deficit discourse also call into question the moral identity of non-Indigenous peoples (i.e., they have perpetrated illegitimate harm against another). A group's perceived moral status is more important to members' sense of identity than is their perceived competence or sociability (Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto 2007). It is not inconceivable that non-Indigenous Canadians would engage in a strategy of competitive victimhood wherein their own perceived victimization and disadvantage takes precedent (Denis 2015; Sullivan et al. 2012). For example, online commentary to the July 2017 death of Barbara Kentner, a First Nations woman in Thunder Bay, Ontario, who was struck by a trailer hitch thrown by a white man in a passing car, included statements such as "White people cannot walk our streets here safely, without being robbed, spat on, called names ... and the young [First Nations] children are told NOT to talk to white people." Despite these and other protestations, the power difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples means the actions of disadvantaged groups will be perceived by observers as more moral than those committed by the more powerful group (Vandello, Michniewicz, & Goldshmidt 2011). To redress this perceived moral imbalance, the advantaged group may question the legitimacy of the victim group's claims, and in particular whether the victim group brought

on its own suffering (Noor et al. 2017). These strategies of competitive victimization and victim blaming do not simply protect the moral identity of non-Indigenous peoples, they encourage a sense of moral outrage regarding the demands of Indigenous peoples who can be construed as “getting what they deserve.”

In short: By evoking an image of the underdog struggling against adversity, a deficit discourse may engage the sympathy of non-Indigenous peoples. But this same discourse can perpetuate and reiterate non-Indigenous feelings of superiority. If addressing the power differential threatens either the real resources of non-Indigenous Canadians, or challenges their moral status, such sympathies are unlikely to translate into action that fundamentally changes or challenges the status quo.

It would not be unreasonable to think that when a strength-based discourse is evoked non-Indigenous Canadians would feel an even greater threat to their status. However, such a discourse increases the probability of groups being perceived as equals treated with mutual respect (Hettinger & Vandello 2014). To the extent that a focus on strength conveys victory over adversity, the victorious underdog may be perceived as even more competent than members of the advantaged group (Goethals & Allison 2012). Conveying the message that the treatment of Indigenous peoples continues to be inequitable and illegitimate is central to social change, but making salient their successes and strengths that highlight competence and effectiveness might be more likely to elicit action in solidarity (Thomas & Louis 2014).

However, a strength-based discourse can also paint a deceptive picture wherein Indigenous peoples are perceived to have already achieved justice and equality, and that continued discrimination is nonexistent (Walls 2008) or perpetuated by few (Denis 2015). As a result, further changes or resources to bring about equality are perceived as “special treatment” (Hettinger & Vandello 2014), and once wounds have been aired and “acknowledged” (e.g., through an official apology), Indigenous peoples are expected to move on (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman 2013; Denis 2015). If Indigenous peoples are regarded as too empowered or assertive (i.e., “militant”), perceptions of their disadvantage wane and sympathies shift toward the more powerful adversary (Vandello et al. 2011). For example, in Canada’s recent 150th anniversary celebration (or 150 years of colonization), various media portrayed Indigenous peoples as aggressive and disruptive (e.g., repeated coverage of the conflict

between two First Nations women and a reporter at a press conference³). This coverage set the tone for online commentary, such as “I’m getting real tired of hearing terms like ‘settler colonial’ and using it to refer to white people in derisive terms ... especially when its all over the CBC message boards and such, and then to hear the term ‘White Lady’ being used as an insulting term towards the reporter.”

Conveying the strengths of a group, especially as they resist and shed the oppressive policies of the past, also elicits expectations of moral responsibility and obligation. A series of studies has demonstrated that when members of a group were subjected to harm in the past (e.g., the Jewish Holocaust), observers expect them to learn from the experience (Warner & Branscombe 2012). Because they know what it means to experience undeserved suffering, victims or members of victimized groups (or their descendants) should be better, stronger people, and are held to a particularly high moral standard of conduct (Branscombe et al. 2015; Fernández et al. 2014). This higher moral standard is more likely to be applied to the victim than to the group or person that perpetrated the harm in the first place (Warner & Branscombe 2011). The perceived obligation, like many intergroup dynamics, is motivated by a need to believe in a just world. When notions of justice are pronounced, observers perceive greater meaning in the lives of those who have experienced tragedy (Anderson, Kay, & Fitzsimons 2010). A belief in a just world is restored when this meaning is believed to have strengthened the character of the victim (i.e., they have benefited from the experience). In turn, the victim has a moral obligation to help others and do no harm (Warner & Branscombe 2012). That said, expectations for a higher moral standard of behaviour are less likely to be applied if the group is still suffering or under threat (Fernández et al. 2014; Warner, Wohl, & Branscombe 2014), whereby victims are regarded as more entitled to act out against adversaries in order to protect themselves (Warner et al. 2014). Ergo the balance of a deficit- and strength-based discourse will be fundamental to how Indigenous peoples are perceived as moral actors, as they assert their rights to justice and equality.

³ See Amy Minsky, “Indigenous Women Call Reporter ‘White Lady,’ Demand She Leave Press Conference,” Global News, 29 June 2017, <https://globalnews.ca/news/3565073/indigenous-press-conference-white-lady-demand-leave/>.

Strategic Use of Deficit- and Strength-Based Discourses: How Do We Not Repeat History?

Given the complex identity and intergroup reactions and relationships associated with a discourse of deficits versus strengths, the implications for Indigenous peoples as they grow in strength, but continue to fight to address inequities and achieve self-determination, are challenging. Balanced, strong leadership will be critical. But so too will the role of social and mass media that shape the public discourse.

Over the past two decades (and before) there have been significant political efforts by and with Indigenous peoples in Canada to raise awareness of their status. This has included painstaking documentation of the historical treatment of Indigenous peoples, amounting to “cultural genocide,” paternalism, broken treaty agreements, resource exploitation, and the requirement to obtain permits to travel off of reserve lands and permissions to manage them. The effects of government legislation on the past, and current gaps in health, justice, education, employment, child and family welfare, mortality, housing, water (and the list goes on) have been quantitatively documented—that is, when the data exist and are made accessible. Detailed comprehensive reports have all included recommendations, or Calls to Action, that have held up as reasonable and appropriate strategies for achieving a just and equitable relationship with Indigenous peoples (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996; Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) 2012, 2015). Most recently, the Canadian public is absorbing the substantial public challenge emanating from the final report of the TRC regarding the Indian Residential Schools. The report, and the communications of the TRC Commissioners as the report was released, reflect a combination of deficit- and strength-based discourses. The question is: What is salient for mainstream Canadians, and what are the implications for action?

The mandate of the TRC was to allow the victims of the Indian Residential Schools to document their experiences and stories. For its part, the TRC spent six years going across Canada listening to the stories of the Survivors, and collecting the existing documentation concerning the operations of the Indian Residential Schools. While the Survivors were unquestionably heroic in their perseverance and their willingness to come forward, the stories that captured popular attention were of the physical and sexual abuse Indigenous children experienced at the hands of “people of God”; the torture children were subjected to, which included the use of an electric chair in one school; the over 4000 children who died; and the thousands of others who tried

to escape. Charlie Wenjack,⁴ a child who died running away from the school to his home over 400 miles away. St. Anne's, a residential school where some of the most horrific acts of child abuse occurred. Ralph Rowe,⁵ an Anglican minister who sexually abused an uncounted number of First Nations boys. The victimization of thousands of Indigenous children, and the cultural genocide of a people, is a painful story. The TRC concluded with their Calls to Action for fundamental change in Canada's relationship with Indigenous peoples. In its release, the TRC emphasized that addressing the Calls to Action is a "Canadian problem, not an Indian problem."

Non-indigenous Canadians have choices to make. The hardest choice of all will be to work toward bringing about real change in the relationships with Indigenous peoples. That choice cannot hinge on a de facto welcome or invitation from all Indigenous peoples or nations (however defined). In essence, such welcome cannot be presumed, but must be sought through the choice itself. Welcome might be found by undoing the systems, policies, and histories that have rendered the statuses of settler and colonized—and it is this dismantling, without the affirmation of moral superiority, that will be perhaps most difficult for many non-Indigenous Canadians. Centuries worth of paternalistic systems are in place, and the tenets of these systems reach deeply into the current culture and governance of each nation that makes up the Indigenous peoples in Canada. In such a context, overhauling relations is a daunting challenge for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and governments alike. It is easier to fall back on "fast" ways of thinking that are reflected in the singular, consistent discourses of deficit *versus* strength, and to react accordingly. So what might a more complex response entail?

1. Recognition that, although social and economic gaps exist, addressing them requires acknowledging their roots in history rather than in individual or community deficits. This will require identifying systems and the underlying beliefs and attitudes that oppress Indigenous peoples. These systems need to be rebuilt in a manner that respects the leadership and wisdom of Indigenous peoples as diverse nations, and, as such, give way to the implementation, adaption, and learning in the process of creating governance systems that meld traditional ways and modern societies.

⁴ See "The Lonely Death of Chanie Wenjack," *Maclean's*, <http://www.macleans.ca/society/the-lonely-death-of-chanie-wenjack/>.

⁵ See Tanya Talaga, "24 More Native Men Come Forward in Boy Scout Leader's Sex Abuse Case," *The Star*, 8 November 2011, https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2011/11/08/24_more_native_men_come_forward_in_boy_scout_leaders_sex_abuse_case.html.

2. Incorporating into the relationship rebuilding processes the recognition that complexity works at both macro and micro levels. Many Indigenous communities have flourishing economies, ongoing and strong language and cultural heritage, and healthy and successful youths. Other communities are starting the healing process. Some communities are urban, and others are geographically remote. But in all cases communities must be treated with respect, as equal, and accepted for their diverse needs, priorities, and cultural roots. At different stages of the healing process, Canadians should endeavour to support and build the capacity relevant to the aspirations of Indigenous peoples.
3. Truly understanding strengths (and deficits) goes beyond assessing the success of Indigenous peoples through Western metrics. A good example is educational reform. Rather than concluding that Indigenous peoples are “deficient” (with devastating consequences on the esteem and confidence of young people), embracing strengths as culturally defined means confronting the incapacity of universal standards to legitimize other knowledge systems. For example, Spillman (2017) notes that: “‘success’ may take a more relational and place-based flavour... Beginning with strength-based conversations that honour the diversity and uniqueness of experiences, stories, strengths and aspirations that children and family members bring with them, is much more likely to inspire motivation to participate and learn. They also enable the creation of supportive, inclusive learning environments necessary to nurture and translate that motivation into self-efficacy and resilience” (p. 4).
4. Canadian identity is commonly tied to multiculturalism, and embraced as a celebration of diversity and tolerance. It is assumed that the inclusion of Indigenous ceremony and symbols reflects the equal integration of Indigenous peoples into the Canadian mosaic. At the same time, multiculturalism is a screen behind which non-Indigenous Canadians wilfully withdraw from a responsibility to challenge and erode contemporary operations and mechanisms supporting racism (Dunn & Nelson 2011), especially in relation to Indigenous peoples. Indeed, in 2014 the United Nations Human Rights Council singled out Canada for violating the rights of Indigenous peoples (Anaya 2014), and Indigenous advocates continue to appeal to the United Nations to pressure Canada to address the inequitable treatment of Indigenous peoples (with a specific focus in 2017 on Indigenous women⁶ and

⁶ See “Discrimination against Indigenous and Racialized Women in Canada: Report to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination on the Occasion of the committee’s

children⁷). Left unexamined, Canadians seem perplexed by Indigenous claims of systemic racism. Their understanding of multiculturalism is one of integrating diverse groups that embrace a Canadian identity, and that operate within the core values and structures of a Eurocentric Canadian politic (Hyman, Meinhard, & Shields 2011). In contrast, Indigenous peoples have a unique place in Canada that is qualitatively different from that of other minority groups, and that fundamentally challenges the pre-eminence of an overarching Canadian identity. Until non-Indigenous Canadians put their relationship with Indigenous peoples into historical and political context, Canadian pride in a multicultural identity will ring untrue.

There are caveats and pitfalls associated with both a deficit- or strength-based discourse concerning the status of Indigenous peoples. A focus on either is unlikely to enable working together to achieve justice and equality. Nor can the temptation by a deficit discourse to address single gaps at a time be met with any real expectation for change. When the bucket has ten holes, repairing one does not stem the leak. For too long such stopgap solutions have been tried and failed. The gaps and deficits experienced by Indigenous peoples emanate from centuries of applying Western structures and laws. To succeed in addressing this “Canadian problem,” Indigenous communities must be able to fundamentally reframe their political and social systems to reflect their cultural strengths and aspirations. We might discover true value, moral and otherwise, in what we learn from doing so.

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⁷ See “A historic legal victory for First Nations children and Canada’s failure to comply: Canadian Human Rights Tribunal Finds that Canada is racially discriminating against 165,000 First Nations children and their families,” Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 21st–23rd Reports of Canada, Alternative Report, 29 June 2017, First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CERD/SharedDocuments/CAN/INT_CERD_NGO_CAN_27941_E.pdf.

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