Ask Dr. Robertson 6—It's All About Me, Me, Meme, and the Self: From First Nations to Second Nations, Building Third Culture Counselling

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His research interests include memes as applied to self-knowledge, the evolution of religion and spirituality, the Aboriginal self's structure, residential school syndrome, prior learning recognition and assessment, and the treatment of attention deficit disorder and suicide ideation.

In addition, he works in anxiety and trauma, addictions, and psycho-educational assessment, and relationship, family, and group counseling. Please see Ask Dr. Robertson 1—Counselling and Psychology, Ask Dr. Robertson 2—Psychotherapy, Ask Dr. Robertson 3—Social and Psychological Sciences Gone Wrong, Ask Dr. Robertson 4—Just You and Me, One-on-One Counselling, *and* Ask Dr. Robertson 5—Self-Actualization, Boys, and Young Males: Solution:Problem::Hammer:Nail *as these are the previous sessions in this educational series. Here we talk about memes, the self, and Aboriginal or Indigenous issues.*

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Let's start with memes and the self in relation to the Aboriginal self this session, please. The self is a cognitive structure and, thus, in part, a cultural construct. It also links to memes.

A meme is described as "an elemental unit of culture that exhibits referent, connotative, affective and behavioural properties. Connotation and affect were assumed to be the source of the attractive and repellent "forces" identified by Dawkins.

In addition, the self exists as non-static.[1] This view of the self as a dynamic whole within an environment is reflected in the eco-maps idea and cultural construction.[2] **You have described one caveat of the self-stability as important as our selves evolving through time, or the dynamism of the self, too.**

Also, the self, as it has evolved, is a reflective project. As noted, there can be consistency in the memeplexes, and so the average self across selves, e.g., consistency in volition in spite of cultural repression in the case of Maomao. In a way, the self remains not entirely a cultural construct in this resistance to cultural repression.

You explain the modern self as follows, "The modern self may be understood as a self-referencing cognitive feedback loop having qualities of volition, distinctness, continuance, productivity, intimacy, social interest, and emotion."

The self, as a referent point, simply seems non-trivial as a point of contact here. Adler stated the self is core in worldview. Obviously, this links worldview to culture, the cultural construction of the self, the average self across selves, the dynamic self evolving through time, and, ultimately, the reflection in the structure and dynamics of the brain and so the mind.

Thus, these diverse points of contact centered on the self may be a means by which to help patients, as some work shown by you.

What other contexts provide explanation of the self and memes as further background—ignoring for the moment other work by Blackmore and others on technology and "memes"?

Dr. Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson: Thank you for that intricate summary of my work in this area Scott. I am not going to accept your suggestion that we ignore Blackmore for the moment, because I think that she offers a good starting point to understanding my contribution to self studies. Briefly, she viewed the self to be an illusion created by complexes of memes infesting human bodies turning us into "meme machines." Given that the self is not a material thing, but an entity consisting of units of culture that describes a relationship with one material human body, hers is not, at first glance, an unreasonable metaphor. But we cannot be the corporeal body Blackmore assumes us to be because such bodies, by themselves, lack self-awareness or consciousness, and we have both. In the alternative, we might be the

memeplexes so visualized, but that leads to the image of ethereal bodies waiting to infest some unsuspecting dumb brute in a kind of non-theistic dualism. From whence did such ethereal bodies come? The answer, of course, is that the memeplexi had to come from the bodies to begin with, which means there could be no infestation, no take over, no dualism between the two. Our bodies and our minds co-evolved and the distinctions we make between the two are simplifications that may benefit our analysis in some ways but cannot completely or holistically describe the phenomena.

When did the first self emerge? Well, I could say when the first ape-like creature recognized his reflection in a pool of water, but an argument could be made for millions of years earlier—when the first organism recoiled when penetrated by a foreign object. Of course, neither the ape nor the organism had a self we would recognize as such. The evolution of the self was aided by the invention of language that allowed for increasingly sophisticated conceptualizations, and equally important, a process whereby phonemes can be recombined to create new meanings—a process that is mimicked in the process of recombining memes in new and novel ways. The modern self with elements of uniqueness, volition, stability over time, and self descriptors related to productivity, intimacy and social interest, is one such recombination that proved to be such value that it was preserved in culture and taught to succeeding generations of children. This modern self occurred as recently as 3,000 years ago, but had such survival value that it spread to all cultures.

When I use the term “modern self” it should not be confused with “modernity” which is said to have occurred with the European Enlightenment. Foucault mistook the ideology of individualism that flowed from the Enlightenment with self-construction in declaring the self to be a European invention. Let me explain. To engage in volitional cognitive planning each person must first situate themselves within a situational and temporal frame. Even when engaged in group planning, each individual must so situate themselves in determining their contribution to the group effort. The Europeans did not invent this. While the potential benefits to societies containing individuals who can perform forward planning are obvious, the individualism inherent in defining oneself to be unique, continuous and

volitional are potentially disruptive. I have argued that the rise of the great world religions was an effort to keep the individualism inherent in the modern self in check. Confucians sublimated the self to the family and tradition. Buddhists declared the self to be an illusion. Christians instructed the devout to give up their selves. Hindus controlled self-expression through an elaborate caste system. One of the accomplishments of the Enlightenment was to reverse the moral imperative. The individualism inherent in the self was now seen as a good and the enforced collectivism restricting the freedoms of the self, especially with regard to freedom of thought, was deemed to be oppressive. It is with this background early psychologists like Adler were able to declare the self to be central to a unique worldview.

Jacobsen: This can relate to Aboriginal peoples too, especially in the forced attempts at construction of new selves for the Aboriginal peoples in Canada with the sanction of both the churches—in general—and the government of Canada.

You stated, "The botched church-directed attempt to re-make the selves of aboriginal children led to the distinctive symptoms of Residential School Syndrome even in individuals who were not sexually or physically abused at school. Since the self both creates and is created by the surrounding culture…"

That links to the individual and cultural construction of the self in an Aboriginal mistreatment context. However, nuances exist here. The history remains gray rather than black and white—so to speak. In "The Residential School Experience: Syndrome or Historic Trauma," you state, "…the residential school experience traumatized a generation of children without the necessary pre-condition that each one experienced physical or sexual abuse."

Robertson: If I can interject here, I was engaging in literary hyperbole in the last quote you correctly attributed to me. Not every residential school was the same during all periods in which they existed, and not every child who attended an Indian Residential School was traumatized. I have worked with a number of adults who report good experiences at such schools. Having said

that, there are numerous examples of physical and sexual abuse, but that is not the whole story. The point I was making here is that the system itself was potentially traumatizing without the necessity of introducing those "life and death" causal factors necessary for a traditional diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

All trauma can be viewed as damaging to the self of the individual who experiences it. In the case of Residential School Syndrome, children were removed from their families and their communities for extended periods of time. The churches wanted to minimize familial influence that might negate their sacred mission to proselytize. Isolated individuals have difficulty maintaining their sense of self. In the residential school environment students would not have typically received such reinforcement for their self, except possibly from their peers. From the staff, these students were treated like different persons from who they were in their communities and this was in an environment where they were disempowered. The new self was often grafted on to the old self but often without a good fit, or in some cases, the old self was discarded entirely. If we were only talking about physical or sexual assault then a diagnosis of PTSD would be sufficient to understand the condition. Considerations of self expand the range of recognized triggering events and expands the range of symptoms. It also introduces the possibility of intergenerational transmission.

Jacobsen: Also, you noted the possibility, as when Waldram reviewed the work of Manson (a study of U.S. high school students) and 8 other studies, of low rates of exhibited PTSD in Aboriginal peoples—because they simply have low rates of PTSD. In other words, it's not everyone.

That is to say, there is a difference between the Aboriginal sub-populations who have and have not gone through Residential Schools, and differentials between individuals and people groups who went through the Residential School system. (All this skipping over issues of blood quantum and status, as described.)

Robertson: The mixing of "blood quantum" and culture invariably leads to racism, but for this discussion, we do not need to go there. At the time that I

wrote the article to which you refer, the research on PTSD in aboriginal populations consistently showed lower rates of PTSD despite a higher proportion of potentially traumatizing incidents with survivors of residential schools in Canada being an exception. Since Waldram's work, Brave Heart, who popularized the notion of "Historic Trauma," has argued that PTSD in indigenous American populations is much higher than had been diagnosed, but this argument is based on the idea that high rates of alcoholism, domestic violence and crime are evidence of trauma. In my opinion, there are other possible reasons for such destructive activities.

Jacobsen: For example, there will be differences in the efficacy of methodologies between, for example, the Cree and the Blackfeet. It can be the same with different methodologies for men and women too.

As we discussed in the last session on pornography and video games and young men, described in the case of international students who were middle eastern men, you explain, "In the new, unmonitored environment, their post-secondary studies suffered because they spent several hours per day gaming and viewing pornographic websites."

This may need a different intervention than with women who may be less likely to have these problems and different issues, if they do have them, manifesting with them, too.

One practical therapeutic example included a woman. You researched the construction of the map of the self, where the map of the self may help youth with the serious issue of suicidal ideation, as in the case of "Suzie," alongside CBT and EMDR.[3]

However, males may respond in different ways. Therefore, different cultural groups and sexes & genders may require different methodologies. How can the ideas of memes and the self incorporate into different therapeutic methodologies for different Aboriginal peoples—and for Aboriginal men and women?

Robertson: There is an assumption in your question that different methodologies are appropriate for different classes of people. I treat each client as a culture of one with that culture identified through exploration. Once the client's personal culture is understood, or in the process of developing that understanding, we co-construct treatment plans based on the uniqueness that is inherent. When we talk about differences between the sexes, or between racial and ethnic groups, these differences are merely averages and cannot describe any one person within the group. Any attempt to define people by their membership to an ascribed identity ends up being oppressive. People must define themselves.

Jacobsen: Further on the issues of men and women, and Aboriginal peoples, you have explained, in part, how this church (and state) imposition impacts the ways in which PTSD-like or PTSD symptomatology can be passed through the generations. You have described some of the atrocious outcomes:

The churches' plan to pay for school maintenance costs through the labour of the students was unsuccessful, and this resulted in cutbacks to diet and health care. A 1941 study found that half the children who entered residential schools prior to that date did not survive to adulthood.

This relates to the cultural construction of the self passed through peoples with the trauma generated and delivered socioculturally down the generations. Also, as you note, ideological stances, such as some feminisms, may impute selves into men as a category, causing real-life havoc and lifelong damage.

This may become an issue or concern, or a reality, for many Indigenous peoples within the bounded geography of Canada, as they may be imputed, by the wider non-Aboriginal culture, with certain selves with damage to healthy senses of self. The aforementioned trauma, obviously, can impact the sense of self.

As noted in counselling services, the ethnicity and sexual orientation of the counsellor can influence who shows up, where, in a North American

context, similar "ethnicity appeared to be more important to Amerindian than to Caucasian students…"

Dealing with aforementioned points of contact at the outset, for those Indigenous youth, or even older, affected with PTSD or PTSD symptomatology, could the storytelling and metaphors, e.g., the medicine wheel, help in the discovery of the newer healthier self, especially if done through an Amerindian counsellor as an example?

Robertson: My concern is not so much that people who are not aboriginal to North America would impute damaged selves to those who are, but that aboriginal people make the imputation to themselves. For example, when Waldram first suggested we consider that lower rates of PTSD have been diagnosed among Amerindian populations because they actually have lower rates of PTSD, there was a huge outcry, not from the non-indigenous populations, but from indigenous academics. These academics and others in the indigenous community believed that Waldram was minimizing the effects of colonialism, but this interpretation was a misreading of his work. His actually said that we should explore resiliency factors in aboriginal cultures that lead to a greater ability of members of those communities to cope with potentially traumatizing events, and I agree. We need to explore community strengths instead of focusing exclusively on weaknesses or past wrongs. Indeed, a focus on weakness can be damaging irrespective of the money and resources thrown at that weakness. Let me give an example.

Supposing there is a terrible death in a community and the grieving family invites me to help them with the grieving process. I let them know I will be right over. While they are assembled in the front room waiting for me, Aunt Mary arrives with a cake. We can all recognize that Aunt Mary is not there to show off her baking. She is there to provide comfort and support to the grieving family. Now, supposing instead of inviting Aunt Mary in, the family tell her they are waiting for this expert on grieving to arrive, and they ask her to come back later. What Aunt Mary has learned is that her approach, what she has to offer, is not good enough. She is less likely to offer her coping skills in the future and less likely to pass her skills on. One of the co-constructed community activities that we developed to combat high rates of

youth suicide in Stanley Mission during the 1990s was to have elders teach the wilderness survival skills. These camps proved to be very popular with the males and therapeutic. When we asked the elders why they had not taught these skills to their grandchildren previously they replied that in this modern age they didn't think anyone would be interested.

The storytelling tradition runs deep in cultures indigenous to the Americas, and indeed, one of the ways we make sense of the world is to tell stories to ourselves. Usually, in these stories, we are either the protagonist or the story is told from our perspective. The first task is to gain an understanding of the meaning of the metaphors and images embedded in the story. Then I look for evidence of the protagonist overcoming great difficulty. If the self that is in evidence from these narratives does not evidence the ability to overcome obstacles, then that is an area of self-definition that needs to be addressed. Over time, the self-narrative will change to include empowered self-volition, and with that change the individual can assess their circumstance from new perspectives.

The medicine wheel concept offers the promise of understanding complex situations; however, the medicine wheel as is popularly used falls short of that ideal. If you believe that the medicine wheel is always divided into four and that the primary constituents of that fourplex include physical, mental, emotional and spiritual then you have moved it from being a useful construct for understanding complexity to a simplistic dogma. In any case that medicine wheel is not particularly traditional. For one thing, there is no word for mental in the Algonquian family of languages, nor in any other indigenous language as far as I know. In Cree a word meaning "He is crazy" is usually used much to the chagrin of mental health workers. Second mental disorders are usually inabilities to modulate, control or act on emotions so "mental" necessarily includes both cognitive and emotional functioning. Finally, and most tellingly, the wheel is not indigenous to Amerindian cultures. There has been a lot of cultural appropriation going on in the construction of the modern medicine wheel. There are hundreds of ancient stone circles stretching across the length of the Great Plains of North America that are too big or too intricate to be tepee rings, the stones that hold the flaps of a tepee down and are left when a camp moves. These ancient

circles were divided in many ways and not always from the center like spokes in a wheel. Following that older tradition, I invite clients to construct their own personal medicine wheel using whatever symbolism that fits with their history and worldview.

Jacobsen: Herein, we have a deeper question about the necessity of the categories of the Aboriginal self and non-Aboriginal self, or, rather, the selves. The important part seems the development of a functional self in the first place.

As you noted, cultures evolve. Or, more quotable, "As culture is the collective expression of the people who constitute it, cultural evolution is tied to self-change." Static assumptions do no one good here, described earlier; either at the individual or the collective levels.

Some examples of this include Indigenous Christianity exemplified by Dr. Terry LeBlanc, Dr. Raymond Aldred, the late Rev. Richard Twiss, and others. Cultures collide and third ones arise. You posed the question, "How many non-aboriginal memes can be incorporated into a self before it ceases to be aboriginal?"

Looking into the future, the First Nations cultures will remain. The Second Nations or settler-colonialist cultures will stay. Simultaneously, a third set of cultures will emerge from this history. What might be the next manifestation of a third culture?

Robertson: During the 1960s Anishinaabe Duke Redbird used to say that the truck is a very important part of Amerindian culture. "How do I know that?" he would rhetorically ask, only to answer "Because whenever I visit a reserve anywhere in Canada, there are old half tons and plenty of reserve mechanics who know how to keep them running." I would add that the trucks are a lot newer these days.

It is not so much that Amerindian or First Nations cultures will remain as that they will continually be co-constructed and reconstituted by the members that

identify with those cultures. Those reconstructions will inevitably involve cultural appropriation. The concept of nation as applied to Amerindian peoples in Canada is one such appropriation. The idea of the nation began with Joan of Arc who rallied people who spoke various dialects of French to oppose the British. Although French forces eventually repelled the British, the idea that the French were a nation that owed each other and the nation allegiance did not take root until the French Revolution and was exploited by Napoleon to almost conquer all of Europe. Arguably, however, the first nation occurred earlier in the form of the Dutch Republic. The Anishinaabe could be a nation if they defined themselves as such, and if they did they would organize something like an Anishinaabe national council. Irrespective of issues of sovereignty and self-government, a band that may consist of two or three extended families, is not the same thing as a nation so when the term "First Nation" is used at that level it represents a misappropriation. It seems that the term "First Nations" represents a conflation of "first peoples," but even here we have waves of migration so that the descendents of the Clovis peoples would be arguably the first, the Dene the second and the Inuit the third.

Given the historical record your use of the term "Second Nations" is confusing. You may be referring to the formation of Canada led by John A. Macdonald. He attempted to form a nation out of British North America but in his attempt to assimilate French and English speakers into that nation he was extending the definition of the term. In any event, the experiment did not work as planned. Beginning with Rene Leveque, the Quebecois defined themselves as their own nation but English speaking Canadians have never defined themselves as an English speaking nation. All of this prompted Justin Trudeau to describe Canada as a post-national formulation in a New York Times interview. In Trudeau's opinion, the Canadian nation no longer exists.

You asked about the emergence of a third culture, but that has already happened and is continuing to happen. Canadian culture has been evolving from a "mosaic" pattern distinctive from the U.S. American "melting pot." It is descended from the fur trade and the mercantile system that distinguished British North America heavily influenced by geography, climate, and cultures that were indigenous to the land. It is also a culture that is descended from the

European Enlightenment as well as its Christian traditions. It will continue to evolve as a negotiation between its peoples.

Jacobsen: As you imply, the objective world matters, as objective truth provides the basis for empirical models for comprehension of the natural world. However, the work with Indigenous or Aboriginal peoples with PTSD symptomatology can become a difficulty.

As you explained, "The scientific method developed as a way of reducing subjectivity in our quest for the objectively real. Rational thought is anathema to thought systems that propagate through non-rational means."

How can healthy concepts of self and, with them, reliance on approximations of objective truth derive a basis for a third culture—secular and religious—more constructive and positive than destructive and negative of relations between the First Nations and Second Nations—so to speak—or the settler-colonialists and, in fact, a basis for different and innovative forms of treatments oriented with the context and conceptualizations of memes the self?

Robertson: First I would like to explain that I am not a post-modernist. I had a professor who said science is just a "white male way of knowing." I countered that if this was true then accounts of colonialism are just a "Politicized Indian way of knowing." For the very same reasons why I believe there exists an objective reality outside ourselves, I believe the holocaust and the colonization of the Americas occurs irrespective of the race, gender or ethnic membership of the speaker. "His truth" or "her truth" is always trumped by "the truth." It is our challenge to find what is true, and that is the mission of science.

Instinctively, we know this is true. Clients with very low self-esteem don't change just because the therapist tells them they are worthy and capable. They change only when they see sufficient evidence that counters their low self-evaluation. It is not that they are afraid to believe in themselves, it is that they are afraid to believe in themselves falsely. They take a theory as to who

they are and they keep to that theory until it is overwhelmed by evidence to the contrary. They are scientists.

Evidence that is based on blaming others is self-defeating because the act of blaming transfers one's personal power to those who are blamed. A problem with victim culture is that it depends on redress from the more powerful with the result that it breeds perpetual dependency. PTSD is characterized by a disempowered self surrounded by a worldview that is hostile to the individual and unpredictable. The anecdote for both those with PTSD and those immersed in victim culture is to define oneself as capable of contributing to a secure future within a world that is mostly, but not always, supportive and predictable. The positive self-esteem that results is then a result of one's own efforts within a social interest context.

Blaming or demeaning others is a cheap and ultimately ineffective way of building self-esteem. Let's deconstruct your use of the term "settler-colonialist." The 19th century Cree, after they defeated the Dene in most of what is now northern Saskatchewan, settled in the now vacated land building family trap lines and ultimately forming communities. Since they came from what is now northern Manitoba and settled in a land to which they had not previously occupied, they were settlers. But after a generation or two, their descendants could no longer be viewed as settlers because they were born in and were part of the land that was once Dene. The term "settler" only applies to the generation that settled. The notion that white people will always be settlers because of their race is, I think, racist. I am reminded of a political conversation I had with a group of people at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College back in the early 1980s. At one point a Cree woman who refused to acknowledge that she also had European genes loudly stated, "I wish all the whites went back to where they came from, and you Metis should go half way back." We all laughed. In those days we were not so sensitive to humour. But when you think about it, the idea that the Metis should drown in the North Atlantic is a racist idea, but at the time we knew she didn't really mean that. The fact is, the whites aren't going anywhere. Calling them "settlers" only breeds a perpetual sense of self-defeating disempowering victimization.

I notice that when the words aboriginal and settler are used in the same sentence, the word “aboriginal” is usually capitalized while the word “settler” is never capitalized. This is rather curious because both words are descriptive adjectives. Why would adjectives describing one people be treated differently than adjectives describing another? Now, in fact, in English adjectives that end in “al” are never capitalized, but in Canada we have recently ignored that convention. Perhaps we believe that by capitalizing the word aboriginal we will build the self-esteem of people who are aboriginal to this land. I think there are more meaningful ways of building self-esteem. As a person with such ancestry, I don’t need to capitalize a self-referencing adjective to build my self-esteem.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Robertson, again.

[1] **It is referenced in other research by Dr. Robertson, “…this understanding explains how the syndrome may be transferred intergenerationally. That being said, it would be a mistake to assume that all who went to residential school suffer from the associated syndrome or that therapeutic self-reconstruction can be done by PLAR facilitators.”**

[2] **Interestingly, as a small point, the self can have implications for how one views the need for weddings too. Dr. Robertson states, “It is postulated that marriage ceremonies have persisted among the non-religious due to needs to authenticate or recognize transitional changes to the self, but these needs have been met through ad hoc strategies as opposed to a uniform demand for humanist services.”**

[3] **Ignoring the prior learning assessment, though intriguing, as this does not suit the needs of the educational series here, the work with Dianne Conrad repeats the other interesting points about the need for integration into the models, of the practitioner of “self-development,” of a dynamism in other words.**

Some interesting commentary, "The literature of higher education and adult learning has long recognised the value of providing adults with not only cognitive and workplace skills but also with tools for development in the affective—social and emotional—domains of learning."

Some more intriguing commentary, "…the practice of recognising prior learning, as a means of credentialing and a form of validation, must be rigorously and ethically administered to ensure appropriate recognition of real achievement." How does one keep the accurate conception of self mapped to the notion of the "self"?

Image Credit: Dr. Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen founded ***In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal*** and ***In-Sight Publishing***. He authored/co-authored some **e-books**, free or low-cost. If you want to contact Scott: **Scott.D.Jacobsen@Gmail.com**.