A review of Indigenous Statistics: A Quantitative Research Methodology

Elaine Coburn
American University of Paris and the Centre d’analyse et d’intervention sociologiques-Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, France


Keywords: Indigenous research methodology; quantitative methodology; statistics

Introduction

In a review of Marxist feminist Shahrzad Mojab’s forthcoming book (2015), the always-incisive non-Indigenous sociologist Dorothy Smith (2015) writes: “I didn’t agree with all that I read, but that’s exactly what a book within this framework should do to awaken us.” I feel that way about this essential book by Maggie Walters and Chris Andersen. Even if I disagree with some of the arguments, as I understand them from an outsider, non-Indigenous perspective, Walter and Andersen “awaken” both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and policy makers. They raise critical concerns around quantitative methodologies, arguing for new approaches to producing statistical data “by and for” (p. 16) diverse Indigenous peoples. Writing from their “standpoints” as “colonized first world Indigenous” researchers in the academy (Walter and Andersen, p. 19; pp. 75-76), they critically analyze mainstream quantitative methodologies that participate in the social construction of Indigenous nations as “deficit” communities against an unexamined
colonial standard (Chapter One). In their place, they argue for the development of varied Indigenous approaches to producing quantitative data, in ways useful to diverse Indigenous peoples.

Along the way, they follow Maori scholar Brendan Hokowhitu (2009) in making a more general case for Indigenous social sciences, as distinct from what might be called Indigenous moral philosophy. That is, they emphasize the importance of Indigenous-led empirical studies of diverse Indigenous social realities today, in all their layers and complexities (p. 91), whether or not these realities are judged good or bad (p. 71). Although Walter and Andersen’s pragmatic embrace of the “symbolic” charge of specifically quantitative data within colonial societies (p. 78) may be more problematic then they acknowledge, this book should be required reading for those who produce quantitative data about Indigenous peoples, not least colonial state officials, for those curious about quantitative methodologies and for those who resist these as “incompatible” with diverse Indigenous worldviews. Finally, the book makes an important contribution to debates about the future of Indigenous social sciences as intimately bound up with the possibilities for Indigenous self-determination in and beyond the academy.

Research is Political: Statistics, Governmentality and “Making Up People”

Following Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (1999) path breaking work, this book observes that research, including quantitative research, is an eminently political enterprise, saturated by unequal power relations, including those of contemporary colonialism. This counters the mainstream, if increasingly critiqued, positivist idea that science, including social scientific numbers derived from the empirical testing of theory-derived hypotheses, are disinterested, objective representations of a world “out there”, a world transparently waiting to be counted. Instead, within the still-colonial context, state statistics produced about and even ostensibly for Indigenous peoples are less an objective understanding of complex Indigenous realities than, in French philosopher Michel Foucault’s language, an expression of colonial biopower (Walter and Andersen p. 12). That is, government statistics in particular – but not exclusively – are not so much observations about the social world as social interventions that facilitate and legitimate the disciplining of both the “civilized” citizen and the Indigenous “barbarian” (pp. 13-14). The latter are socially constructed as requiring authoritarian forms of governance given their ontologically “deficit” character (Chapter One), while the former may participate more freely, if unevenly, as citizens within liberal states and markets.

As non-Indigenous philosopher Ian Hacking might observe (2004, Chapter Six), statistics, like other social scientific categories, thus participate actively in “making up people.” This socially productive effect of statistical categories is a consequence of the fact that unlike say, insects or planets, that are indifferent to writings that classify them, human beings respond to their classifications: they may come to identify with them. This is true even when the intention is merely descriptive. Through contemporary colonial government statistics, states socially construct the official “public Indigene” (p. 10): the deficit “Indigenous person” is conceived as
requiring coercive, corrective colonial state interventions in order to assimilate or “integrate” Indigenous persons into colonial standards that are taken for granted as both normal and normatively desirable. As Cree-speaking Métis scholar Emma LaRocque (2010) might remark, this is a contemporary variant on persistent colonial construction of the “civ(ilized)/sav(age)” dichotomy, a symbolic violence that justifies material violence against Indigenous peoples dehumanized as “savages” or, in gendered language, as “squaws”. Although such constructions may be resisted, precisely because of their stigmatizing character, they participate in establishing “soul destroying” (p. 94) partial truths and associated lack of self worth across too many Indigenous communities. The political implication is that Indigenous peoples need to wrest control of the development of Indigenous statistics from colonial states or they risk having their public image defined for them in ways likely to be deeply damaging to self-conceptions that inevitable develop within – as well as against – mainstream colonial society.

At the same time, this suggests that when Indigenous scholars produce statistics, they exercise socially and politically productive power. Hence, when Andersen writes about his own research, laying out eleven “distinctive elements of urban Aboriginal identities” (pp. 119-120), this is more than a description. Arguably, it creates an ontological possibility: if his work is broadly read, some Indigenous persons who live in cities may come to identify as “urban Aboriginals” sharing a social reality – most or all of his eleven listed characteristics – with others who so identify. Such identities may, in turn, create political possibilities of solidarity around this shared identification, although they may likewise create divisions and obscure other, relevant Indigenous social realities. This means that creating “empirically robust” depictions of contemporary Indigenous communities (p. 126) is only one (important) aspect of Indigenous quantitative methodologies. Another is the political reality that “statistical imaginaries” (p. 121) may actually produce new ways of being Indigenous. The apparently “technical” question of quantitative methodologies is, in fact, bound up in critical ways with political struggles towards Indigenous self-determination.

Underlying this argument is Walter and Andersen’s explicit rejection of the idea that quantitative methodologies are somehow inherently inimical to Indigenous ontologies and worldviews (pp. 68-73). It is not only that the Indigenous failure to engage with statistical methodologies means granting colonial actors a dangerous monopoly on “a primary language of power” (p. 70); it is that quantitative methodologies are simply “tools” that may, in principle, be harnessed for Indigenous purposes. In other words, the fact that quantitative methodologies now reflect colonial ontologies, axiologies and epistemologies should not, in their view, obscure the possibility that “quantitative knowledge can reflect Indigenous standpoints” (p. 72, italics

---

1 Of course, I am not suggesting that contemporary statistical categories literally label Indigenous peoples as “savages” and “squaws”. As Walter and Andersen insist, however, they do participate in their dehumanization, not least through the persistent negative construction of Indigenous “values, behaviours, attitudes and capacities” (p.35) as the cause of Indigenous suffering.

2 This is different than simply being an Indigenous person living in urban spaces; again, it is an identity as a particular kind of person. This is analogous to the difference between, for instance, engaging in same-gender sexual relationships and identifying ontologically as gay or lesbian.
added). Refusal to accept this possibility, they suggest, reflects understandings of Indigeneity as uniquely commensurate with precolonial, pre-modern qualitative traditions – and then further imagines Indigenous subjectivities as inevitably subject to colonial power, including colonial power encoded in quantitative methodologies. Against such over determined visions of colonial domination, Walter and Andersen argue that Indigenous persons can both resist and invest their own knowledges and values into quantitative methodologies, even if these were originally developed by the colonizers from their own paradigms and for their own purposes. In other words, Indigenous scholars can and should act to appropriate quantitative methodologies for their own aims – they do not merely have to submit to colonial usages of them.³

**Colonial Erasures: Statistics, Objectification and Social Location**

Like qualitative methodologies, quantitative methodologies are productive. At the same time, they affect critical erasures. Typically, quantitative data generated by the colonial state erases the effects of colonial power, including histories of genocide and ongoing processes of colonial dispossession as explanations for contemporary Indigenous suffering (p. 97). Instead, it is Indigenous “cultures” and behaviors that are deemed problematic and in need of correction. Colonial states and settlers disappear, only present outside the analysis as supposedly “neutra(l)” (p. 86), disinterested, scientific observers. Perversely, within positivist scientific traditions, the “social, economic and racial distance of…(non-Indigenous researchers who are) producing data from the object of the data, Indigenous peoples” (p. 35) may even be understood as a guarantee that “personal bias” will not politicize the results. In contrast, Indigenous researchers are understood as inevitably politicized.

Given this context, an important task of Indigenous quantitative methodologies is to restore visibility to colonial and Indigenous social realities that are denied by colonial statistics. As I will explore briefly below, Walter and Andersen (pp. 78-79; p. 96) suggest that this means reversing the gaze, so that the Indigenous scholar becomes the expert knower, while colonizers and non-Indigenous peoples become the “known” subjects of the Indigenous gaze. Such research helps to uncover hidden aspects of the colonial relationship, not least the institutional and everyday ways that racialized colonial power is exercised. In addition, such an approach may help make clear variations in the extent to which different non-Indigenous institutions and

³ My own feeling is that this analysis does not recognize the possibility that quantitative methodologies are “a language of power” in part because they are under the relative monopoly control of dominant actors, including colonial researchers and policy-makers. Statistics are likely to lose their “charisma” when broadly mastered by Indigenous and other subaltern actors, in the same way that the medical profession in North America arguably declined in status as it became feminized. I would agree, however, that the issue is less an exaggerated quantitative/qualitative methodological divide (as if this division neatly mapped onto colonial/Indigenous binaries, with the Indigenous defined only as an unequal “opposite” to the colonial) than a question of who shapes research: who asks the questions, on whose terms and with accountability to what communities.
persons (p. 97) engage supportively with diverse Indigenous political struggles. Rather than “deficit” Indigenous peoples, the explanatory emphasis is on the violence of colonial states and of the settlers than enact it. At the same time, such research challenges defeatist teleologies by highlighting practices of solidarity, where they exist, so affirming the possibility of non-Indigenous decolonization initiatives and prefiguring more just relationships across the colonial divide.

In addition, Indigenous quantitative methodologies must challenge colonial statistical erasures of Indigenous peoples. Such erasures may be a consequence of the colonial state’s self-interested “failure” to recognize the contemporary existence of some Indigenous peoples, as with the Australian state’s refusal to acknowledge the survival of Aboriginal Tasmanians until political action by Indigenous movements forced a reversal in the 1970s (p. 89). But such erasures may likewise reflect “sloppy” statistical questions, for instance, as with the Canadian colonial state’s failure to ask Indigenous respondents explicitly if they identify as part of the Métis nation, historically centered on the Red River region on lands now claimed by Canada – or if they are simply indicating that they are “métis”, often understood to refer to any individual with “mixed” Indigenous and non-Indigenous heritage (pp. 123-127). Indigenous methodologies are not only socially and political productive, they likewise challenge colonial methodologies that erase colonial power and violence and that deny the ongoing existence of distinct Indigenous peoples, whether through (more or less deliberate) omission or through failures to appreciate distinct Indigenous national histories and peoplehood.

Finally, Walter and Andersen argue that colonial positivist and post-positivist research erases the social situatedness of all research, pretending to an impossible “God’s eye” view of social life. Against this, they insist that all “statistical space” (p. 65) is profoundly shaped by the researcher’s standpoint, a position widely shared by feminist scholars (pp. 48-49). The four factors they see as most powerfully shaping research are social position, not least within radically unequal racialized colonial relationships, epistemology, that is, whose “voices (are) prioritized and validated” (p. 49) as knowledgeable in research, axiology or values and moral commitments and the ways these shape, for instance, what research questions are considered worth asking (p. 50), and ontology, the inevitably changing and contextual understandings of the nature of reality and what human beings are (p. 53; summary, pp. 44-53). Within these commitments, theoretical orientations then further shape research (pp. 54-56), so that it becomes important to develop distinct Indigenous social scientific theories in addition to appropriating those non-Indigenous theories that may be useful for Indigenous scholars (p. 55). For many Indigenous academics, this emphasis on the ways that standpoint affects research, and the need to reflexively situate the researcher’s standpoint in order to contextualize research results, is a familiar claim. As Cree intellectual Margaret Kovach (2009) explains, “We know what we know from where we stand. We need to be honest about that” (p. 7), including in our research.
Situating Ourselves in Research: An Intellectual or Political Task or Both?

Being reflexive as a researcher, however, is not necessarily a straightforward task. For those in dominant social relationships, especially white, heterosexual, able-bodied researchers like myself, our social position, epistemology, axiology, ontology and even our social scientific theories may be so pervasive that we fail to “see them” – they become “largely unconscious” (p. 15) naturalized extensions of ourselves. In such cases, it becomes impossible to situate ourselves methodologically. In contrast, Indigenous scholars may be able to explain their marginalized methodological standpoints more clearly, because they must continually justify them against taken-for-granted colonial ways of being, knowing and doing. Insofar as Indigenous researchers are human and therefore imperfect, however, reflexivity about all relations of inequality shaping research is not self-evident for Indigenous scholars either. Rather, the ability to do this will inevitably reflect social relationships of inequality that cut across the colonial divide and that exist within Indigenous nations, whether these inequalities are the direct result of colonialism or not. Hence, the virtually total absence of any mention of Indigenous sexual and gender minorities or Indigenous disabled persons, for instance, across Walter and Andersen’s book is arguably symptomatic of the relative social domination of such marginalized Indigenous persons within broader colonial society, within academia and within many Indigenous nations.

As with non-Indigenous researchers, it would be misleading to understand such absences, which are often felt as erasures – in this case, for instance, of Indigenous disabled persons, their advocacy, their concerns, their voices – as purely “personal” failings. Rather, they are a direct consequence of the political marginalizations and exclusions that also operate in institutionalized ways within the academy. Disability research is routinely marginalized as “minor” and “less prestigious” than social sciences from other perspectives, for instance, privileging enabled scholarly perspectives, both non-Indigenous and Indigenous. It is only in the last few years that I have been attentive to disability and “crip” theories and research, to offer an example from my own experiences, since as an “enabled” non-Indigenous person I tended not to “see” disability – and decades of scholarly studies did not require me to be familiar with these perspectives to be deemed a competent social scientist. Ultimately, this suggests that reflexivity is less a matter of intellectual will and honesty, although these clearly matter, than a capacity that is socially produced through the political ability of dominated others, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to make visible relations of power that the relatively dominant do not perceive precisely because they benefit us. Walter and Andersen’s arguments (especially p. 15), from Bourdieu, arguably tend in this direction, although it is not clear if they understand the reflexive “unmasking” of naturalized worldviews and ontologies as primarily an intellectual or political act or both.

---

4 For some Indigenous disability perspectives, both scholarly and activist, see for instance the work by Demas (1993); First Nations Disability Network (2014); and Soop (1988).
Reversing the Gaze: Studying "Our White Peoples"

The importance of reflexive research methodologies faces further complications in the context of ongoing contemporary colonial relationships. Both inside and outside of academia, Walter and Andersen observe that Indigenous scholars are expected to “justify” themselves, laying bare their personal histories when they present their research. In contrast, non-Indigenous scholars are typically respected in their supposedly disinterested capacity as scientific “experts”, so that their ontological, epistemological, moral and political investments in their research are not subject to the same scrutiny (pp. 86-88). This means, as Walter explains, that for Indigenous researchers “explicating our social position can be a double-edged sword” (p. 86). Indeed, when white audiences insist on asking Indigenous scholars about personal and cultural beliefs and practices, this reflects white racialized power, an attempt to re-assert the white gaze as “knowing” and the Indigenous person as the “known” rather than as the “expert knower” (pp. 87-88). Thus, Walter and Andersen carefully socially locate their own positions (eg., pp. 88-90) and those of key intellectuals whose work they draw upon. They explain the relevance of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s nationality, race, gender and especially social class to his theoretically innovative research (p. 55), although it might be observed they do not consider how his sexuality and able-bodied positionality created lacunae in his work. But the key political dimension of this reflexivity is that it is done on their own terms as Indigenous persons and not at the behest of (white) colonial critics and audiences. Arguably, ideally both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers would routinely acknowledge the situatedness of our research, although as noted above, our ability to “see” relevant characteristics of our social location with respect to our research may ultimately depend upon broader power relationships.

What is clear, as Walter and Andersen observe, borrowing from Geonpul scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2000), is that, “Indigenous peoples are well aware of and deeply steeped in knowledge about whiteness – how it operates, what it takes for granted, and its gaps, silences and illogicalities” (p. 77). This suggests that Indigenous scholars are particularly well situated to “make visible” colonial assumptions that are usually invisible to non-Indigenous researchers. If colonial research erases its own social situatedness, then Indigenous researchers can usefully reverse the usual gaze of white expert/Indigenous research “object” and become knowers of “our respective white peoples” (p. 78). Inevitably, this will be met with resistance by “colonizer settler” peoples who may become angry at finding themselves “the subject of Indigenous study” (p. 79). Despite the potentially “incendiary” situations this may engender, especially insofar as Indigenous scholars describe white researchers and peoples “in highly unflattering ways” (p. 79), Indigenous quantitative methodologies mayvaluably unmask the routine ways that white racialized power is reproduced, including through scholarship. Indeed, this book is one contribution to that unmasking, in the realm of the social sciences.

In short, it is politically useful to point out the ways that “our white peoples” actively participate in sustaining racially charged relationships of colonial inequality and to describe, including quantitatively, how they (“we”, in my case) are routinely in “deficit” with respect to
meaningful political solidarity with Indigenous peoples. Likewise, this reverses the usual story of “deficit” Indigenous communities by focusing on Indigenous agency and successes, for instance, as Walter and her colleagues did in one study about “how Indigenous children grow up strong” (p. 101). These approaches have a strong political agenda, reversing the usual colonial assumptions, but they are at the same time empirically valuable, fleshing out untold stories about the complex realities of contemporary colonialism from Indigenous perspectives. The aim, however, is not simply an inversion of equally politicized, hegemonic colonial narratives. Rather, Walter and Andersen (eg., pp. 96-97) observe that Indigenous methodologies must be nuanced, disaggregating data to clearly describe diversities across and within Indigenous nations and colonial institutions and persons. Such variations are reminders that what “is” is not a fatality, since different contexts may reveal more or less successful instances of Indigenous self-determination and of non-Indigenous solidarity with Indigenous struggles. This underscores the fact that social realities are always contingent, shaped by political agency, not inevitable injustices falling out of nightmarish colonial legacies.

Towards Indigenous Social Sciences: Immediacy and the “Is/Ought” Distinction

In making their arguments, Walter and Andersen make a “bold” case (p. 68) for Indigenous social sciences - although they do not describe their reasoning this way, instead presenting their argument as a call to dissolve the false dichotomy between modernity and tradition. Specifically, following Hokowhitu’s argument for an “Indigeneity of immediacy” (Walter and Andersen p. 26), they argue for careful analytical and empirical study by and for diverse Indigenous peoples as they are, today, in all their complexity and sometimes-contradictory “layers” of relationships (p. 91). From my own Euro-Canadian background, this recalls analytical philosophy’s “ought/is” distinction; that is, the separating out of normative arguments about what “ought” to be from empirical arguments about what “is” or “was”. Specifically, Walter and Andersen argue for a turn away from a too-exclusive emphasis on the recovery of a supposedly perfect pre-colonial Indigenous past (p. 27, following Hokowhitu). Instead, they argue for Indigenous scholarship that undertakes critically informed empirical studies of the power relationships that shape contemporary Indigeneity, “for good and ill” (p. 72, italics added). The question shifts from a normative concern with tradition and authenticity, with the unstated moral equation of pre-colonial relationships with moral goodness, to an empirical concern with the here and now of Indigenous lives, whether these are normatively judged to be “good” or “bad”, inauthentic or authentic, traditional or untraditional. This does not mean that “axiologies” and politics are irrelevant to Indigenous social sciences – such an argument would run contrary to the whole idea that all research is profoundly socially situated. But it does demand some effort to distinguish, if inevitably imperfectly, between debates about (a) what “is” and what “was” empirically in diverse Indigenous lives, on the one hand, and (b) the political and moral evaluation of the value of any specific Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing, on the other.
In this social science of Indigenous “immediacy”, Indigenous quantitative methodologies may play a role, alongside qualitative methodologies. Indeed, given that Indigenous scholars are typically subject to more scrutiny and skepticism with respect to their “expert” academic credentials than non-Indigenous, white scholars (p. 79) and given the “reverence” that colonial states, publics and mainstream academics have for numbers as representing truth (p. 78), the use of Indigenous quantitative methodologies may make otherwise-discreditable Indigenous scholars respectable to colonial officials, mainstream academia and to a more general public. In other words, the strategic use of quantitative methodologies by Indigenous scholars may enable them to be “heard” before otherwise skeptical, even hostile publics, both academic and policy-makers. As Walter and Andersen state baldly, “the fact that…results can be ‘proved’ in statistical terms means that they are taken seriously in a way that qualitative findings are not” (p. 134). This then suggests that “statistical literacy” (p. 130) among Indigenous scholars is necessary to enable Indigenous academics to participate as lead investigators rather than as “informants”, deciding the direction of the collection, analysis, interpretation and use of Indigenous quantitative data “relating to our own peoples within our own nation-states” (p. 130), as well as enabling Indigenous experts to credibly critique colonial quantitative research. This is “research self-determination” (p. 136) as part of the broader political project of Indigenous self-determination.

Towards Critical Indigenous Statistics

Yet, from my own, ongoing work about the International Monetary Fund (IMF), an institution that has taken statistical fetishization to astonishing heights (or depths), I am wary of even the “strategic” use of quantitative methodologies when unaccompanied by a serious critique of those same methodologies. At the IMF, what is not measured does not exist - and what is measured is so quickly incorporated into complex mathematical narratives that, in the flagship IMF publication, the World Economic Outlook, there are no human beings at all. Indeed, if an alien were to descend to earth and read the IMF Reports, they might conclude that on earth there were bubbles, systems, automatic stabilizers, and carefully measured “rates” of various kinds, but they would be hard-pressed to discern any actual human life. The “economy” exists, but as something totally disconnected from human existence. Of course, it might be observed that qualitative rhetoric may equally abstract from the “immediacy” of human being, knowing and doing. We have all had the experience of reading purely qualitative scholarly work that is so full of jargon and highly “refined” concepts that any relationship to empirical data – to actual human, social life – disappears behind the rhetoric. The threat of such abstraction through Indigenous quantitative research may be a “phantom menace” given the paucity of Indigenous quantitative research right now. But it seems to me that what is needed is not so much Indigenous quantitative methodologies but critical Indigenous statistics practiced by researchers unafraid to “unmask” the dangers of statistical fetishization, even as they strategically use quantitative data as a way of knowing and of persuading. To use a problematic “we” - I suggest that “we” need to defend plural methodological pathways to the “veracity” (p. 78) of Indigenous existences, in all
their variety, complexity and contradictions, even before skeptical colonial officials and audiences.

If I have any other regret, it is that the authors re-centre mainstream colonial social science, even if it is to challenge such approaches. The aim is to re-appropriate quantitative methodologies by and for diverse Indigenous peoples, rather than critically engaging with methodologies developed by other dominated classes, peoples and groups – for instance, Black feminisms, or methodologies rooted in crip or queer studies. In suggesting this, I am not claiming that these “subaltern” methodologies are the same as Indigenous methodologies, although there may be some common concerns. Instead, engaging with these multiple, different, usually marginalized methodologies – Black feminist, crip, queer and so on – would create new conversations and maybe even prefigure strategic alliances across the social sciences against hegemonic methodologies that exclude too many. Too often, subalterns speak “to” the centre, including in our scholarly work, so forgetting to engage and so shift the margins. And we do so precisely because, already marginalized, the way to re-establish credibility - including as Indigenous researchers in the colonial academy - may be to ignore other subaltern contributions and engage with the mainstream. Against such tendencies, I would have liked to see the engagement with feminist methodologies (p. 48) so briefly considered here, as an entry into a broader conversation with other subaltern methodologies.

But these are nuances to overall arguments that are boldly stated, compellingly argued and clearly presented. Thus, if it might be observed, quantitatively, that I have proportionately spilled considerable ink here on a relatively short text, this is a testament to the acuity, intelligence and importance of the book’s many contributions, which I have only begun to address. The authors write that, “Indigenous knowledge…is ground-breaking, orthodoxy-breaking and often brave scholarship” (p. 76) – and there is no better description of the authors’ own work here.

References


