

The Eurocentric epistemic hierarchy and Aboriginal rights

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Indigenous intellectuals ... must protect and defend our 'indigeneity' that is, they must work to ensure that indigenous ways of knowing the world are not devalued, marginalized, or ridiculed in the marketplace of ideas.¹

Dale Turner

Introduction: Research decision-making

In June 2008, I was part of the CPSA's panel, Aboriginal Rights and Policy, during which Frances Widdowson presented her paper, "Native Studies and Canadian Political Science: The Implications of "Decolonizing the Discipline." Claiming that the discipline's scholars are unwittingly accepting Indigenous methodologies as sources of knowledge, she argued that they hold out false hope that Indigenous methodologies can transform, that is, decolonize political science and simultaneously contribute to decolonizing Aboriginal peoples. According to Widdowson "The subjective character of indigenous theories and methodologies, and how these are reinforced by spiritual beliefs and oral accounts, means that these cannot be considered 'theories' or 'methodologies' at all."² Political scientists err if they assign the same epistemic value to Indigenous methodologies as their own. By extension, they also err when they assign the same epistemic value to the scholarship of those in Native Studies as those in political science. Moreover, it is as scientists, not as apologists for Indigenous knowledge, that political scientists will contribute to the *development* of aboriginal peoples and discover the solution to native dependency and deprivation.

Widdowson urged her colleagues to disentangle her discipline from Indigenous methodologies and be dismissive of the work of Indigenous scholars such as Kiera Ladner. Her admonitions were in sharp contrast to the dependency of non-Aboriginal scholarship on the work of Indigenous scholars demonstrated in my own presentation, "Non-Aboriginal Responsibilities Pertaining to Understanding Aboriginal Rights." Arguing that informed non-Aboriginal scholars are obliged to resist the injustice they see in the relationship between Indigenous peoples and non-Aboriginal governments, I explain how Indigenous scholars assist one embedded in the Eurocentric world view to see the injustices and discover the responsibility to, in Dale Turner's words, "...help indigenous people to make their arguments count."³ In their research and teaching non-Aboriginal academics have a moral responsibility to support Aboriginal peoples in their efforts to secure recognition and respect for their Aboriginal and treaty rights. This moral obligation is a poor fit with Widdowson's epistemic obligation. Furthermore, her

epistemic obligation is inconsistent with my argument for non-Aboriginal epistemic dependency upon Indigenous scholars.

What is the appropriate response to Widdowson's work?

Ordinarily, qua philosopher, I take scholarly disagreement as an invitation to continue the dialogue. Moreover, if non-Aboriginal scholars have the moral obligations I argued for in my presentation, my responsibility to respond to what I believed were dangerous arguments seemed clear. Widdowson's epistemological views implied that Aboriginal voices are irrelevant to understanding their reality or changing their circumstances. If she delivers on her promise to show that "...promoting "indigenous theories and methodologies" acts to obscure the causes of aboriginal dependency and entrench native marginalization," it appears that Aboriginal voices and participation is more than irrelevant, it seriously impedes understanding.⁴ Since I believe just political and legal processes pertaining to Aboriginal rights presuppose Aboriginal participation and also believe a just relationship presupposes Aboriginal understandings of their rights, responding to Widdowson's views and arguments should be part of my research program. This understanding of my responsibility was further supported by claims about the significance of epistemology in discussions of Aboriginal rights by Indigenous scholars such as Dale Turner and Sakej Henderson. At several points in his discussion of the tasks of word warriors Dale Turner indicates the importance of asserting and protecting indigenous ways of knowing the world. Furthermore, he claims "The word warrior's most difficult task will be to reconcile indigenous ways of knowing with the forms of knowledge that define European intellectual traditions."⁵ Widdowson's paper supports Turner's claim and her arguments provide the opportunity for non-Aboriginal *philosophers* to help make the arguments of indigenous intellectuals count.

Although there are good reasons supporting my decision to write a paper critically examining Widdowson's views and to submit my abstract to the CPSA programme committee, the discussion following Widdowson's presentation, in the media discussion of the CPSA session, and in the response to Widdowson's book, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry: The Deception behind Indigenous Cultural Preservation*, co-authored with Albert Howard, I have discovered there are also good reasons for ignoring Widdowson's work.⁶ I have had to ask myself whether I am honoring Widdowson's views by taking them so seriously that I treat them as worthy of comment. Should scholars be silent about her arguments and conclusions in order to avoid the appearance of respecting Widdowson's scholarship and taking seriously her reasoning and conclusions?

Glowing reviews from economist John Richards and political scientist Tom Flanagan on the book's cover notwithstanding, scholars from several academic disciplines, have decried the book's academic merit and accuse its authors of dressing a trite piece of journalism in scholarly accessories. According to Political scientist Taiaiake Alfred "This book really is a shoddy piece of trash posing as serious analysis and pretending respectability" and it "...conveys a profoundly willful ignorance of both Indigenous realities and scholarship on Indigenous issues."⁷ Sociologist J. S. Frideres

claims he would not recommend the book to his students because "...it is not well researched, it is not well argued and it definitely does not meet the minimal standards of scholarship."⁸ So, if the argument and analysis in Widdowson's work are so inadequate, is the appropriate response of academics to ignore it and hope it will go away?

I find myself in a position analogous to that of anthropologist Peter Kulchyski who forced himself to read and write a review of the book. In the opening paragraph of his review, Kulchyski explains

I had previously written these authors off as "kooks" from the far political right wing; but now they have been embraced by certain prominent left academics and have themselves started to gloss their opinions with Marxist rhetoric. Their work does an enormous disservice to the growing movement of socialist activists and theorists in Canada who are engaged in the real work of decolonization, and could potentially set back a growing oppositional movement for years. So, at a time when crises are escalating and the demands on our time are high, I'm forced to sit down and read this. What follows will not be pleasant.⁹

Like Kulchyski, I felt obliged to read a book it hurts to read and to respond to claims and arguments that on their own do not merit a response. What calls for the response is the harm one imagines these claims have the potential to cause if the academic community's response is only to pretend they do not exist. Widdowson's views have become part of the arsenal used to be dismissive of Aboriginal rights, should this weapon not be dismantled? Since it is likely her book will become part of the 'torture' some Indigenous students will suffer in their efforts to earn an undergraduate degree, should its weaknesses not be exposed?

Arguably the world would have been a better place without Widdowson's presentation or book. However, because her views are labeled racist and hate speech by some and judged worthy of the Donner Prize by others, her claims have become so visible that pretending the book is harmless or powerless is wishful thinking. It is frightening that Widdowson's book was vying for a prize acknowledging excellence by Canadian researchers in the area of public policy. The books on the short list are those which the jurors are enthusiastically recommending to policy makers and 'informed' readers. Since being on the short list implies that the jury agrees the book satisfies not only their 'important subject' and 'well-written criteria' (criteria i and iii) but also the 'presenting authoritative analysis and evidence' criterion (ii), I believe challenging the soundness of its analysis and adequacy of its evidence is necessary. The Donner Prize nomination means the book is repeatedly heralded as one of the best books on Canadian public policy. Those who see its weaknesses must analyze and critique Widdowson's claims and arguments in order to defuse whatever power they might have in legal and political discourses and shaping of public policy.

I am aware that some political scientists have argued that course outlines and seminar discussions which deliberately omit engaging students in discussing

Widdowson's views constitute the most appropriate response to Widdowson's research. I see the wisdom of this response. There seems to be no value in exposing students to her claims and arguments. The only reason to engage Widdowson's views is to assist those readers who do not have the tools to critically assess them. Those who lack understanding of epistemology and the methods of political science and those who are uninformed about Indigenous philosophy and oppression will require some assistance in reading and assessing Widdowson's work.

One of the 'complex issues' to sort out in deciding how to respond to Widdowson's work relates to the charges of hate speech and racism that are repeatedly leveled against it. These notions are theory laden and I will not attempt here to determine the appropriateness of applying them to her views. However, it is uncontroversial to indicate that her claims disparage Indigenous peoples, culture and knowledge and hold up Eurocentric culture and knowledge. Although the social evolution theory which provides the basis for Widdowson's claims about development and progress is equally problematic, I only comment here on the positivist epistemology upon which she bases her comparison of Indigenous and Eurocentric methodologies. I argue that her argument for rejecting indigenous methodologies is unsound. I also use her attack on indigenous knowledge to expose the epistemological prison of the Eurocentric world view.

It is important to indicate what I will not attempt to do in this paper. I do not provide an account of indigenous ways of knowing nor do I attempt to refute Widdowson's account of indigenous methodologies. I think that her account is inadequate and hence her criticisms largely beside the point. I also believe that she misrepresents the work of indigenous scholars such as Kiera Ladner, Taiaiake Alfred and Dale Turner. However, the important task of correcting these components of her argument are the responsibility of indigenous scholars, who alone have the appropriate expertise.

My purpose here is to reveal the problematic epistemic presuppositions upon which her argument against indigenous methodologies is based and to explain why being aware of and understanding these presuppositions contributes to dismantling her critique of indigenous methodologies. I argue that Widdowson's epistemology and the theories she presumes to be true are part of a world view. The Eurocentric methodologies to which she assigns such value do not have privileged 'non-world-view' access to the world. I show that her Eurocentric world view contains an epistemic hierarchy. This epistemic hierarchy enables Eurocentric epistemology to 'imprison' non-Aboriginal reasoning and perpetuate ignorance and misunderstanding of Indigenous knowledge and Aboriginal rights.

Widdowson's attack on Indigenous methodologies

Widdowson has been attacking the association of Aboriginal 'Traditional knowledge' with knowledge for many years. A 2006 paper co-authored by with Albert Howard, "Aboriginal "Traditional Knowledge" and Canadian Public Policy: Ten Years of Listening to the Silence," argues that the spiritual component and unscientific reasoning of traditional knowledge make it incompatible with scientific research and a

threat to environmental assessment and public policy. In Widdowson's more recent paper about Indigenous methodologies and political science, the epistemological assertions are essentially the same. Indigenous methods are subjective eschewing objectivity. Indigenous truth claims cannot be verified so the notions of evidence, theory and methodology no longer apply. Widdowson puts it this way:

The subjective character of indigenous theories and methodologies, and how these are reinforced by spiritual beliefs and oral accounts, means that these cannot be considered "theories" or "methodologies" at all. There is no attempt to develop any kind of systemic approach for evaluating the evidence that is deployed to reach an understanding of the natural world. A spiritual belief, for example, is not a "theory", since there is no evidence that can be evaluated to determine its validity. And although it is often claimed that aboriginal peoples have their own standards for evaluating oral histories, elaboration of these methods actually reveals a lack of systematic assessment.¹⁰

In Widdowson's view political science *qua* science must hold on to the notions of evidence, theory and methodology. If political science must forgo these notions in order to integrate Indigenous methodologies, then the rational choice for 'progressive political scientists' is obvious. They must resist incorporating the methodologies of native studies into political science.

The most glaring weakness of Widdowson's attack on Indigenous knowledge and methodologies is the absence in her articles and book of the epistemological theory and conceptual framework upon which her critique is based. Widdowson makes claims about science, evidence, objectivity and universal truth as if they were uncontroversial and self-evidently true. Demanding explanation of and evidence for Indigenous knowledge and methodologies, she does not explain or justify her own epistemological claims and presuppositions. Therefore, even if her conclusions about Indigenous knowledge and methodologies follow from her epistemological views, her own epistemological principles rationally compel her to confess she has not objectively or scientifically (as she employs these terms) proven anything. As I argue below, since epistemological principles cannot be empirically proven, Widdowson's epistemology implies her research questions are outside the realm of inquiry for a political scientist. She is compelled by her own beliefs about what constitutes evidence, beliefs which according to her epistemology must remain assumptions, to revise her categorical assertions about Indigenous knowledge and methodologies. Her own conceptual framework only permits her to indicate that these claims are subjective and faith based. A more adequate account of the methodology of political science than she provides also reveals that she must revise her assertions about the objectivity of political science.

Widdowson's epistemological claims

All research activity presupposes an epistemology. So, it is unsurprising that Widdowson has epistemological beliefs and assumptions. What is surprising, given her particular set of epistemological assumptions, is that she seems to view herself as a political scientist when making epistemological claims and employing them in her arguments. Philosophers encourage everyone one, including social scientists, to do epistemology; however, we would not encourage political scientists to think that they are engaged in *scientific* research when they are providing an account of knowledge and examining sources of knowledge. Political scientists who engage these questions have moved both feet across the border into the humanities realm of their discipline. They are doing philosophy. Widdowson either does not recognize or is unwilling to acknowledge that she crosses this border. She presents claims belonging to her epistemological theory as though they are scientific claims. However, qua epistemological claims they cannot be more scientific than the epistemological views of the postmodernists or Indigenous scholars she berates. The *assessment* of ways of knowing is not a scientific activity which produces scientific beliefs. Given Widdowson's characterization of non-scientific beliefs as subjective and irrational, it is understandable that she would prefer that epistemology belonged to scientific rather than philosophical investigation; but, that does not make it so.

The nature of epistemological inquiry and the centrality of epistemological claims in her argument create serious problems for Widdowson's attack on Indigenous knowledge and methodologies. If she uses the subjectivity and irrationality of Indigenous knowledge and methodologies as reasons for not incorporating them into political science, must she not, for these same reasons, draw the same conclusion about her epistemology? 'Yes' seems to be the only rational answer to this question. Yet, to admit her argument is subjective confronts Widdowson with an uncomfortable choice. Her own epistemology commits her to values which require her either ban to her epistemological argument from her work or encourage her reader not to take it too seriously. Although I believe Widdowson's argument fails for many reasons, its philosophical nature is particularly significant since there is no escape from the dilemma it presents.

In an article which has excluding Indigenous theories and methodologies from political science as one of its aims, it is noteworthy that Widdowson says virtually nothing about what knowledge is and nothing about the methodologies of political science. Neither previous CPSA papers nor *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry* contain the clear exposition of knowledge and political science's methodologies which one might assume is the necessary first step in mounting her epistemological argument. Her epistemology remains largely unstated. Its content can only be inferred from her claims made in the context of critiquing indigenous knowledge and methodologies and postmodernism. So for example, much attention is given to establishing that indigenous knowledge and methodologies are subjective. Being subjective is not explained other than to contrast it with objectivity, which also remains unexplained other than by associating it with science. Widdowson's lack of exposition of her conceptual

framework and her theory is astonishing given her fierce attack on those who do not explain indigenous knowledge and methodologies to her satisfaction.

Although Widdowson does not explicitly claim that knowledge consists in only in the product of scientific inquiry, this is implied by everything she says to heap criticism on indigenous knowledge and methodologies and praise upon Eurocentric science. The two statements about knowledge below make claims about knowledge in the context of her critique and provide the most hints she provides regarding her understanding of the nature of knowledge:

Beliefs are the unverifiable assumptions of aboriginal elders about the existence of supernatural forces in the universe; they cannot be described as “knowledge” since they are justified by faith, not evidence. The values and practices referred to in various definitions [of traditional knowledge] also have nothing to do with knowledge *per se*. The former concerns normative judgements about the way things should be, not what they are, while a practice refers to how people act, not what is known. Although knowledge, or an understanding of natural processes, may inform values and practices, values and practices do not constitute knowledge.

Knowledge is what all people acquire when they understand the nature of matter. There is only one kind of knowledge. It is a universal concept of reality – reality supported by unequivocal evidence. We cannot know that the earth is flat, and it would be unthinkable to insist that the proposition be respected.¹¹

These claims indicate that for Widdowson the scope of knowledge is very narrow. Knowledge is only of matter and material processes. It is not about values. It is verifiable and supported by unequivocal evidence. It is a universal concept. Few in number and by no means original, each of Widdowson’s assertions about knowledge are rich in controversy. In his concise and insightful comments on Widdowson’s paper at the CPSA, discussant Peter Russell claimed that she uncritically presupposes logical positivism. I agree. Her claims about knowledge and what she finds problematic in Indigenous knowledge and methodologies are consistent with logical positivism. The ‘uncritically presupposes’ charge is fair since, as I explained above, her paper lacks analysis or any attempt to justify her views.

Nothing in Widdowson’s papers or *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry* suggests that she has any background in epistemology other than an awareness of the debate between postmodernists and their critics. She may protest being assigned to the logical positivist camp. However, her fundamental epistemological commitments are so similar that the basic criticisms of it will apply to her theory. Repeatedly in her chain of reasoning, she rejects as subjective beliefs which are not verified by scientific means. Only a scientist’s experience linked to science’s methodologies is a source of the

objective and universal claims which constitute knowledge. Without the scientific methodology, it seems that experience delivers only individual claims and such claims are particular, subjective and irrational.

As Russell points out, logical positivism “has not stood up well to philosophical criticism”. Widdowson has attached herself to an epistemological theory which finds itself in the unenviable position of assessing as unverifiable its own claims about what knowledge is how to acquire knowledge. This is why Russell wisely recommends that she ought to work out more clearly and in a scholarly manner where she stands on normative thinking. Arguably the analytic philosophers whose carefully analysis exposed the criticisms of the epistemology Widdowson espouses have been as responsible for opening the door to methodologies which Widdowson calls subjective and unscientific as the postmodernists she ‘blames’ for contaminating political science.

Misrepresenting calls for change in political science

It is clear throughout Widdowson’s writing that she views herself as part of a minority of political scientists who are protecting their discipline from the majority who are sacrificing the truth and the integrity of the discipline in order to promote the decolonization of indigenous peoples. She consistently gives social activist reasons to political scientists who accept Ladner’s *epistemological* argument that the Eurocentric eyes of political scientists limit their potential to understand indigenous politics.

In political science, indigenous theories and methodologies are largely supported because doing so is seen as aiding the decolonization of aboriginal peoples. Academics who would not support, for example, holding prayers at political science meetings, accept these instances when they are claimed to be associated with aboriginal decolonization. Canada’s native population has been terribly oppressed historically, and it is argued that recognizing and respecting native culture is a harmless way to right past wrongs.¹²

It is reasonable to expect that decolonizing political science will contribute to the larger decolonization project. Indigenous scholars like Kiera Ladner, who make visible the ways the discipline’s Eurocentric conceptual frameworks and presuppositions generate and support a distorted Eurocentric understanding of Indigenous peoples, create tools to dismantle the distortions. Widdowson’s work provides a striking illustration of how Eurocentric political science misrepresents Indigenous peoples and justifies colonialism. Since a Eurocentric distorted picture of Indigenous reality always provides the arguments to justify colonialism, decolonizing the discipline will not only increase understanding of Indigenous politics, but it could contribute to changes in politics. Widdowson’s Eurocentric understanding is the basis for her criticisms of policy and for the policies she recommends. So linking the decolonization of the discipline with the decolonization of Indigenous peoples is not unreasonable. However, by focusing on this

possible consequence of decolonizing the discipline, Widdowson misrepresents the point and the content of Ladner's argument. Postmodernists could reasonably make the same complaint.

At the outset, Widdowson's analyses of Ladner's argument and the postmodernist critique of Eurocentric epistemology contain the same mistake. By ascribing social justice reasons to those who call for changes in the discipline, she accuses them of sacrificing truth for justice. But this is to ignore the content of arguments she purports to critique. The arguments are first and foremost epistemological. They challenge Eurocentric epistemological principles and methodologies. They expose the presuppositions and limitations of these methodologies and call for appropriate structural and attitudinal changes. Only by misrepresenting the work of these scholars is Widdowson able to accuse them of choosing justice and sacrificing truth. Their commitment to knowledge is as evident in their work as their commitment to justice. Contrary to Widdowson's caricature of their work, they are never confronted with the choice of assigning greater value to one than the other. By misrepresenting the motive and ignoring the content of their arguments, Widdowson constructs a straw man and an ineffectual refutation. Since she has bypassed analysis and critique of their arguments, the views of Ladner and the postmodernists remain intact. Only the weakness of Widdowson's line of reasoning is exposed.

The Eurocentric epistemological prison

One of my aims in this discussion of Widdowson's work is to expose what I call the Eurocentric epistemological prison. Being in this prison comes with membership in western society and membership in western society makes the prison invisible to the one who occupies it. While it is obvious that one does not reason in a vacuum, it might not be so obvious that one has a world view and that it constrains our seeing and thinking. It can assist and hinder well intentioned efforts to understand material or political reality. While it is important that everyone be aware the prison exists, this awareness is particularly important for academics. Widdowson's research illustrates why. Because she is unable to see her fundamental epistemic presuppositions as peculiar to a particular Eurocentric epistemology, she is unable to understand that from other epistemological standpoints (different Eurocentric and Indigenous epistemologies) they are problematic. Rejecting other epistemologies from her standpoint, she does not see the critiques of her epistemology from other standpoints as legitimate. To challenge her epistemology is to irrationally defend junk science. From the prison of her epistemological presuppositions Widdowson cannot see things otherwise. Because she believes science has an objective methodology and it is the source of objective species truth, other cultures may have their world views, but Eurocentric science does not. Science may have Eurocentric origins; but, she presumes its methodology and its presuppositions are neither culturally grounded nor biased.

Widdowson's predicament, the predicament of any Eurocentric scholar, is analogous to the predicament of the prisoners in Plato's cave. Her fundamental epistemological and metaphysical beliefs hold her captive. Impossible to verify, hence

beliefs which her epistemic principles would dismiss as subjective and mere opinion, these beliefs become the basis for an epistemic hierarchy. Since a verification principle, narrowly construed as verified by scientific methodology, ultimately provides the basis for determining placement in the hierarchy it is not very complex. Beliefs are either scientific or not, just as they are either objective or subjective. She utters her unwarranted epistemic principles with the same confidence the prisoners make claims about shadows. However, the difference in onlooker response to the prisoners and Widdowson is worth noting. Readers of Plato's Allegory of the Cave sympathize with the prisoners. However, there is no sympathy for Widdowson in many of the academic reviews of her work. Her theoretical framework, methodology, ignorance and character have been attacked. No one points to her epistemic predicament to explain and excuse her work. Widdowson receives no sympathy because, unlike the prisoners, she is presumed to have the opportunity to become aware of the prison.

Escaping completely the prison of Eurocentric epistemology might not be possible, but it is presumed that she has had the opportunity to avoid the epistemic conceit which is all that ultimately grounds her dismissal of Indigenous knowledge and methodologies. If her presentations and book were authored by a journalist unknowingly embedded in western society's dominant epistemology, reviewers might have seen a closer analogy with the prisoners in the cave. However, with a Ph.D. in political science, Widdowson does not have access to the ignorance excuse and the sympathy that accompanies it. She is expected to know that logical positivism has been discredited. She is expected to see the problems inherent in her simplistic understanding and use of the subjective/objective distinction. She is expected to understand that science is no longer understood to be purely objective. These understandings which are commonplace in the academic community are unlikely to be part of the dominant epistemology in Canadian society. It is precisely because Widdowson's views are so consistent with the dominant epistemology that they have the potential to do so much harm. Unlike Peter Russell, the majority of the 'informed' readers who read her Donner Prize shortlisted book will be unable to inform her that her basic epistemological tenants are untenable.

In his review of the book, Peter Kulchyski claims "In its sloppiness, ethnocentrism, racism and stupidity, this book does not reflect well upon its authors, the readers who endorsed it, the editors who proofread it, the scholars who supported it and the publisher who will allow this book to stand on their shelves next to the many excellent books in the Native and Northern Series."¹³ Kulchyski implies that those participating in the peer review process have responsibilities that require them to take more seriously the assessment of the academic credibility of the work than interest in the topic, or profit for the publisher or freedom of expression. Obviously Widdowson is free to express her opinion. However, academics do not violate that right if they oppose its publication because its outmoded epistemological views (and scientific theories) invalidate its arguments. These reasons are why there is a peer review process. Academics are to assess the academic merit of the research, the plausibility if not the strength of its argument. What is troubling about the publication of *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry* is not only that the book exists. Like Kulchyski, I think it matters that it is published by a reputable academic press. I think it matters that this academic

press recommended it for a Donner Prize and it matters that the recommendation implies that the book represents the best in contemporary academic scholarship.

It is impossible to ascertain the extent to which the Eurocentric epistemological prison of those who positively reviewed the book hindered their assessment of its scholarship. However, the absence of epistemological criticism in every review I have read suggests that the epistemic component of her argument is going unchallenged. This may only mean that the reviewers regard other aspects of her work as more problematic than the epistemological. However, it is important to know whether it means that the Eurocentric epistemological prison still holds many academics. It is important to know whether political scientists generally are as dismissive of her epistemology as Russell. I do not mean that her epistemological views are more problematic than her theory of cultural evolution - the aspect of her work that is the target of most critics. I focus on her epistemological views in the first place because they provide the basis for what have been described as racist claims about Indigenous knowledge and methodologies, and in the second place because of their consistency with the dominant epistemic hierarchy in western societies. Since those who are prisoners of this hierarchy will not challenge Widdowson's epistemology, it is incumbent upon those who see the prison to inform others about it. This is because the epistemic conceit of those who are unaware they are in the Eurocentric prison will lead to claims which inappropriately disvalue and dismiss indigenous knowledge and methodologies.

Science and normative judgements

Widdowson is almost silent about normative claims other than to associate them with values and call them subjective. Since they are not objective, there is no place for them under the science umbrella. Russell, citing Karl Mannheim, reminds Widdowson that all science has a subjective component. Her presumption of a radical polarity of objective and subjective in human knowledge misrepresents the nature of science and, in particular, political science. The subjectivity of political science may have different origins than the subjectivity of indigenous methodologies; but, since she allows no subjectivity in knowledge seeking, the difference is irrelevant. Only the presence of subjectivity matters for the negative epistemic assessment.

I believe Widdowson has misrepresented (and overestimated) the objective nature of political science and does not see the subjective component of its methodologies because the epistemological standards under-girding these methodologies are typically taken for granted. Methodologies are learned rather than subject to the kind of investigation which has the potential to make the normative principles visible. The Eurocentric prison exercises its most powerful influence when a scholar's normative principles are invisible and presumed. Perhaps a political scientist does not always need to be aware of the discipline's epistemological presuppositions when engaged in research. However, one must be aware of the nature of one's inquiry when one is *assessing* the reliability of sources of knowledge. Widdowson might not be aware that she has replaced her science hat with an epistemologist's (i.e. a philosopher's) in much of her work. It is only when she sees the unscientific nature of her own research and works out

the implications of this for her praise of political science and disdain for Indigenous knowledge and methodologies that she can escape the prison of her epistemic presuppositions. Presently, her corner of epistemological prison of the Eurocentric tradition prevents her from knowing where she is and seeing the implications of her own assertions.

A list of the methods in a political science research methods course, provides many reasons to be puzzled by Widdowson's confidence in the verifiability of its claims and the kind of objectivity she ascribes to political science. How do these methods deliver the verification she praises and satisfy her objectivity criterion? Reading the work of a political scientist employing these methods does not provide the kind of answers to these questions that are supportive of Widdowson's claims about political science. An analysis of her own methodologies demonstrates that she does not require of her own research the strictures she imposes on others. This can be shown most efficiently using citing, one of the methodologies of the political scientist she uses extensively. Apart from the epistemologically problematic appeal to authority inherent in this method, citing requires choosing from among experts. One must assess the theories of the experts and the appropriateness of their methodologies. Each choice, each normative judgement opens the door to subjectivity and raises questions about objectivity. Peter Kulchyski points out deficiencies in the citations Widdowson and Howard provide in support of their development theory.

This book is based on intellectual dishonesty. The authors can barely cite a living anthropologist who will agree with them, so the anthropologists they cite favourably almost all come from before the 1950's, when the now totally discredited doctrine of social evolution still left traces of its pernicious influence. This dishonesty come through, because in each chapter where they tackle an issue, they refuse to actually grapple with the stronger scholars who deal with the subject matter, usually relying on newspaper accounts and non-academic works to act as stray dogs they can knock over... Rarely do they actually confront strong versions of the arguments they oppose.¹⁴

Kulchyski's challenge requires a response. The quality of citing must be defended because citing can provide good or bad evidence. For my purposes in this argument, it is irrelevant whether Kulchyski is correct in his assessment of the scholars Widdowson values and disvalues. What matters is that Kulchyski makes the normative activity of citing explicit. Scholars are *favoured* and some scholars are *stronger* than others. Citing is not verifying and citing is at least partially subjective. Although I do not want to push the analogy, in light of Widdowson's reasons for dismissing Aboriginal Elders as sources of knowledge, it is important to acknowledge that citing is an expression of confidence in experts and their theories and insights. If citing in political science actually verified claims, and if claims and theories cited were objective in Widdowson's sense of objective, then to cite experts in political science and to cite Aboriginal Elders in

Aboriginal politics might be radically different methodologies. Since both hypothetical claims are false, Widdowson's argument leaves us without any evidence for making judgements about the strengths of one and the weaknesses of the other. Even if she correctly characterizes the Aboriginal Elder's role in Indigenous methodologies, which I doubt, her very inadequate account of the methodologies of political science ensures that any of her comparative normative judgements are implausible.

Epistemology and Aboriginal rights

In her work, Widdowson consistently places side by side her epistemological conclusions about Indigenous knowledge and methodologies and her public policy conclusions about what is to be done about the circumstances of Aboriginal peoples. Since she argues that Indigenous people have no knowledge to contribute to political science and public policy is an area of political science, she predictably argues that something other than Indigenous understandings of Aboriginal rights should provide the basis of public policy. By consigning all Indigenous scholars (including Indigenous political scientist Kiera Ladner) to Native Studies, which she stipulates is an inherently subjective and non-science discipline, Indigenous voices are discredited. If one takes Widdowson's epistemic assessments seriously, non-Aboriginal paternalism is the only rational approach to policy making. If one accepts her developmental theory of cultural evolution, assimilation (i.e. ongoing colonialism) is the only rational policy. Land claims and Aboriginal rights, the solution argued by Indigenous peoples, is exposed as irrational by the subjectivity of its proponents. *Real* science shows they *really* ensure Indigenous people retain the Neolithic cultural features (undisciplined work habits, tribal forms of personal identification, animistic beliefs, and difficulties in developing abstract reasoning) which maintain the development gap and prevent "...the integration of many aboriginal peoples into the Canadian Social dynamic."¹⁵

In *This is Not a Peace Pipe*, Dale Turner pointed to the problem Eurocentric epistemological principles pose to securing respect for the rights of Canada's indigenous peoples. In Widdowson's work we can see the verification of Turner's claim and reason for his concern. From her Eurocentric epistemology, she has launched an attack on Indigenous knowledge and methodologies that position these in opposition to and inconsistent with science. The one is subjective, the other is objective. The only available choice is to choose one and discard the other. A Eurocentric tradition which disposes us to think in terms of polarities means that those in the Eurocentric epistemological prison will be more inclined to agree with Widdowson than to receive her views with appropriate skepticism.

According to Turner the Aboriginal participation which he argues is necessary for Canada's legal and political discourse about Aboriginal rights to produce a meaningful theory of Aboriginal rights raises important epistemological questions.

The key problem of participation arises because most Aboriginal peoples still believe that their ways of understanding the world are, de facto, radically different from Western European ways of

understanding the world. These differences raise a tension between Aboriginal ways of knowing the world and the legal and political discourses of the state.

The issue of participation generates epistemological problems of reconciling indigenous forms of knowledge with Western European philosophy.¹⁶

Widdowson's epistemological theory makes nonsense of Turner's reconciling indigenous forms of knowledge with Eurocentric philosophy. Her epistemological arguments aim to discourage reconciling. Indigenous forms of knowledge are to be discounted in legal and political discourse not included or respected. Turner assigns word warriors "...the intellectual work of protecting indigenous ways of knowing." He claims "... indigenous knowledge offers legitimate ways of understanding the world – ways that have never been respected within the legal and political practices of the dominant culture."¹⁷ My discussion of Widdowson shows that from some Eurocentric points of view, the epistemological prison's epistemic hierarchy makes the word warrior's task virtually impossible. Only by refuting Widdowson's epistemological claims and presuppositions, by dismantling her epistemological prison piece by piece, is the indigenous scholar permitted to make the assertion and what s/he claims seriously considered. Turner who is aware of the hostility of the dominant culture urges indigenous intellectuals to continue resistance. I see the efforts of non-Aboriginal epistemologists and social scientists to refute Widdowson's views as contributing to making the dominant culture less hostile. My efforts are not motivated by concern that Widdowson's work has the power to reverse any progress academics and academic disciplines have made in becoming aware of and escaping from the Eurocentric epistemological prison. My concern is for those who are unaware of this progress and whose confinement in the dominant epistemology ensures they will absorb rather than question her views.

Turner indicates that the role of the elders, spiritual experience and the oral tradition all are problematic within Eurocentric epistemology and he has much evidence to support this claim. Like Widdowson, the dominant Eurocentric epistemic hierarchy has no basis for regarding as equal to the claims of social scientists beliefs based in any of these essential aspects of indigenous epistemology. Turner and Henderson demonstrate the relationship between epistemology and injustice when they analyze Supreme Court attempts to define Aboriginal rights. Unwittingly perhaps, these judgments presuppose the Eurocentric epistemological hierarchy in a manner that disadvantages indigenous peoples in their efforts to have their rights respected by non-Aboriginal governments. In Turner's discussion, he explains that the notion of the Aboriginal elder's spiritual understanding will be disadvantaged in a Court respecting scientific expertise. It is partly for this reason that he wants to position an indigenous word warrior between the one with understanding of indigenous philosophy and the Eurocentric epistemology of the non-Aboriginal judge or politician. If Aboriginal rights as defined by the Court are to reflect indigenous understandings of their rights, it will be necessary to secure epistemic respect for Aboriginal elders and the oral tradition.

Widdowson may not understand the role of elders or the oral tradition, but her discussion of both is informative as to why they are disadvantaged relative to the scientist and the written word in Supreme Court decision-making. Assuming that judges respectfully listen to Aboriginal persons, their conclusions regarding the nature and scope of Aboriginal rights leave no doubt that the testimony of Aboriginal elders has not received the respect of written historical documents and the Common law. Aboriginal elders' testimony and the oral tradition which provide the source of indigenous understanding of their responsibilities (i.e. rights) is not explicitly discredited in recent court cases. Nevertheless, judgments that consistently constrain rather than recognize Aboriginal rights provide evidence that their testimony is not accorded the same weight as the evidence supporting non-Aboriginal claims. The judges *hear* Aboriginal persons speak of their understandings of their rights and of the nature of their relationship with non-Aboriginal governments. But, if their decision does not reflect what Aboriginal elders have said, if instead the judgment is significantly inconsistent with their testimony, in what sense can the judges be said to assume the epistemic equality of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal testimony. Aboriginal people can reasonably claim after every Supreme Court decision that they have lost another battle for their rights at least in part because their sources of knowledge are *assumed* to be epistemically inferior. Invisible in the judges' justification for their decision this assumption is a key player in the conceptual landscape within which the judges construct their arguments. Arguably, this invisible and unjustified assumption is as important to the outcome of their deliberations as their assumption regarding the scope of non-Aboriginal treaty rights, particularly the legitimacy of Canadian sovereignty.

On their own, Supreme Court judges are no more likely to see that they are prisoners of epistemological presuppositions than the prisoners in Plato's Cave. In the Cave, the prisoners needed the assistance of someone who knows there are shadows in order to escape their epistemic prison. In the Supreme Court, the judges need the assistance of someone who knows that normative presuppositions, not scientific empirical facts are what justify their preference for Eurocentric epistemology. It is unlikely that they, any more than the rest of us who encounter the world via the Eurocentric worldview, acquired their epistemic commitments reflectively or rationally. I do not maintain that the judges cannot (1) discover their prison (2) escape it. It is precisely because they can that non-Aboriginal philosophers and social scientists specializing in the area of epistemology and research methods respectively have a special responsibility pertaining to Aboriginal rights. These scholars are responsible for ensuring that Eurocentric epistemic prejudices do not produce an unjustified assessment of indigenous methodologies. They must ensure arguments assessing indigenous methodologies do not unfairly and irrationally *assume*, like Widdowson's, a normative epistemic hierarchy which cannot see the legitimacy of indigenous methodologies. To make this possible, they must make visible the hierarchy and its prejudices.

In his analysis of Supreme Court arguments to justify decisions pertaining to the nature, scope and content of Aboriginal rights, Sakej Henderson establishes that the experts in Aboriginal jurisprudence, expertise essential to understanding Aboriginal rights, have not been permitted to contribute to the judges' deliberations.¹⁸ Judges have

not seen the testimony of Aboriginal elders as a legitimate and necessary source of knowledge about the Aboriginal legal traditions determining the nature and content of Aboriginal rights. The judges who are called upon to provide an account of Aboriginal rights seek *evidence* that would enable them to make their decisions. Yet Aboriginal elders, the primary source of the knowledge they seek, are denied this epistemic status by the Eurocentric epistemic hierarchy of judges who from this prison cannot see it. The prison accords this status and accompanying respect to the academic experts. Like Widdowson, the dominant epistemology has an epistemic hierarchy, and like Widdowson it places science on the highest rung of the knowledge ladder.

The dominant epistemology of the majority in western society views scientists as having knowledge because they use the methodologies best equipped to acquire it. Since natural scientists are knowledgeable about material processes and social scientists are knowledgeable about human nature, science has the realm of knowledge covered. The only uncontested source of knowledge, science has the highest epistemic status the epistemology bestows. Once the social sciences were disentangled from philosophy and under the science umbrella, the dominant epistemology assigned these new sciences the epistemic status previously reserved for natural science. This simplistic epistemic assessment, which ignores important differences in the methodologies and subject matter of the natural and social sciences, does not typically infect the research of social scientists. This makes Widdowson's presumption of same and equal epistemic status so puzzling. If, as she claims, knowledge is of matter and material processes how can she pretend political scientists have access to knowledge? Furthermore, if the methods of the natural sciences determine the standards for sources of knowledge, do the methodologies of the social sciences qualify as sources of knowledge? Although Widdowson and supreme court judges presume social scientists to be at least one rung above Aboriginal elders on the epistemic status ladder, this is only a presumption until *real* epistemological inquiry has been undertaken. Hence, at this time epistemic respect for the social scientist and epistemic disrespect for the Aboriginal elder only reveals the prejudice of one within the Eurocentric epistemic prison.

Overcoming Eurocentric prejudice

How are indigenous ways of knowing to overcome epistemic prejudices that are not recognized for what they are? Discovering this epistemic prison is the first step towards its destruction. Making its existence general knowledge, that is, a component of the dominant epistemology rather than specialized knowledge is the second step. Calling a prejudice a prejudice is necessary if we are to eliminate the prejudice and the unjust consequences which are built upon it. Careful examination of the work of indigenous scholars like Ladner, Turner and Henderson is an indispensable tool for non-indigenous scholars. Because they *see* the Eurocentric epistemological beliefs and values presupposed by the epistemic hierarchy which denies equal epistemic status and respect to indigenous methodologies, their scholarship enables non-indigenous scholars to discover their prison. They remind us a Eurocentric epistemology presupposing a Eurocentric epistemic hierarchy provides the conceptual framework that automatically

becomes our starting point when, like Widdowson, we evaluate proposed methodologies and claims. Disposed to reason within the confines of this conceptual framework, we need to consciously resist its influence. These Indigenous scholars, like the instructor in Plato's Cave, bring an epistemic prisoner into a context which provides insight and promotes questioning of an epistemological theory that she takes for granted.

Like the released prisoner in Plato's Cave, non-Aboriginal scholars aware of the epistemic prison have a weighty responsibility to communicate its existence. This responsibility is partly based upon the value of truth and integrity appropriately upheld by Widdowson. Arguably, given Socrates' efforts to dispel false beliefs, the prisoner having knowledge is understood to have an epistemic responsibility to rescue the other prisoners from their false beliefs and ignorance. However, like the prisoner who experienced the world outside the cave, non-Aboriginal scholars who have escaped or even caught sight of the epistemic prison holding them captive have a *moral* obligation. Non-Aboriginal persons are entitled to understand their epistemic predicament, especially if their ignorance is an ongoing source of harm for others. And, indigenous peoples are entitled to an unprejudiced assessment of their ways of knowing. Unless non-indigenous scholars engage the epistemological inquiry beside indigenous scholars, Eurocentric epistemology will continue to thwart non-Aboriginal scholars in their search for knowledge and indigenous peoples in their search for justice.

¹ Dale Turner, *This Is Not a Peace Pipe: Towards a Critical Indigenous Philosophy*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006, p.113.

² Widdowson, "Native Studies and Canadian Political Science: The Implications of "Decolonizing the Discipline," p.7.

³ Dale Turner, *This Is Not a Peace Pipe*, p.120.

⁴ Widdowson, "Native Studies and Canadian Political Science: The Implications of "Decolonizing the Discipline," p. 3.

⁵ Dale Turner, *This Is Not a Peace Pipe*, p. 93.

⁶ Francis Widdowson and Albert Howard, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry: The Deception Behind Indigenous Cultural Preservation*, Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 2008.

⁷ Taiaiake Alfred, "Redressing Racist Academics, Or, Put Your Clothes Back On, Please! A Review of Widdowson and Howard's, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry*" posted on his website January 16, 2009. (<http://www.taiaiake.com/42>)

⁸ J. S. Frideres, presentation at Mount Royal College, December 1, 2008. The presentation was made on a panel discussing *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry*.

⁹ Peter Kulchyski, "The Emperor's Old Clothes," *Canadian Dimension Magazine*, March/April 2009.

¹⁰ Widdowson, "Native Studies and Canadian Political Science: The Implications of 'Decolonizing the Discipline,'" p.7.

¹¹ Widdowson, "Aboriginal 'Traditional Knowledge' and Canadian Public Policy: Ten Years of Listening to the Silence" p. 5, 29.

¹² Widdowson, "Native Studies and Canadian Political Science: The implications of 'Decolonizing the Discipline,'" p.11,12.

¹³ Peter Kulchyski, "The Emperor's Old Clothes," *Canadian Dimension Magazine*, March/April 2009.

¹⁴ Peter Kulchyski, "The Emperor's Old Clothes," *Canadian Dimension Magazine*, March/April 2009.

¹⁵ *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry*, p.13.

¹⁶ Dale Turner, *This is Not a Peace Pipe: Towards a Critical Indigenous Philosophy*, , p.7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 8.

¹⁸ James Youngblood Henderson, *First Nations Jurisprudence and Aboriginal Rights: Defining the Just Society*, Saskatoon: Native Law Centre, 2002.