



WORKING WITH INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE THROUGH A SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITIONS LENS

Conference Ambassador Report by Belen Iturralde on:

Dialogue Session 212: Indigeneity in Transitions. (20th of August 2020, 17.30-19.00)

Presenters: Stephen Williams and Andreeanne Doyon

During the dialogue session 'Indigeneity in Transitions', the conference participants firstly considered the ways in which Indigenous Knowledge (IK) systems can contribute to research on sustainability transitions. Secondly, the discussion evolved around the question of how researchers can conduct research that involves indigenous peoples and knowledge in an ethical and respectful way. The presenters Stephen Williams and Andreeanne Doyon, who both have an STR background, as well as another researcher with a sustainable energy background, a master's student, and me took part in the discussion.

The discussion canvassed ethical questions and practical challenges raised when attempting to reconcile different schools of thought. Interestingly, these practical challenges materialized in the session in at least two ways: Firstly, no indigenous peoples were present. Discussions on IK and STR will always be problematic if no indigenous peoples are able to share their views. Secondly, the small number of participants revealed the lacking interest of the STRN to include a postcolonial perspective. This is unfortunate as opportunities for shared learnings to move forward do exist. However, to address the imbalance between the well-funded Western perspective of STRN practitioners and the marginalised IK, substantial intellectual engagement, decolonization, and active responses from STRN practitioners are required. The following comments summarise some critical observations I had on the relationship between STRN and Postcolonial Theory (PT) while reflecting on the session.

Postcolonial Theory is a discipline concerned with de-constructing and exposing dominant ideologies and their essentialising practices (Smith, 2012). Transition scholars engaging with this approach must make an extra effort to not only break established guidelines, but also to promote an anticolonial stance. This will certainly involve much reflexivity and openness towards new approaches and other actors. The dialogue session elaborated on some of these issues to better understand the ethics of working with IK through a sustainability transitions lens. During the discussion, it became evident this is a difficult task. On the one hand, a postcolonial understanding of 'knowledge' as partial, place based, and a construct that influences power relations is fundamental to a meaningful engagement with IK. On the other hand, STR is an inherently 'Western' discipline that originated in the Netherlands to address the sustainability challenges faced by societies of the Global North (Loorbach, Frantzeskaki, & Avelino, 2017).

The work Stephen Williams and Andreeanne Doyon presented during this session was a literature review of transition articles that deal with indigenous peoples and IK. The aim of such work was to highlight methodological and epistemological gaps in transition studies. I believe that identifying these gaps is a necessary first step to address inequalities and the lack of validity of IK in Western institutions. At the same

time, the very act of defining and categorising knowledge contradicts the principles of PT (Smith, 2012) – as pointed out during the session, a result of this classification is the exclusion of literature that does not fit with the prescribed categories. Finding ways of overcoming this breach between the two disciplines is essential. Personally, I would like to see more profound focus on this.

Protocols should be identified or created to enable successful collaborations between IK systems and research on sustainability transitions (Johnson et al., 2016). The ‘Indigeneity in Transitions’ dialogue session posed the question ‘*Who holds the pen?*’ and the implications that follow from this. The session further looked at the methods and ways of knowing/meaning that are best suited for conducting transition studies in partnership with indigenous peoples. It is encouraging to see that some STRN members are engaging with these questions. Research on sustainability transitions holds a privileged position in terms of access to funding and other economic resources. This power can be channelled into expanding the discipline’s epistemological boundaries. Yet, without self-reflexive work and meaningful engagement with the holders of the IK, STRN researchers might miss the forest for the trees.

The discussion session demonstrated the need to unpack these two schools of thought further. An analysis of the underpinning ideas and their underlying assumptions and worldviews is necessary. We need to understand, as best as possible, the direction of change (or continuity) each school of thought desires. Finally, it is vital to look at the power each holds to influence and produce its desired outcomes. From there, we can see if IK and transition studies have any corresponding interests or modalities of thought, which will in turn help us to determine epistemological compatibility. Without such an honest and far-reaching debate, and the necessary scientific research, we run the risk of talking at cross-purposes, even if we are speaking the same words.

REFERENCES

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