

Limits and Possibilities: Understanding and Conveying Two-Eyed Seeing Through Conventional Academic Practices

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Abstract

This article offers conceptual and theoretical insights that we gained in a scoping review project to understand the Mi'kmaw guiding principle Two-Eyed Seeing/Etuaptmunk. Reflecting on the experiences and outcomes of the scoping review project, we explore the following questions: (a) To what extent can we rely only on written works and the English language to understand Two-Eyed Seeing? (b) How do academia's conventional ways of thinking and sharing knowledge shape our abilities to understand and convey Two-Eyed Seeing to others? (c) What strategies can academics draw upon to better understand Two-Eyed Seeing? Ultimately, we contend that, to develop a richer and more nuanced understanding of Two-Eyed Seeing, we need to move beyond academic conventions and engage with a multiplicity of knowledge systems, approaches, and methods, including dialogical, visual, and experiential practices.

Etuaptmunk, the Mi'kmaw word for Two-Eyed Seeing, more closely translates to the “gift of multiple perspectives” (Marshall, Marshall, & Bartlett, 2018, p. 17) and is grounded in Mi'kmaq language, epistemologies, and culture (Iwama et al., 2009; Marshall, Marshall, & Bartlett, 2018). It was first brought

into academia in 2004 by Mi'kmaq Elders Albert and Murdena Marshall and Dr. Cheryl Bartlett. They described Two-Eyed Seeing as “learning to see from one eye with the *strengths* of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing and from the other eye with the *strengths* of Western knowledges and ways of knowing and

... using both these eyes together, for the benefit of all” (Bartlett et al., 2012, p. 11). Two-Eyed Seeing has become widely used in Indigenous health research; however, it is sometimes described inconsistently or without sufficient detail (Marshall & Bartlett, 2018; Marshall, Knockwood, & Bartlett, 2018; Roher et al., 2021; Sylliboy et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2019). Elder Albert Marshall has expressed concern that when Two-Eyed Seeing is not meaningfully described and used, it risks being watered down or tokenized (Marshall, 2018).

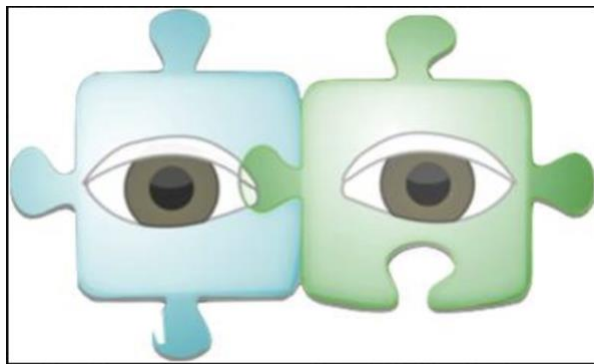


Image credit: Team of the Canada Research Chair in Integrative Science in collaboration with Mi’kmaw Elders in Unama’ki / Cape Breton

From 2018 to 2021, two Indigenous professors and two non-Indigenous students—all of whom had previous experiences thinking about and “using” Two-Eyed Seeing in health research projects—joined together to undertake a scoping review to better understand how Two-Eyed Seeing is described in Indigenous health research. Dr. Anita Benoit is a Mi’kmaw scholar who began using Two-Eyed Seeing in her Indigenous health research as early as 2012; Dr. Debbie Martin is Inuk and is a Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Peoples’ Health and Well-Being; Sophie Roher is a Jewish settler scholar who used Two-Eyed Seeing as a guiding principle in her PhD research; and Ziwa Yu is a first-generation Chinese immigrant who focused on cervical cancer prevention and treatment in Inuit communities in her Master’s research. In the scoping review, we compared descriptions

of Two-Eyed Seeing from the “original” authors (i.e., Elders Albert and Murdena Marshall and Dr. Cheryl Bartlett) and “new” authors (Roher et al., 2021). While the scoping review methodology deepened our understandings of Two-Eyed Seeing, we also found limitations and challenges in making sense of the Mi’kmaw principle from within the Euro-Western academic customs and protocols of a scoping review. In this commentary, we reflect on these limitations and consider strategies that we, as academics, can draw upon to better understand Two-Eyed Seeing.

To what extent can we rely only on written works and the English language to understand Two-Eyed Seeing?

In our scoping review methodology, we used JBI scoping review guidelines and abided by a rigorous search strategy to find 71 written works by new authors and nine by the original authors (for details of our search strategy see Roher et al., 2021). We observed that the original authors’ texts did not capture the same depth of information as their talks, images, and presentations available online at the Institute for Integrative Science and Health website (www.integrativescience.ca). Our instincts were affirmed in a conversation with Elder Albert Marshall and Dr. Cheryl Bartlett (personal communication, October 7, 2020), who expressed the view that a certain depth and richness of Two-Eyed Seeing was lacking in written articles. They drew our attention to the over 150 presentations given between 2002 and 2019 to local, national, and international audiences; 10 years of teaching the principle; and the images and videos they had created. Two-Eyed Seeing was conveyed in multi-dimensional ways that went far beyond the limited “scope” of academic literature (A. Marshall & C. Bartlett, personal communication, October 7, 2020). As an action-oriented, dialogical, and spiritual principle, perhaps it is not meant to be left static on paper. Two-Eyed Seeing is active, alive, and changing. It relies on

multiple perspectives being shared and individuals building relationships and learning together (Roher et al., 2021). The scoping review methodology included only written understandings, providing a *partial* understanding of the original authors' characterizations of Two-Eyed Seeing.

We also reflected on the fact that the meanings and ideas represented through Two-Eyed Seeing come from the Mi'kmaw language, which may not be easily communicated in English (Roher et al., 2021). For instance, Dr. Bartlett clarified in our discussion that the Mi'kmaw word *Etuaptmuk* is commonly misunderstood as translating directly to "Two-Eyed Seeing" when, in fact, it translates to "the gift of multiple perspectives." According to Dr. Bartlett, Elders Albert and Murdena Marshall used the term "Two-Eyed Seeing" when describing the guiding principle to English audiences because they felt that it could better represent the *meaning* behind *Etuaptmuk* (C. Bartlett, personal communication, October 7, 2020). Even this seemingly simple linguistic difference demonstrates the ways that certain decisions around language use and translation may be misunderstood across time, space, relationships, and languages, particularly as we rely on words to represent ideas. In a similar way, the original and new authors' English-language characterizations of Two-Eyed Seeing shaped our interpretations as we tried to make sense of their English representations of Mi'kmaq concepts, values, and ways of thinking and being.

How do academia's conventional ways of thinking and sharing knowledge shape our abilities to understand and convey Two-Eyed Seeing to others?

In our scoping review, we found that many new authors described Two-Eyed Seeing using the academic terminology of "methodology," "epistemology," or "ontology." However, Dr. Bartlett has emphasized that Two-Eyed Seeing is all three of these at once (Roher

et al., 2021). Two-Eyed Seeing is a way of being and living that is not limited by academic boundaries. For example, when limited to "methodology," Two-Eyed Seeing is understood only insofar as it can help generate data. It is not viewed as an expansive and spiritual guide for life, but rather as a tool or strategy that lends itself to a specific research method (Roher et al., 2021). Given the tendency in academia to filter principles through pre-existing scholarly categories and concepts, it can be difficult to "see" the richness of the guiding principle and to convey it to others.

Additionally, the conventions of peer-reviewed journal articles may shape one's ability to communicate Two-Eyed Seeing to others. Authors may be constrained by journal requirements, such as word limits, pre-set headings, or policies around language use. In our scoping review, many scholars described Two-Eyed Seeing in one or two short sentences. We wondered if authors were catering to an audience used to seeing ideas broken into structured academic frameworks (Roher et al., 2021). Authors may also be deciding against using more space to describe Two-Eyed Seeing because they are uncomfortable or unable to describe the guiding principle. When Two-Eyed Seeing is not described in research articles, it can contribute to the "watering down" of the principle, which Elder Albert Marshall expressed concern about (Marshall, 2018). Thus, it is important for researchers to intentionally describe how they conceive Two-Eyed Seeing in their respective projects and for journal articles to open up space for these descriptions.

What strategies can academics draw upon to better understand Two-Eyed Seeing?

Elders Albert and Murdena Marshall and Dr. Cheryl Bartlett went to great lengths to communicate Two-Eyed Seeing to diverse audiences. In keeping with Indigenous epistemologies, they shared teachings orally (<http://www.integrativescience.ca/>; Bartlett,

2012; Humber College, 2020; Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness, 2019). Although we only



Artist credit: Integrative Science Vision, aka Common Ground, painting by Basma Kavanagh, artist within the team of the Canada Research Chair in Integrative Science, in collaboration with Mi'kmaw Elders in Unama'ki / Cape Breton

uncovered nine written academic works by the original authors, Two-Eyed Seeing has been taken up worldwide, speaking to the fact that oral transmission matters—not just for Indigenous peoples but for everyone (McKivett et al., 2020; Michie, 2013; Sivertsen et al., 2020). The Mi'kmaw epistemology from which Two-Eyed Seeing originates understands knowledge as constructed through storytelling (Cajete, 2017; Gough, 2011; King, 2003). Sharing through storytelling is more “alive,” dialogical, and experiential. Relationships are fostered and created through storytelling and story listening. As stories are told over again, our relationships and contexts change. A listener can hear the same stories time and time again but take different meanings from it each time.

Elders Albert and Murdena Marshall and Cheryl Bartlett also invested time and energy into appropriate imagery and artwork to relay the meaning of Etuaptmumk. They offered the image of two eyes shaped like puzzle pieces, fitting together to show the distinct and whole nature of both Indigenous ways of knowing and Western ways of knowing. They also

commissioned an art piece by Basma Kavanagh portraying two people facing each other and kneeling in front of a sacred fire to convey the process and values that are required for co-learning. The kneeling position represents humility, mutual trust, and “extreme vulnerability” (Bartlett et al., 2012, p. 19). Once mutual trust is offered and invited, co-learning and sharing can begin. Two spheres around the kneelers represent their respective worldviews being brought together; the distinctions and differences between them are also respected.

Given the original authors’ emphasis on oral communication and visual imagery to relay the spirit of Two-Eyed Seeing, it is important to learn and experience Two-Eyed Seeing through visual and relational means grounded in Indigenous ways of living, seeing, and being. Storytelling methodologies, arts-based methods, and other land-based and collaborative research methodologies may align with Two-Eyed Seeing, given that they are commonly used in research projects together (Fontaine et al., 2019; Martin, 2009; Rand, 2016; Vukic, 2014). We are not suggesting these methodologies offer a “more complete” understanding of Two-Eyed Seeing, but rather that each understanding is partial. A richer and more nuanced understanding of Two-Eyed Seeing is developed by critically engaging with multiple methods, knowledge systems, and ways of knowing.

Conclusion

We build academic work from academic work; we look at the ways that people have thought about ideas in previous studies and articles, and we work to expand and broaden what we already know about a subject. As we build on previous descriptions of Two-Eyed Seeing, it is important for us to be mindful of the ways in which academia’s dependence on written works to understand and share ideas and its tendency to place ideas into categories can limit researchers’ abilities to both understand Two-Eyed Seeing and convey it to

others. To tap into the richness and strengths of Two-Eyed Seeing, we need to push beyond academic customs and embrace new ways of understanding, learning, and conveying Two-Eyed Seeing, such as dialogical, relational, and arts-based practices.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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