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Indigenous Reconciliation: Why, What, and How

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About the author

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Abstract

Although a great number of academic researchers have introduced reconciliation in their work, they have not explained what it means from Indigenous perspectives. How do we need to understand and practise it in our everyday practice? Why should we all, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, practise land-based and antiracist learning—as a system of reciprocal social relations and ethical practices—as a framework for reconciliation? This article initiates these transdisciplinary questions that challenge not only our static science and social science mindsets, but also the responsibilities for reconciliation, including building respectful relationships with Indigenous people, respecting Indigenous treaties, taking actions to decolonise our ways of knowing and acting, learning the role of colonised education processes, and protecting Indigenous land and environment rights.

Keywords

Indigenous reconciliation, Indigenous treaties, decolonisation, Indigenous land rights, Indigenous Elders, knowledge-keepers

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Reconciliation is not something that government can legislate into reality and it's not something Indigenous people can force on the rest of Canada. Every person in Canada—every citizen, every immigrant, every refugee, and every visitor—is responsible for Reconciliation.

Senator Sinclair, former Commissioner of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission
(Indigenous Innovation, 2019)

While a significant emphasis has been placed on the concept of *reconciliation*, there have been misunderstandings, a lack of trust and respect, and negligence from and within both settlers and new Canadians, particularly among immigrants and refugee communities, regarding its meaningful interpretation (Clark, de Costa, & Maddison, 2017; Egan, 2011; Morgan, 2018). A number of questions remain unanswered for many immigrants, refugees and settlers regarding current practices of reconciliation, including: *What is reconciliation? Why does it matter to me? Why should I be responsible for it? Is reconciliation an end goal to be achieved or is it a process? Is it a collective or an individual responsibility? Why am I responsible for meaningful implementation of reconciliation? How am I benefitting from Indigenous perspectives on reconciliation?* Many Indigenous scholars, Elders, knowledge-holders and activists have answered these questions numerous times; however, there are limited educational policies and practices. As a result, settlers and immigrants have many misconceptions about the process of reconciliation (Abu-Laban, 2014, 2018; Morgan, 2018; Simpson, 2014). A number of studies of non-Indigenous communities show that there are many non-Indigenous people, particularly immigrants and refugees, who take for granted the existing ideas and/or practices as authentic knowledge and practice. This can be dangerous for Indigenous people in Canada (Abu-Laban, 2014, 2018).

Situating self

Situating myself (*Who am I? Where am I coming from? Where am I going?*) is significant in exploring *What does 'reconciliation' mean for an immigrant Canadian like me?* As an Indigenous person from Bangladesh, I have seen how Bangladeshi Indigenous peoples are displaced every day from their traditional land, how Indigenous women are raped and murdered, and how Indigenous culture, knowledge and sustainability are destroyed by mainstream people and the military (Datta, 2019). I have also observed that many of our Indigenous people sacrifice their lives every day to protect their lives, culture, land and sustainability. Moreover, I have learned from my Indigenous ancestors that the meaning of reconciliation from an Indigenous perspective is not only significant for who we are in our land, our identity and our sustainability, but it can also offer many benefits to all Bangladeshi people.

I know that as an immigrant I am a guest in this land. I came here for a secure life that I did not have in my motherland; therefore, I am grateful to the Indigenous people in Canada for providing the opportunity to learn from them and build solidarity with their struggle. I also know as an immigrant in Canada that learning about reconciliation from Indigenous people is not only beneficial to them but will also create many benefits for me, including educating me, creating a sense of belonging in this land, and empowering me. I not only have a strong commitment and passion to learn the meaning of reconciliation from Indigenous perspectives, but it is also my responsibility.

What does reconciliation mean?

The question *What does reconciliation mean to Canadians, particularly settlers and new immigrants?* has many different responses. The perspectives of Indigenous Elders and knowledge-holders, Indigenous scholars and educators, Indigenous youth and the Truth

and Reconciliation Commission are vital to Indigenous communities' understanding of reconciliation (Gebhard, 2017; Morgan, 2018). To understand reconciliation from an Indigenous perspective, it is important to acknowledge that Indigenous perspectives are not homogenous in Canada but are very diverse. Recognition of the unique history, culture and traditions of each Indigenous community is a fundamental first step all of us can take in learning to respect Indigenous peoples, as they each have distinct perspectives, capacities and challenges in reconciliation. Recognising the diversity of Indigenous perspectives and outlooks may not only lead to in-depth opportunities for reconciliation for non-Indigenous communities but it can also offer bridging opportunities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Indigenous perspectives can also guide both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in understanding the meaning of reconciliation. Learning the meaning of reconciliation from, by and with an Indigenous perspective is fundamental to achieving genuine reconciliation between Indigenous people and all Canadians. In this section, I discuss the meaning of reconciliation from the perspective of Indigenous Elders and knowledge-holders, Indigenous scholars, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Reconciliation as reclaiming Indigenous land rights

Reclaiming Indigenous land rights is one of the most important parts of reconciliation for many Indigenous Elders and knowledge-holders (Simpson, 2014). For instance, at a traditional knowledge-keepers' forum in Winnipeg in 2014, Mary Deleary, an Anishinaabe Elder, expressed very clearly that the work of reconciliation must continue in ways that honour Indigenous ancestors, respect the land and rebalance relationships. In speaking about the land, she said, 'The land is made up of the dust of our ancestors' bones. And so to reconcile with this land and everything that has happened, there is much work to be done' (Anishinaabe Elder Mary Deleary, as cited in TRC, 2015a, p. 9). Similarly, other Indigenous Elders and knowledge-holders think that Indigenous land rights can assist in recognising divergent opinions about the nature of the conflict between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Similarly, Indigenous knowledge-holder Ryan McMahon said, 'Canada needs to get serious about talking about land and decolonization before reconciliation can be possible' (McMahon, 2016). Thus, meaningful reconciliation cannot occur without taking into consideration Indigenous land rights.

Reconciliation as decolonisation

From a decolonising perspective, reconciliation is a lifelong process of unlearning and relearning. Tuck and Wayne Yang (2012) discussed how 'decolonization is not accountable to settlers or settler futurity. Decolonization is accountable to Indigenous sovereignty and futurity' (p. 36). For instance, many Elders and knowledge-holders argue that without decolonisation, reconciliation is not possible (Battiste, 2013). A Kahnawake Elder, scholar and writer from the Mohawk First Nation described the relationship between reconciliation and decolonisation:

When we talk about colonization, we tend to think of brutally stolen land, racism, broken treaties, and residential schools. Those are things that happened. Those well-known things shaped the relationship between indigenous people and the settler society on this continent. But what was the deeper and lasting impact of those things on nations of indigenous people? Alienation, separation, disconnection. (YES, 2018, p. 1)

A Mohawk Elder also explained how to decolonise: 'We need to reclaim the sacred spaces of our traditional territories. Rename those spaces to sever the emotional and intellectual ties of colonially imposed names and restore the full histories and ancient significances

embedded in Indigenous languages' (YES, 2018, p. 1). Focusing on decolonisation, a Cree Elder explained that reconciliation means not only a respectful relationship but also doing the work together to make sure that Indigenous people can fully exercise and enjoy their rights.

Decolonisation is an important starting point for reconciliation (Battiste, 2013). Decolonising educational systems involves rethinking the way schooling is delivered, including the curriculum, methodologies and relationships with communities. For instance, First Nation youth activist and blogger Andrea Landry (2017) wrote:

The only reconciliation that exists for us, as Indigenous nations, is the reconciliation we need to find within ourselves and our communities, for agreeing and complying to this madness for so long ... I want our children to learn about our own liberation, rather than the colonizer's reconciliation ... And I want our children to know that Indigenous liberation will always overthrow colonial reconciliation.

For Battiste (2017), decolonisation as part of reconciliation can inspire us to ask questions: 'How are we related to the colonization, oppression? Who are the people who belong to the colonial culture? Who are the people benefiting from the oppressive systems? Who is privileged by oppressing others?' (Battiste, as cited in Datta, 2018a, p. 12). Similarly, another Indigenous youth activist wants to focus on decolonisation before discussing the concept of reconciliation. A Dene youth also explained the importance of decolonisation in achieving reconciliation: 'In decolonization, we have our own nations. We have our own political practices. We have rights to land, to establish our own economies, our own ways of life' (Shahzad, 2017). Therefore, decolonisation plays an important role in reconciliation.

Learning about decolonisation is important for everyone, particularly for newcomers. Indigenous scholar Battiste shared the meaning of reconciliation from the perspective of decolonisation on a CFR 90.5 radio program with radio host Jebunnessa Chapola and me in 2017 (Battiste, 2017). According to Battiste, decolonisation has two pillars. First, we (i.e. immigrants, refugees and settlers) need to understand that 'our system of education is deeply colonial' and decolonisation is to 'help people to understand where colonialism came from and ... colonial histories, and unpack these histories from our own perspectives' (Battiste, as cited in Datta, 2018a, p. 12). She suggests that reconciliation 'education needs to not just be a colonial experience ... but it has to be a way to help people to understand their situation, where they are, and how they are in an inequitable situation'. Second, decolonisation as part of reconciliation is:

recovery from colonial impact, restoration of Indigenous people's identities, Indigenous people's languages, Indigenous people's experiences, and all things that we [Indigenous people] need for restoring us in this country [Canada] which builds in treaties that have been signed, ignored, marginalized for many, many years in Canada. (Battiste, as cited in Datta, 2018a, p. 12).

Decolonisation leads to educational opportunities (Morgan, 2018). A Cree Elder in my study explained the purpose of reconciliation is a life long unlearning and relearning process (Datta, 2018b). This Elder also explained that the unlearning only classroom based learning and relearning Indigenous history, colonial history of Canada, precolonial success stories. We need to bring these learning stories into our everyday practice, and share with our future generation (Datta, 2018b). Therefore, relearning about reconciliation from Indigenous perspectives encompasses diverse sources of knowledge and is not limited to books and educational institutions.

The meaning of decolonisation in reconciliation has diverse implications in practice. Indigenous scholars Battiste and Youngblood Henderson (2000) warn that there is not just one Indigenous way of knowing or understanding. As we work to decolonise, we must be sensitised to the histories, cultures, knowledge, ways of knowing and governance systems that various Indigenous individuals and cultures practise. Discovering the traditions of different Indigenous groups can be difficult because of the long history of colonisation, as many generations have now passed.

Reconciliation as recognising the historical colonial legacy

Recognising the historical colonial legacy in Canada is an important part of reconciliation, according to many Indigenous Elders and scholars (Simpson, 2014). Recognising the historical colonial legacy, according to Battiste, emphasises the importance of not only ‘understanding and/or unpacking whiteness, colonization, oppression that belongs with the kind of language’ (as cited in Datta, 2018a, p. 12), but also suggests that we need to understand our own relationships to that legacy. Once Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars are able to recognise the historical colonial legacy of oppression, colonial culture and colonial impacts on their research, they will be able to appreciate their relationship, as researchers, with that legacy. Battiste (2013) and Simpson (2014) suggest that once we understand the processes of colonisation and our relationship with it, we can find out who we are as immigrants, refugees and settlers and what we should do as researchers, educators and professionals. According to Battiste, decolonisation is about ‘beginning to understand that once we “get it”, we will not go back to the colonial process in our research’ (as cited in Datta, 2018a, p. 12). Thus, recognising the historical colonial legacy in Canada is an important learning point for all of us in meaningful reconciliation.

Reconciliation through Indigenous eyes

Viewing reconciliation through Indigenous eyes is one of the important paths for many Indigenous people. Indigenous people have diverse perspectives on reconciliation from community to community, from land to land, and from generation to generation. North American Indigenous scholar Brian Rice (2005) suggests that seeing the world with Aboriginal (Indigenous) eyes opens four significant doors for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people:

The seeing path: This is known as the Eastern door. It includes cosmology, visions, sounds, beliefs and values evolving from the spiritual world.

Ways of relating: This is the Southern door, which is about cycles of life, time, mathematics, relationships between people, the earth spirit and Sky Worlds.

Coming to knowing: This is the Western door and includes Elders, the learning path and Indigenous knowledge.

Ways of doing: This is referred to as the Northern door. It includes ethical and moral issues, ceremonies, healing, prayers and life ways.

The term ‘reconciliation’, as viewed through these four significant doors, has neither a fixed meaning nor an end point. Simpson (2014) affirms that if reconciliation is to be meaningful for Indigenous people, it must be grounded in Indigenous perspectives, Indigenous cultural regeneration, and political resurgence. He suggests that Canada needs to ‘engage in a decolonization project and a re-education project that would enable its government and its citizens to engage with Indigenous Peoples in a just and honourable way in the future’ (p. 23). While Simpson supports the broad approach to reconciliation as discussed by the TRC, she cautions that a focus on residential schools alone permits Canadians to assume that ‘the historical “wrong” has now been “righted”’

effectively discounting ‘the broader set of relationships that generated policies, legislation, and practices aimed at assimilation and political genocide’ (p. 22). Similarly, Indigenous scholar Shawn Wilson argues that reconciliation is a process that seeks to honour, respect and accept accountability for our relationships with the land. These relationships seek truth, justice, accountability and healing (Rix, Wilson, Sheehan, & Tujague, 2018). Reconciliation through Indigenous eyes is about co-existing, cooperating and sharing, with the goal of a better life for all by emphasising a broader perspective.

Reconciliation as Indigenous worldview

Learning about reconciliation through Indigenous philosophy is an ongoing process, particularly in Canada. For instance, Malcolm Saulis, a Tobique First Nation educator, Indigenous scholar and Elder, explains that in the Indigenous worldview, the focus of reconciliation in Canada is on ‘building a relationship between people that doesn’t have any differences attached to it’ (Postmedia Network, 2017, p. 2). In providing an Indigenous worldview, Saulis lists three complex but interconnected components as an ongoing process:

(1) Reconciliation includes sharing responsibility for creation. ‘The first thing that we share as people is that we have a responsibility to make Creation a healthy, livable place’ (Postmedia Network, 2017, p. 3). We have a responsibility for future generations and what we do now impacts future generations. He continues:

An example of this collective understanding is when you see people, indigenous and non-indigenous, standing up together against pipelines. This protest is about the possibility of how a disaster could affect the sustainability of creation — the water, the land, the animals; that is what they are standing up for. (Postmedia Network, 2017, p. 4)

(2) Reconciliation is a human process, according to Saulis. There are elements to the process of building relationships that reflect reconciliation, such as the mutual acknowledgement that we are working together for the good of future generations. For instance, Saulis suggests that ‘Indigenous medicines and ceremonies are ways that we share healing and change between us. The four medicines we share are cedar, sage, sweetgrass and tobacco’ (Postmedia Network, 2017, p. 5). Also, medicine can be words, thoughts, and prayers—anything that promotes healing in reconciliation. Saulis goes on to explain how the human process works by explaining that when we stand together it is a ceremony that we are sharing and it is medicine for our relationship. Out of this sharing, we perceive each other differently.

(3) Reconciliation involves respect. Saulis explains that with reconciliation, ‘It is us giving ourselves respect as the Creator and ancestors taught us, and we are not leaving it to someone else to do’ (Postmedia Network, 2017, p. 8). There has to be a genuine impulse behind an action for it to be medicine. According to Saulis, all Canadian government public servants have a responsibility for reconciliation with Indigenous people. One of Saulis’ many questions to civil servants is ‘What are you doing for reconciliation?’ (Postmedia Network, 2017, p. 8). Therefore, Saulis suggests that the concept of reconciliation should be defined from and within an Indigenous worldview. Saulis further argues that if the meaning of reconciliation enforced by the government does not involve Indigenous engagement, it will not be reconciliation.

Reconciliation as responsibility

Collective and individual responsibilities play a significant role in understanding reconciliation (Morgan, 2018). For instance, Indigenous Elders and knowledge-holders suggest that each of us (as a collective and as individuals) is responsible for building trustful reconciliation (Morgan, 2018). In a study on responsibility and reconciliation, Morgan (2018) explains that individual and collective responsibility for reconciliation is not fixed but is instead multiple, fluid and becoming. It can involve participating in ceremonies, personal actions, nature walks to experience the power of place, critical learning, antiracist activities, taking action against injustice, creative arts, hands-on application of theory, individual reflection and group activities.

Similarly, many Indigenous Elders and knowledge-holders also suggest that the United Nations Declaration of Indigenous Peoples and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's process and Calls to Action can help us to build meaningful reconciliation through building relationships with Indigenous communities; advancing right relations with Indigenous people; communicating through deep listening; creating partnership opportunities with Indigenous people; sharing Indigenous ways of knowing; developing curiosity; practising relational leadership; empowering individuals to take action on reconciliation in their own lives; and increasing respect, understanding and meaningful connections between citizens.

Reconciliation as healing

Reconciliation is a healing process (Simpson, 2014) and a virtue that involves making creation a better place to live. For instance, Indigenous youth Maya Nabigon, who is Anishinaabe from Sagkeeng First Nation, thinks reconciliation 'is the healing of two nations coming together to find common ground and to move forward on any difficulties they have had' (Monkman, 2016). Another Indigenous young person said:

Regardless of who we are, whether we have benefited from, or been a victim of colonization, perpetrator or survivor we all have been wounded by colonization of people and the Earth and we all must heal from this wound in order to bring forth a more just and sustainable world. Healing intergenerational trauma collectively strengthens our capacity to do the work of radical adult education and community organizing and we recognize it as a valid part of the process of righting relations. (Tejpar, 2018, p. 2)

Indigenous people express this virtue by consciously considering their actions as medicine and ceremony. The outcome of the reconciliation process is healing. Working together, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can heal a country, heal churches, and heal all those people in the Indigenous population who have been harmed.

Reconciliation as relationships

Reconciliation incorporates respectful relationships with Indigenous people and the land. When engaging in reconciliation with Indigenous people, Battiste (2008) argues that researchers must understand that relationship with and practices on the land are political in nature and are heavily circumscribed by processes of colonialism. Indigenous scholar James Daschuk explains that the Government of Canada defines reconciliation as 'working to advance reconciliation and renew the relationship with Indigenous peoples, based on the recognition of rights, respect, cooperation and partnership' (Government of Canada, 2019, p. 4). A number of Indigenous scholars argue that responsibility is an

important aspect of reconciliation (Battiste, 2017; Christian, 2011; Morgan, 2018). Indigenous scholar Winona Wheeler states that Canadians cannot say it is not their responsibility to right the wrongs of the past or to seek reconciliation: ‘There’s not a single Canadian who has not benefitted from our dispossession, oppression’ (Shahzad, 2017). Similarly, North American Indigenous scholar Dorothy Christian (2011) suggests that new immigrants and refugees need to accept responsibility for understanding the concept of reconciliation. Christian goes on to describe accepting responsibility as a relationship-building process. Once the silence is broken and each party has taken responsibility for their part in the relationship, then a new relationship can begin of relating to each other as dignified autonomous human beings.

Building relationships with Indigenous people also refers to honouring and respecting Indigenous treaties (Morgan, 2018). Indigenous treaties in Canada are constitutionally recognised agreements between the Crown and Indigenous peoples. For instance, Ivana Yellowback is a Nehinaw youth from Manito Sipi Cree Nation. She said:

Being an Indigenous person in Canada, reconciliation is the treaties, honouring and acknowledging our treaties. The reason I say ‘our’ is because it’s all of ours. Our communities are sovereign, distinct nations. Our nations made an agreement with Canada on a nation-to-nation basis. These were peace and friendship treaties. In these treaties, we did not cede our lands. These are still our territories, these are still our lands. (Monkman, 2016)

Ivana explains that talking about reconciliation will require learning about each of the different territorial treaties. Similarly, many Elders and knowledge-keepers referred to territorial treaty rights as part of meaningful reconciliation during my nine years of maintaining a relationship with Indigenous communities in Canada.

Reconciliation as a response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action

The meaning of reconciliation in Canada (Abu-Laban, 2018) cannot be understood without discussing the TRC’s 94 ‘Calls to Action’ (TRC, 2015a) urging all levels of government—federal, provincial, territorial, and aboriginal—to work together to change policies and programs in a concerted effort to repair the harm caused by residential schools and move forward with reconciliation. The TRC’s Calls to Action identify important gaps in the current educational institutions. In fact, Indigenous Elders, knowledge-holders and scholars have suggested that the TRC’s Calls to Action are mandatory and not optional for any of us (i.e. Canadian government, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people) for achieving reconciliation in Canada (Abu-Laban, 2018).

Over the past few years, the TRC has emerged as an important catalyst for renewed dialogue and debate about the importance of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. While the TRC affirmed a broad and inclusive definition of reconciliation with both individual and collective dimensions, its mandate was specifically linked to the historic harm and ongoing effects of Indian residential schools (IRS). The TRC’s goals included the following in schedule N (TRC, 2015b):

- A. Acknowledge Residential School experiences, impacts and consequences;
- B. Provide a holistic, culturally appropriate and safe setting for former students, their families and communities as they come forward to the Commission;
- C. Witness, support, promote and facilitate truth and reconciliation events at both the national and community levels;

- D. Promote awareness and public education of Canadians about the IRS system and its impacts;
- E. Identify sources and create as complete an historical record as possible of the IRS system and legacy. The record shall be preserved and made accessible to the public for future study and use;
- F. Produce and submit to the Parties of the Agreement a report including recommendations to the Government of Canada concerning the IRS system and experience including: the history, purpose, operation and supervision of the IRS system, the effect and consequences of IRS (including systemic harms, intergenerational consequences and the impact on human dignity) and the ongoing legacy of the residential schools;
- G. Support commemoration of former Indian Residential School students and their families.

The TRC believes that in order for all of us in Canada to flourish in the 21st century, reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians must be based on 10 principles. Within the 10 principles, numbers 1, 5, and 6 directly address non-Indigenous communities' collective responsibility for meaningful reconciliation:

- The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is the framework for reconciliation at all levels and across all sectors of Canadian society.
- Reconciliation must create a more equitable and inclusive society by closing the gaps in social, health, and economic outcomes that exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.
- All Canadians, as Treaty peoples, share responsibility for establishing and maintaining mutually respectful relationships. (Ricochet, 2015).

The TRC emphasises collective learning processes and the need to do more than just *talk* about reconciliation: we must learn how to take responsibility for reconciliation in our everyday lives—within ourselves and our families, in our communities, in our education, and in our workplaces. In response to the TRC's Calls to Action, immigrant and refugee communities need to take responsibility for creating a space to better understand the truth of Canada's shared history with Indigenous peoples. This includes fostering a dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians and asking each of us to enter into a respectful relationship with one another as we work toward shared purposes. Responsibilities include developing a deeper understanding of our shared history, the meaning of reconciliation, and the role all Canadians can play in improving our relationships by:

- raising awareness of Canada's shared history with Indigenous peoples;
- understanding the truth by engaging in meaningful discussion about reconciliation;
- inspiring through sharing already existing wise reconciliation practices; and
- inviting Canadians to take action to achieve reconciliation in their lives, communities, and organisations.

Therefore, the meaning of reconciliation from Indigenous perspectives is complex, relational and deeply rooted in the Indigenous history of colonisation, land rights, self-governance, cultural heritage, socio-ecological justice and environmental well-being. It may be a lifelong process that does not have any end point; however, it inspires Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to transform Canadian society so that our children and grandchildren can live together in dignity, peace and prosperity on the lands we now share. In addition, the TRC recognises that part of reconciliation is to support Aboriginal people as they heal from the destructive legacies of colonisation that have wreaked such havoc in their lives.

Why do we need reconciliation?

Exploring the challenges in reconciliation can lead to understanding *why I should be responsible for it*. There are many immigrants, refugees and settlers who have not had an opportunity to learn why we need reconciliation or why we need to understand the challenges in reconciliation from Indigenous perspectives in Canada (Abu-Laban, 2018). This lack of learning can lead to many misconceptions about Indigenous peoples, their culture, and the meaning of reconciliation. Next, by discussing the challenges in reconciliation, I explain why we should be responsible for it.

Failure to address decolonisation

Many Indigenous Elders find current education and justice policies and practices to be deeply colonised (Battiste, 2013; Simpson, 2014). For instance, the acquittal of Gerald Stanley in the Colten Boushie murder trial is a current example (Quenneville, 2018). Narrow interpretations of reconciliation will continue to contribute to the colonisation of Indigenous communities (Quenneville, 2018; Shahzad, 2017) unless the Canadian government changes the current education and justice systems by including Indigenous voices, colonial history, Indigenous culture and practice, and Indigenous ways of knowing (Datta, 2018b).

In my study (Datta, 2018c) with one of Saskatchewan's Dene First Nation communities, an Elder explained why internal colonisation is problematic for his community's reconciliation:

We have been living sustainably in this land for centuries. Now I am 90 years old; I will die with many successful stories. If I cannot share our successful stories with our children, our future generations will not get to learn these important stories. The Western education system does not teach our stories. Now this is your [meant researchers and educators] responsibility to record our stories and teach them to our future generations, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children. (p. 41)

Thus, many Indigenous scholars argue that current reconciliation initiatives fail to address decolonisation and that there can be no reconciliation without decolonisation (Battiste, 2013; Tuck & Wayne Yang, 2012) as these two concepts are interconnected. One study (Williams & Claxton, 2017) recommends challenging the structure of settler colonialism by decolonising and Indigenousising clinical legal education.

Mistrust

Without meaningful Indigenous engagement, the public conversation on reconciliation can lead to mistrust by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (Barkaskas & Buhler, 2017). Daschuk says that 'Reconciliation has, in some ways, lost its meaning in public conversation' and has been 'cheapened' (Shahzad, 2017, p. 1) because it has been happening without meaningful Indigenous community engagement. Similarly, an Indigenous youth, Maya Nabigon from Sagkeeng First Nation, argues that the current narrow definition of reconciliation has been misused:

When I think about reconciliation, as an Indigenous woman, I feel like the term has been used to pacify people. It's thrown around loosely. It kind of troubles me, and makes me realize that there's a lot of work to do on our end as Indigenous people. But I see it, I see the youth coming up and it makes me so proud. In order for us to stand as a nation and to reconcile, we need to be strong in who we are and with our identity. (Monkman, 2016)

Similarly Indigenous Elders and knowledge-holders have pointed out on numerous occasions that without seeking justice for Indigenous nations, the goals of reconciliation will be an illusion (Datta, 2018c; Shahzad, 2017). For example, a Dene Elder in Saskatchewan contends that reconciliation is not possible without seeking justice for Indigenous people in Canada:

When you meet an Indigenous person who says, 'Reconciliation is not possible,' remember that there are still residential school survivors and sixties scoop survivors alive today and that the horrific experiences that many encountered at residential schools and in foster homes (e.g. physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse) have contributed to inter-generational trauma in their homes and communities. (Shahzad, 2017)

To break the mistrust, Indigenous scholar Marie Battiste (2000, 2017) recommends decolonial education on Indigenous knowledge, land rights and culture. Indigenous Elders, knowledge-keepers, scholars and the TRC Calls for Action provide us with a guideline for educating ourselves and putting into practice Battiste's recommendation.

Settler¹ colonialism

The failure to address Canada's settler colonial history is a significant challenge to reconciliation. Indigenous Elders and knowledge-holders argue that many educational and non-educational institutions have been trying to implement reconciliation without focusing on settler colonialism and its negative impact on Indigenous communities (Quenneville, 2018). To truly understand the concept of reconciliation, Indigenous scholars, Elders and activists believe we need to understand settler colonialism, how it gives control of resources to some people and economically marginalises others, and how it enables some to negotiate pathways to educational success and discourages others from even participating (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). The residential school system is one of the darkest examples of Canada's settler colonial policies that were implemented to eradicate Indigenous people (Dhamoon, 2015). The extensive government- and church-run residential school system was 'characterized by the forced removal of children from families; systemic physical and sexual assault; spiritual, psychological and emotional abuse; and malnutrition, inhumane living conditions, death, and murder' (Cannon & Sunseri, 2011, p. 278). The system accomplished what is today considered cultural genocide against Canada's Aboriginal peoples (Tasker, 2015).

Revealing Canada's settler colonial history and debunking the racist myths that run through Canadian society is an important part of the truth and reconciliation process (Dekel & Goldblatt, 2008). First Nation activist and blogger Andrea Landry (2017), from Treaty Six territory in Poundmaker Cree Nation, writes that the current form of reconciliation 'is for the Colonizer'. She argues, 'This settler-colonial reconciliation branded by the government is artificially sweetened with handshake photo-ops and small pockets of money buying our silence on real issues'. According to Landry, 'This type of reconciliation is a distraction ... This reconciliation is not our reconciliation. And we need to leave this conversation'.

Indigenous Elders and knowledge-holders argue that accounts of settler colonisation are not included in current education and citizenship programs. Many Indigenous people believe that unless reconciliation includes the history of settler colonialism, the initiative will create another form of injustice for Indigenous communities (Dhamoon, 2015). Furthermore, an Indigenous Elder, during a conversation from my research (Datta, 2018c), argued that settlers fail to recognise their responsibility to their new land and its Indigenous people in a colonial system.

This comment provides a rationale for why all new non-Indigenous Canadians need to educate themselves and build a relationship with Indigenous people in Canada.

Racism in everyday practice

A discussion around racism has been overlooked in current reconciliation policies and practice (Gebhard, 2017). Research shows that antiracist² education and initiatives are extremely limited (Gebhard, 2017). To address racism using the language of racism and anti-racism is critical as it acknowledges the presence of racism and, in so doing, overcomes denial. Deeply rooted racist attitudes and stereotypes surface when Canadians question why Aboriginal people cannot simply ‘get over it’, lack understanding of the intergenerational impact of colonisation, and fail to commit to truth and reconciliation as a national project for all Canadians. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada, Beverley McLachlin, has labelled Canada’s failure to denounce racism as ‘cultural genocide’ against Aboriginal peoples (Fine, 2015).

Indigenous antiracist educator and scholar St. Denis (2007) argues that Aboriginal people are not and never have been a homogenous population although they do share ‘a common experience with colonization and racialization’ (p. 1087). The concept of racialisation ‘brings attention to how race has been used and is continually used to justify inequality and oppression of Aboriginal peoples’ (p. 1071). Therefore, while exploring the meaning of reconciliation, racism cannot be treated as a spatially homogeneous phenomenon and cannot be separated from the colonial histories in many Indigenous nations in Canada and other Indigenous lands.

Refusal of Indigenous land rights and self-governance

The refusal to recognise Indigenous rights to their land and natural resources is a significant concern for many Indigenous communities, particularly in Canada (Datta, 2018b). Indigenous land rights and the concept of reconciliation are interconnected and cannot be separated, because without Indigenous land rights there can be no reconciliation (CFRC Podcast Network, 2020). Traditional Pawpaw dancer and artist Shady Hafez (Postmedia Network, 2017) challenges the Western concept of reconciliation:

The project of reconciliation, as it is currently framed, is a project I have little faith in. The reasoning is simple: The root of historical and current conflicts between indigenous nations and the Canadian state is land, more specifically the occupation of indigenous lands and the dispossession of indigenous bodies from our lands. Therefore, if reconciliation is a goal that the Canadian state and the Canadian populace are fully committed to achieving, then why are we not resolving the primary issue of contention between our nations—that being land title and the ability of indigenous nations to have autonomous control over our lands and affairs? If Canada is serious about reconciliation and implementing a nation-to-nation relationship with indigenous peoples, the process must begin by returning unused Crown lands to their respective indigenous nations or providing restitution for lands that cannot be returned. Following which Canada should abolish the Indian Act and allow for full indigenous autonomy over our lands. Canadians need to understand that part of reconciliation is appreciating the reality that we may not want to be part of the Canadian state. (Postmedia Network, 2017, p. 2)

Hafez’s comment shows deep frustration regarding the current forms of reconciliation policy and practice.

Conflicts about the land and control over natural resources have often prompted extensive efforts to resolve differences through negotiation and dialogue. In instances where negotiation and dialogue have failed to result in a settlement, Indigenous communities have tried to protect their land through litigation or direct action (e.g., Idle No More movement, protests, occupations, blockades). Although the courts have articulated a preference for negotiation and dialogue in the resolution of continued conflicts over land and resources, litigation continues to be a critically important mechanism for resolving disputes and uncertainty.

The Canadian government's current reconciliation initiatives ignore Indigenous sovereignty and self-governance, presenting an additional hurdle to meaningful reconciliation (Antaki & Kirkby, 2009). The rights of Indigenous people need to be reconciled with the proclaimed sovereignty of non-Indigenous people in Canada. In many cases, reconciliation speaks to the need for non-Indigenous people in Canada to acknowledge the unfairness of the colonial assertion of sovereignty, assimilation policies, and denial of self-governance in order to develop harmonious and just relations with Canada's Indigenous people.

How to practise reconciliation

Reconciliation in everyday practice is a relational responsibility for all of us (i.e., Indigenous people, settlers and immigrants). Simpson (2010) suggests that reconciliation must take the form of a resurgence of Indigenous peoples' political traditions in their nation-to-nation relationships with Canada, including, for example, ceasing to co-opt Indigenous peoples' self-determination movements, so that the movements' leaders are able to relate to Canada in ways that honour unique Indigenous political traditions; otherwise reconciliation will just be a euphemism for neo-colonialism. In her book *Decolonizing Education*, Marie Battiste (2013) explains that reconciliation should be included in the Canadian constitution. She suggests that meaningful reconciliation requires respectful dialogue and consultation: 'Reconciliation needs to be pursued in different forums through engagement with appropriate holders of Aboriginal and treaty rights; these are the people, the elders, the men and women, as guardians of their children' (p. 78). The United Nations' transitional justice measures (UNiLibrary, 2012) suggest similar processes and mechanisms are a critical component of the United Nations' framework for strengthening the rule of law. Transitional justice is the 'full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society's attempt to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation' (p. 2010).

Indigenous Elders, knowledge-holders, scholars, educators, youth and TRC perspectives suggest a number of common responsibilities for practising meaningful reconciliation in our everyday lives. These include:

- Recognition of Indigenous land rights is a prerequisite for reconciliation.
- Reconciliation cannot occur without meaningful engagement of Indigenous Elders and Knowledge-holders.
- Reconciliation cannot occur without education around decolonization.
- Reconciliation cannot occur without justice, accountability, and substantive reparations for Aboriginal rights violations.
- Reconciliation is a process and comprehensive land claims negotiations are only a single step in this process.
- Reconciliation requires accepting individual and collective responsibility and it will take time and require public awareness, engagement, and education.

- Reconciliation requires new forms of co-existence and trust-filled relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. (Burkart & Nicholl, 2013, pp. 1–3).

Like Battiste (2013) and Simpson (2014), I believe that reconciliation must build solidarity (i.e. honour, respect, action) between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, as this will lead to respect for each other's needs and expectations.

Indigenous perspectives on reconciliation can lead to Indigenous capacity-building (Simpson, 2014). Capacity-building at the community and individual levels is a key component of achieving long-term reconciliation (Battiste, 2013). With regard to governance and leadership, all parties must be committed to ensuring capacity is developed in a manner that addresses the growing role of Indigenous leaders. Aboriginal leaders, particularly in Canada, are taking on greater authority and responsibility as both federal and provincial governments recognise the jurisdiction of local First Nation, Métis and Inuit governments. Indigenous leaders need to meet on a frequent basis with senior government and private sector leaders as they are often responsible for negotiating agreements on behalf of their communities (Wesley-Esquimaux & Calliou, 2010).

Taking responsibility for reconciliation requires action from all of us (Indigenous and non-Indigenous). It is through our every action that all of us, regardless of our colour, race or creed, can make a difference that affects the future. For me as a new immigrant in Canada, reconciliation is a continuous learning process about the country's colonial past and present, stories involving Indigenous lands (colonisation), Indigenous children (e.g. '60s Scoop', residential schools), and so on. Re-education will not only help us to understand Indigenous struggles but will also contribute to rebuilding relationships among Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and is a much needed part of meaningful reconciliation. Therefore, learning and taking responsibility for reconciliation from Indigenous perspectives can lead to strong relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Exploring the meaning of reconciliation from multiple Indigenous perspectives has many benefits, including building a comprehensive understanding of various worldviews; recognising multiple ways of knowing and doing; developing bridging opportunities within and among culture, knowledge, and practice; protecting both humans and nonhumans, including land, water, forest, animals, plants and others; creating a sense of belonging with the land, culture and people; and increasing our capacity through Indigenous knowledge, land and culture.

One can hope that relearning the meaning of reconciliation from Indigenous perspectives will be beneficial to Canadians of all backgrounds and will assist them in understanding that we all have a unique and necessary collective responsibility for meaningful reconciliation. New immigrants and refugees share this responsibility to Canada's Indigenous people that will require genuine dialogue and action. All of us (Indigenous people, settlers, immigrants and refugees) must listen as well as speak, and actively reach out to each other, crossing both the material and national boundaries that assign Indigenous people to the margins.

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Endnotes

¹ 'Settler' is a complex and heterogeneous term (Dhamoon, 2015). It is used in this paper to describe 'white settlers' and associated 'white settler privileges'. It recognises the connecting processes of racial and colonial power inherent within the settler colonial context of Canada and elsewhere.

² The term 'anti-racism' used here is according to Bradley (2007), who defines it as 'An action-oriented, educational and political strategy for institutional and systemic change that addresses the issues of racism and the interlocking systems of social oppression (sexism, classism, heterosexism, ableism)' (p. 1).