# The Lakota Concept of the *Nagi*

Lewis Mehl-Madrona, MD, PhD
University of Maine at Orono

Departments of Family Medicine and Psychiatry
University of New England College of Osteopathic Medicine
Biddeford, Maine

Coyote Institute
Orono, Maine

Faculty, Family Medicine and Psychiatry Residencies
Northern Light Health, Bangor, Maine

Lewis.mehlmadrona@maine.edu

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## Abstract

This article examines how Indigenous conceptions of mind, self, and personhood challenge and expand the theoretical foundations of Euro-Western psychology. Drawing primarily on Lakota teachings, the author situates the inquiry within personal lineage and relationship, emphasizing that theories of the self are always embedded in particular lands, languages, and kinship networks. Engaging Indigenous philosophers and knowledge holders, including Battiste, Henderson, and Cordova, the paper outlines core features of Indigenous ways of knowing: relational ontologies that link humans, other-than-human beings, land, and spirit; linguistically mediated realities; and extended kinship and sacred responsibilities as the basis of ethics and epistemic authority. The analysis contrasts these frameworks with Eurocentric assumptions about progress, literacy, and the self, interrogating the long-standing association between writing, "civilization," and heightened consciousness. Drawing on Walter Ong's account of orality and literacy and on contemporary neurocognitive work on brain organization and written language, the paper argues that oral and literate consciousness should be understood as distinct rather than hierarchically ordered. Indigenous models of mind and personhood, it is suggested, offer alternative explanations of human nature that unsettle individualistic, intrapsychic models dominant in psychology and open possibilities for practices that foreground relational accountability, land-based ethics, and spiritual dimensions of mental health. The article concludes by sketching implications for psychological theory, clinical practice, and training when Indigenous philosophies of self are taken as foundational rather than peripheral.

## Introduction

Indigenous mental health practices provide a different perspective from conventional psychology for pursuing emotional well-being. Psychological practice rests upon theories about the self. It requires an understanding of the concept of self and how we define people. In this paper, I wish to explore some Indigenous theories of mind and self and consider how these ideas would change psychological practice.

To situate myself in this discussion, I have primarily studied Lakota and Cherokee cultures and have worked within those cultures as well as the Cree and Wabanaki cultures. I have consulted and spent time with other Indigenous groups in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and Canada. I will address regional differences and similarities across cultures as much as possible but primarily situate myself in terms of my mother's lineage, which is Cherokee from Southeastern Kentucky, and my missing father's lineage, which is said to be Lakota from the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota.

We are interested here in identity and, if any exist, in equivalences to the European concept of self. Battiste and Henderson (Battiste & Henderson, 2000) write that "all knowledge flows from the same source: the relationships between a global flux that needs to be renewed, the people's kinship with other living creatures that share the land, and the people's kinship with the spirit world." This is where our need for understanding of personhood arises. Who is he or she who receives knowledge? Who shares kinship with other living creatures and spirits? These same authors assert that "indigenous ways of knowing share the following: (1) knowledge of and belief in unseen powers in the ecosystem, (2) knowledge that all things in the ecosystem are dependent upon each other, (3) knowledge that reality is structured according to most of the linguistic concepts by which Indigenous people ascribe it; (4) knowledge that personal relationships reinforce the bond between persons, communities, and ecosystems; (5) knowledge that sacred traditions and persons who know these traditions are responsible for teaching 'morals' and 'ethics' to practitioners who are given responsibility for this specialized knowledge and its dissemination; and (6) knowledge that an extended kinship passes on teachings and social practices from generation to generation."

In general, the "Lakotas' worldview places emphasis on the spiritual realm of ancestral spirits and natural powers, bound by kinship bonds.... [T]he entire universe is imbued with and intimately related to spirits and spiritual forces that have real power to influence outcomes." (Voss et al., 1999)(p. 230). This worldview of interconnectedness and interdependence is represented by circles (the horizon, the original medicine circle) rather than by hierarchical relationships of superiority and inferiority, which are the models by which medicine and psychology are practiced and by which corporate management is organized.

## Methods and Sources

During my quest for my missing father, I discovered the Lakota world. I had already been working with a teacher, who was Arikara-Hidatsu Marilyn Youngbird, who was quite familiar with Wallace Black Elk. In search for my father, I found Sonny Richards, Frank Fools Crow, Joe Tione, Becky Chief Eagle, Neal Rzepkowski, and others. Over a 35-year period, I had discussions with them about the nature of the self, Lakota concepts of psychology, and Lakota ontology. I had the opportunity to apply these ideas with others with whom I had limited contact, and to discuss similarities and differences between Lakota concepts and those of the Cree, Cherokee, and Wabanaki, as well as with Australian and Māori colleagues and teachers. This essay distills some of what I learned.

## Comparisons of Concepts of the Self

### What is a self?

The APA Dictionary of Psychology defines self as "the totality of the individual, consisting of all characteristic attributes, conscious and unconscious, mental and physical (American_Psychological_Association., n.d.)." The dictionary continues to state: "According to William James, self can refer either to the person as the target of appraisal (i.e., one introspectively evaluates how one is doing) or to the person as the source of agency (i.e., one attributes the source of regulation of perception, thought, and behavior to one's body or mind). Carl Jung maintained that the self gradually develops by a process of individuation, which is not complete until late maturity is reached. Alfred Adler identified the self with the individual's lifestyle, the manner in which they seek fulfillment. Karen D. Horney held that one's real self, as opposed to one's idealized self-image, consists of one's unique capacities for growth and development. Gordon W. Allport substituted the word proprium for self and conceived of it as the essence of the individual, consisting of a gradually developing body sense, identity, self-estimate, and set of personal values, attitudes, and intentions. Austrian-born U.S. psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut (1913–1981) used the term to denote the sense of a coherent, stable (yet dynamic) experience of one's individuality, continuity in time and space, autonomy, efficacy, motivation, values, and desires; he believed that this sense emerges through healthy narcissistic development empathically supported by the significant figures in one's early life and that, conversely, narcissistic developmental failure leads to a fragile or incoherent sense of self."

No one-to-one correspondence exists for the English word "self" in the Lakota language. The closest conceptual terms are the *nağí*, which is often glossed as one's spirit or "astral self," the enduring spiritual aspect that continues after death and participates in relations with other beings (Hunska Tašunke Icu (Joseph American Horse) et al., 2023). Then there is the *tawačhiŋ*, which refers to mind, will, intention, or conscious awareness, and is another key aspect of what

English might fold into “self (Noisy Hawk, 2015).” Traditional Lakota thought commonly speaks of a person as composed of *thȟaŋčáŋ* (body), *čhaŋté* (heart), *tawačhiŋ* (mind), and *nağí* (spirit), among other aspects, rather than as a single bounded “self (LaPointe, 2020).” For a translation choice in scholarly writing, *nağí* is usually the closest candidate when “self” is meant in a spiritual/ontological sense, while *tawačhiŋ* is closer when “self” means the reflective, intending mind (Marks, 2023).

Lakota religion draws a clear distinction between the physical body and a spiritual interior (Posthumus, 2018). It holds to a triune conception of the human spirit or soul, comprising the *niyá*, *nağí*, and the *šicų*. The *niyá* is the life or breath; the *nağí* is the spirit or soul; the *šicų* is the guardian spirit. These are the *wakʻą* aspects of a person and are therefore immortal. Also crucial to a person's identity is the *wacʻį* (mind, will, consciousness), the *cʻąté* (feelings, emotions), and the *wówašʻake* (strength, power).

Lakota religion teaches that the *niyá* is given to a person at birth by the sky, Táku Škąšką ("Something that Moves"). The *niyá* is believed to survive bodily death as an immaterial entity, likened to smoke or a shadow. The *nağí* preserves a person's idiosyncratic traits. The *šicų* is a non-human potency or influence believed to have been bestowed upon a person by Táku Škąšką. It can separate from the body and travel while a person is asleep, while after bodily death it returns to the nonhuman person or star from which it originally came. Through visions and dreams, over the course of their life a human may acquire additional *šicųpi* (Martinez, 2004).

**The Lakota Concept of the *nagi***

A favorite joke in Lakota country (and around Lakota people) is “How many Lakota does it take to change a light bulb?” The answer, “One to change the bulb, and twenty to stand around and say,’ That’s not the way I was taught.’” As I explain how I was taught to understand the concept of *nagi*, some will disagree. After providing the definition as I understood it from the elders with whom I studied, I will describe other potential definitions given by others.

I came to understand the concept of *nagi* as a swarm, in the sense that biologists and physicists understand it, of all the stories that have influenced us and all the beings who told those stories and participated in our legacy, in our position in the universe at this particular moment in time. *Nagi* contains the network of all our relationships with all beings to whom we are interconnected. Thus, *nagi* is one of the most challenging concepts to understand, especially when it is written in English and taken out of the Lakota language, which, as Peat points out for the Blackfoot language, is the ideal language for presenting the concepts of quantum physics and complexity. *Nagi* is also difficult for people who have internalized the story of the self that is dominant in contemporary Western culture – that of a separate, disconnected, autonomous, essential unit that can be discovered.

Once discovered, this “true” or “authentic” self is said to exalt the person to a higher state of being and morality.

*Nagi* highlights other important Lakota concepts of consciousness. *Nagi* is inherently relational. It highlights our interconnectedness. It highlights the fluid boundaries between minds consistent with this relational ontology. The swarm concept highlights the many overlaps between minds; the more connected we are, the more stories, ancestors, and influences we share. The *nagi* concept offers novel ways to define families, kin, tribes, and culture. Drawing upon this concept, we can say that these concepts represent varying degrees of overlap of our *nagi.* To state this more clearly in English, we can say that a family consists of individuals who share a sufficiently high percentage of stories and of influential beings to be considered related. Kin share fewer stories, while tribal members share even fewer, and so forth. The boundaries are fuzzy and change with context and circumstance. In Paris, I feel closer to any other American than I do in Dallas. My functional family consists of the people with whom I share the most stories – a different concept from my biological family. Today, the number of stories I share with my sisters and brothers is so small, comparatively speaking, that we could hardly be considered family from this perspective. We have become kin.

What I particularly love about the *nagi* concept as a dimension of mind (there are four, and we will briefly discuss the other three. A person is an unexplainable creation with these four constituent dimensions. The *woniya* or *niya* is similar to the Chinese concept of chi or qi. It is the “vital breath which gives life to the body and is responsible for circulation of blood and for the breathing process” (1). The *nagila* is the sacred part that dwells within us and gives us life, and also the part of us that resides in the spirit world, keeping us connected to both worlds. *Nagi* and *nagila* are intimately related, as are yin and yang in Chinese cosmology. *Sicun* denotes our presence, or the impact we have on the world and on those around us. It has been translated as our “presence”.

One explanation for psychosis that was given to me by an elder was a dislocation of *nagi* and *nagila.* “It’s like the person is always a foot above themselves and 9 inches to the left,” he said. “Their awareness is tuned into spirit worlds that they weren’t necessarily meant to see or to see without a strong *nagi* to anchor them in this world. An imbalance in any of these four constituent elements of the person will result in disharmony. The Lakota word for imbalance is *towaci’cow’pta*, which literally means “having one’s head on its side”.

The *nagi* comprises all that one knows (1). It is the capacity to understand. It encompasses all beings, known and unknown, who have influenced us, including parents, relatives, ancestors, spirits, lakes, rivers, mountains, meadows, and more. I imagine the *nagi* as a swarm of all the beings who have influenced us, coupled with all the stories they told to influence us. These stories told by all these beings create us. We are the legacy of all of these stories.

Voss et al. (1) relate the *nagi* to Kohut's understanding of the "relational self" or self-object. They say, "For Kohut, the child is born into an empathic, responsive human milieu; relatedness with others is as essential for his psychological survival as oxygen is for his physical survival" (2). We find the *nagi* more closely aligned with Bakhtin's relational self (3).

Voss et al. state that "the *nagi* encompasses the personal conscious and unconscious. It is the conscious and unconscious collection of personalities across generations that constitutes who one is." We wish to further deconstruct this comparison with European philosophy by eliminating the unconscious as a structure. Elders have told us that many factors outside our awareness nevertheless influence us. We think we can define awareness without creating a structure to encompass everything of which we are not aware. At any given moment, we are not mindful of an infinite panoply of body, social, and cosmic processes that nevertheless influence our lives. Even contemporary neuroscience teaches us that we can function without awareness. Ramachandran & Blakeslee describe individuals who are unaware of their ability to see but who can perform tasks requiring manual dexterity quickly and easily, tasks that require intact visual processing. We can do things without being aware that we are doing them. Thus, we think the *nagi* is better defined as all the stories and the beings who told them that influence our lives.

Voss et al. (1) say that the *nagi* is "composed both of one's false and of one's true selves; it can illuminate one's understanding of oneself and one's world, and it can distort or play tricks on one's understanding of the way things are. Encountering one's nagi can be terrifying or heartening or expansive, depending on one's family or collective legacy." We want to deconstruct the "false self" and "true self" construct. Whatever selves exist, exist. They are neither true nor false. They perform their functions better or worse. Within the understanding we have derived from our elders, each body has a multitude of selves, all of which arise in specific and particular relationships, unique to those relationships. These selves are performed in the relationships to which they belong. They are continually being modified as the relationship changes.

In his landmark Lakota dictionary, the Jesuit priest Buechel (4) translated *nagi* as "the soul, spirit; the shadow of anything, as of a man (*wicanagi)* or of a house (*tinagi)*" (p. 342). We believe this definition is inadequate. It neglects the notion of all the the beings who have influenced us and continue to do so.

Voss et al. (1) say that "nagi also includes what Jung identified as the 'shadow' and the 'autonomous complexes,' which are powerful unconscious influences on the individual and can actually function as if they were foreign or not part of the self (5). "Sometimes these autonomous aspects of the self take over, and later, after an embarrassing experience, one might say, 'That wasn't me. Something

came over me.' Some Jungian analysts have noted that the autonomous complexes often, although not always, are organized around traumatic childhood experiences after which unacceptable aspects of the personality were split off and repressed (6)." The elders with whom we have discussed *nagi are* unaware of 'autonomous complexes' or 'powerful unconscious influences.' The *nagi* concept differs in that it encompasses all stories, regardless of the values various observers ascribe to them or of whether one is consciously aware of a story. Implicit biases typically arise from stories outside of our awareness.

Viola Cordova (Cordova, 1996) writes that "Native American thought should be approached "as a complete, alternative explanation for the world and for human nature." No group exists that lacks a description of the world. These descriptions enable these groups to survive in their unique, local environments. All groups have very definite views about human nature. They have concepts about what it means to be human.

Eurocentric thought assumed that civilization progressed, which is why Native American cultures were considered primitive, hinging on the absence of a written language (though South American and Meso-American Indigenous cultures did have written languages, and pictograph languages existed in Northeastern North America, especially among the Iroquois, and on the Plains, East of the Rocky Mountains). The presence or absence of a written language within a person bespeaks differences in brain organization(Wolf et al., 2009), which could lead to differences in self-conceptualization. Important clues can be found in the differences in Aboriginal models of mind compared to contemporary models. Socrates battled this in his protestation.

The Jesuit cultural historian Walter Ong (Ong, 1977) (p. 178) wrote about how the oral word first illuminates consciousness with articulate language. It first divides the subject and the predicate, then relates them to one another, and finally ties human beings to one another in society. He wrote that writing introduces divisions and alienation but also brings a higher unity. It intensifies the sense of self and fosters more conscious interaction between persons. Writing raises consciousness. I believe the perspective of indigenous knowledge would be that consciousness without writing is just different, but not necessarily inferior. Socrates held the same point of view and even argued that consciousness without writing and reading might be superior.

Wolf wrote, "Socrates passionately decried the uncontrolled spread of the written language; Plato was ambivalent but used it to record spoken dialogues; and as a youth, Aristotle was already immersed in 'the habit of reading'. …[S]ocrates was mentor to Plato, who was mentor to Aristotle. Less known … is that Socrates was the pupil of Diotima, a woman philosopher from Manitea, who used dialogues to teach her students."

Socrates was an early narrative analyst. He “taught students to question the words and concepts conveyed through spoken language so that they could see what beliefs and assumptions lay beneath them. Socrates demanded that everything be questioned … until the essence of the originating thought became clear; understanding how it reflected … the deepest values of the society, and the questions and answers in dialogue were the vehicles of instruction.” Socrates could have easily been a brother of the Cherokee rhetorician, Sequoyah, who preached the same concepts, though Sequoyah invented a written language to map Cherokee phonemes onto symbols.

“[Socrates] felt passionately that the written word posed serious risks to society…. First, Socrates, posited that oral and written words played very different roles in an individual’s intellectual life; second, he regarded the new – and much less stringent – requirements that written language placed both on memory and on the internalization of knowledge as catastrophic; and third, he passionately advocated the unique role that oral language plays in the development and morality and virtue in a society. In each instance, Socrates judged written words inferior to spoken words….

“Socrates believed that unlike the ‘dead discourse’ of written speech, oral words, or ‘living speech’, represented dynamic entities, full of meanings, sounds, melody, stress, intonation, and rhythms – ready to be uncovered layer by layer through examination and dialogue. By contrast, written words could not speak back. The inflexible muteness of written words doomed the dialogic process Socrates saw as the heart of education.”

Contemporary Indigenous people are now looking at European-derived observers to further understand the process of intellectual colonization that has occurred and to explore ways to decolonize mind and mental health. Ethnography arose in the midst of what Carl Mika (Mika, 2019) calls “the brittle self-confidence that … evolved through the deep, western anxiety that comes with fragmenting things in the world (p. 48).” The history of ethnography demonstrates this.

We can trace some of this for North Americans to the European Enlightenment. Tuhiwai Smith wrote “[v]iews of the Other had already existed for centuries in Europe, but during the Enlightenment these views became more formalized through science, philosophy, and imperialism, into explicit systems of classification and ‘regimes of truth’ (Smith, 1999) (p. 33).”

Pualani Louis wrote: “We have been pathologised by Western research methods that have found us deficient either as genetically inferior or culturally deviant for generations. We have been dismembered, objectified and problematised via Western scientific rationality and reason. We have been politically, socially, and economically dominated by colonial forces and marginalized through armed struggle, biased legislation, and educational initiatives and policies that promote

Western knowledge systems at the expense of our own (Louis, 2007) (p. 131)." In claiming the superiority of enlightened reason, conditions were created for rejecting other epistemologies (Smith, 1999) (pp. 67-68). Clement (Clement, 2019) writes about the influence of Enlightenment philosophy on modern capitalism and "the broader narrative of progress (p. 280)." Clement writes about the division of the world into two humanities in the 19th century (according to Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos) – that of being and not-being, asymmetrical positions of superiority and inferiority, which sets the stage for studies of the consciousness or mind of indigenous people. He says, "Eurocentred positional superiority came to be associated with immediately positive descriptors such as 'scientific, advanced, global, universal, and productive', whereas the positional inferiority of non-western humans was associated with qualifiers such as 'ignorant, backward, local, marginal, and unfruitful'. Such oppositional superiority and inferiority have served as a moral pretext for immoral attitudes, violence, and politics against Indigenous peoples…(p 281)." This is the context from which the first anthropologists began to study the Indigenous mind. This duality sometimes ventured to the extreme of human vs animal in referring to Indigenous people (Plumwood, 2002) (p. 102). Indigenous people were presented in human zoos, which Clement says, "posited the imperial order as a unique vision of the world by reaffirming European 'superiority' over colonized peoples and legitimizing their colonization (p. 281)."

Smith describes how scientific Enlightenment philosophy created terms such as "degenerated humans," primitive, backwards, all referring to a concept of regress of biological evolution(Clement, 2019; Smith, 1999).

**Historical Perspectives**

Indigenous perspectives on consciousness and self appear to resemble those emerging from combinations of contemporary neuroscience, phenomenology, Buddhist studies, and complex systems theory (Thompson). As exciting as these ideas are, they are not mainstream. An early ethnographer, Morgan(Morgan, 2013), provides an example of the Eurocentric, objectifying gaze. Morgan may be an improvement, as he seeks to study the vanishing Other rather than annihilate it. Still, his concepts of cultural evolution provided settler-colonial justification for oppression and forced assimilation. He divided history into three periods: savagery, barbarity, and civilization. Indigenous people fell into the former two categories and Europeans into the latter. Morgan followed John Locke (Henry, 1999), who linked the concept of private property with being civilized, with Morgan and others concluding that indigenous North Americans were uncivilized since they lacked this concept, presumably because they lacked the notion of individualism that existed in Europe(Deloria, 1997). While reading the law in Aurora, NY, from 1840 to 1842, Morgan discovered the Iroquois, and in 1843, created the New Order of the Iroquois, in which he aimed to promote the values and virtues of the Iroquois, whom he saw, as was the belief of the times, as a vanishing people. However much he valued aspects of the Haudenosaunee

(their word for themselves) culture, he contributed to Ulysses Grant's assimilation policy, in which the Indian was to be removed from the man, called the Grant-Parker Policy on Native Americans (Deloria, 1998).

**Franz Boas**

Boas refuted Morgan's concepts of cultural evolution, positing that migration and diffusion were better explanatory concepts than evolution (Boas, 1920). Boas recognized that the cultural evolutionists believed that Europe represented the pinnacle of cultural evolution. Still, Boas proposed that alternative paths could exist, leading to different outcomes, and that Europe wasn't necessarily the pinnacle. Boas wrote, "We rather see that each cultural group has its own unique history, dependent partly upon the peculiar inner development of the social group, and partly upon the foreign influences on which it has been subjected (p. 315)," as opposed to there being a universal, one-size-fits-all, pattern of cultural evolution. He further wrote, "There have been processes of gradual differentiation as well as processes of leveling down differences between neighboring cultural centers, but it would be quite impossible to understand, based on a single evolutionary scheme, what happened to any particular people… Cushing believed that it was possible to explain Zuni culture entirely based on the reaction of the Zuni mind to its geographical environment, and that the whole of Zuni culture could be explained as the development which followed necessarily from the position in which the people were placed…. On the other hand, Dr. Parsons' studies conclusively demonstrate the profound influence that Spanish ideas have had on Zuni culture, and, together with Professor Kroeber's investigations, provide one of the best examples of acculturation that have come to our notice. The psychological explanation is entirely misleading, notwithstanding its plausibility, and the historical study shows us an entirely different picture, in which the unique combination of ancient traits (which in themselves are undoubtedly complex) and of European influences has brought about the present condition (p. 317)."

However enlightened Boas was, he remained the expert, studying and interpreting others as external Others, inviting these Others to participate in the research process only as subjects or collaborators in the authorship of his publications. Hierarchy remained; European-derived thinkers dominated indigenous thinkers. Boas continued to use the term "primitive people" in his writing about indigenous people, linked to how people think. For Boas, as for most Europeans, rationalism was the pinnacle of thought rather than holism. Boas wrote that [rationalism] "seems to be one of the fundamental characteristics of the development of mankind that activities which have developed unconsciously are gradually made the subject of reasoning…. It appears, perhaps, most clearly in the history of science, which has gradually extended the scope of its inquiry over an ever-widening field, and which has raised into consciousness human activities that are automatically performed in the life of the individual and of society (p. 319)." Boas held the view that rational thought is

superior to holistic and relational thought. Mika writes about the fundamental irrationality of indigenous thought (Mika, 2021) and relates his beliefs about its superiority, because of “the fact of the world’s withdrawnness, leaving the speculative human with more questions than answers (p. 419).”

## Psychological Functionalism

Bronislaw Malinowski exemplifies this movement in ethnography. Often acknowledged as one of the first to encourage fieldwork in the sense of participant observation (Aktinson & Hammersley, 1998), Malinowski argued that there were seven universal biological and psychological needs. These individual needs were translated into cultural behavior through symbols, which also shaped individual behavior in accordance with group standards. The task of the psychological functionalist was to describe these symbols and demonstrate how social institutions operated to fill psychological needs (p. 164) [17].” Malinowski studied island people who lived to the North and the Northeast of New Guinea. He believed that they were aware of the reasons for their “individual actions and motives but [were] unable to see their entire system. He believed that “an outsider, the ethnographer … [who could] conduct an objective analysis of a society and its institutions (McGee & Warms, 2013) (p. 165).” was required to see the big picture, how the entire system worked. He believed the same to be true for even his own society, that people cannot objectively analyze a system of which they are a part. We can see in Malinowski’s work (Malinowski, 1939) the Eurocentric belief that an objective view is possible, even from a participant-observer, and best derived from an external expert to the culture who can discover universal truths from an analysis of the culture. One can praise Malinowski in his efforts to dislodge the common beliefs of the times in Europe, especially as espoused by Carl Bücher, that "primitive man lives only for the present. . . shuns all regular work . . . has not the conception of duty, not of a vocation as a moral function in life [17], (p. 166).”

## Psychodynamic Ethnographers

Boas wrote about Sigmund Freud’s beliefs that indigenous people exhibited primary process thinking, akin to dreaming or a psychotic state (Kenny, 2015). This “psychologizing attitude” imposed European ideas about mental operations onto others. Marcus and Fischer (Marcus & Fischer, 1999) wrote that the “focus on personhood” (p.45) was anthropology’s new attempt to capture “the distinctiveness of a culture (p. 45),” given that the certainty of dependence on “public rituals, codified belief systems, and sanctioned communal and familial structure (p. 45)” had been undermined. They said that focusing upon “the person, the self, and the emotions (p. 46)” were a way to explore personhood. They wrote that what was new was the understanding that these factors vary among cultures rather than being universal or delocalized constructs. They cited three authors as examples of psychodynamic ethnographies: Levy, Kracke, and Obeyesekere.

We can wonder how anyone could convey another culture through the Eurocentric lens of psychodynamic theory. Marcus and Fischer quoted Levy's book on Tahiti in which he said on page 361, that "Tahitian style lacks … mystery … complicity … symbolic forms suggesting meanings beyond common sense (p. 49)," reminiscent of psychoanalyst James Gustafson writing that Lakota people lacked the sophistication to engage in psychodynamic psychotherapy based upon his experience in the Indian Health Service(Gustafson, 1976). I spoke with Gustafson and with people in South Dakota (personal communication, R. Chief Eagle, 1980) who knew him and were astounded that anyone would lie down on a couch and talk to someone who didn't respond. The entire enterprise sounded incredibly bizarre to them. Marcus and Fisher wrote that the psychodynamicists concentrated on a "display of discourse – self-reflective commentaries on experience, emotion, and self … all of which reveal a behaviorally and conceptually significant level of reality, contrasting with, or obscured by public cultural forms." This perception, however, was firmly centered in Eurocentric modernism, which holds that there is a reality to be discovered or general principles to be found (Sinclair, 2020), which is contrary to most indigenous philosophies, which accept multiple realities and a local meaning that does not generalize (Pack, 2021).

Eurocentric psychological anthropology, developed mainly in North America and Europe, purported to understand the human mind through universal principles that apply to all minds. These were the perspectives of the psychodynamic ethnographers and the psychological functionalists. Today, we know that psychological phenomena are shaped by culture(Smith et al., 2013). For example, 90% of subjects in psychological studies come from countries that are "Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic (W.E.I.R.D)(Henrich et al., 2010)." Many of the subjects are university undergraduates because they can be coerced into participating in the study as part of their introductory psychology course. The findings from people in these studies are not necessarily generalizable to non-WEIRD peoples.

## Concepts of Psychological Ethnography

The Eurocentric ethnographies that dismissed indigenous concepts of the self believed in universal psychological principles and a unified self or "personhood." However, "People in different cultures have strikingly different' concepts' of the self, of others, and of the interdependence of the two (p. 224)(Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The classic study that introduced this idea was conducted in 2001 with Japanese participants and non-Japanese citizens of the United States (Cousins, 1989). All subjects were shown an underwater scene for 20 seconds. The Japanese tended to focus on the background of the scene, while the Americans focused on the largest fish in the foreground. The authors argued that the Japanese people practiced holistic, relational thinking in which the background mattered more than the foreground, whilst the Americans practiced

object-oriented thinking in which the largest object drew their attention(Masuda & Nisbett, 2001). Before this, Cousins studied Japanese and American (United States) college students (in the USA), using the noncontextualized Twenty Statements Test (TST) and a questionnaire asking people to describe themselves in various contexts. “On the TST, Japanese subjects listed fewer abstract, psychological attributes than did Americans, and referred more to social roles and behavioral contexts. On the contextualized questionnaire, Japanese scored higher on abstract and psychological attributes than Americans, who tended to qualify their self-descriptions. In addition, on the TST, Japanese surpassed Americans in the number of highly abstract, global self-references (p. 124).” The authors concluded that definitions and perceptions of the self were widely different between Japanese and American people and that cultural differences exist in self-concept.

Another study used the TST to compare the proportion of social category responses for American college students, Kenyan university students in Nairobi, Kenyans employed in Nairobi, Maasai Kenyans, and Samburu Kenyans(Ma & Schoeneman, 1997). University students in both countries responded primarily with “nonsocial categories of psychological and interpersonal style, whereas traditional Kenyans responded with social categories of occupational and kinship roles. Sociocultural factors of urbanization, education, and Westernization appear to correlate with individuated (nonsocial) self-conceptions (p. 261).”

**The correspondence bias**

The ethnographers mentioned may have fallen prey to the correspondence bias, “the tendency to draw inferences about a person's unique and enduring dispositions from behaviors that can be entirely explained by the situations in which they occur (Gilbert & Malone, 1995) (p. 21).” When one is foreign to the situation, as these ethnographers were, one may make assumptions that are not necessarily valid. Burkhart (Burkhart, 2016) would say that the local does not generalize. For example, the Lakota self is non-local (in the sense of extending outside the boundaries of the physical body) and is located in the space between body and thing-in-the-world(Mehl-Madrona & Mainguy, 2018). It is decidedly relational and therefore non-universal, since no one can occupy the same relational space at the same time. Behavior, then, in Lakota thought, is explained by the negotiations of the various forces of relationships within the context of the moment and informed by the swarm of stories (the *nagi*) existing within that web of relationships. In this regard, Waldram (Waldram, 2016) has observed that within-group variation in behavior is greater than between-group variation, which is annoying to some researchers.

**Observer Bias**

Observations made in any study often depend more on the observer than on the observed (Spano, 2005), a point that earlier ethnographers were less aware of,

steeped as they were in their confidence in authority as scientists. Today we are more aware that every person who enters an environment changes the dynamics of the interactions in that environment, and that people say different things depending on who their audience is. Waldram described wild stories invented by Cree people in Saskatchewan to entertain themselves at the expense of anthropologists – e.g., the Windigo. However, more subtle forms of observer bias exist, as Spano noted. Over 50 years ago, Reiss (Reiss, 1968) (p. 358) stated ‘‘... there are almost no systematic data with respect to observer effects in observation studies in natural settings.’’ Spano noted that the problem remained in 2005 and identified four types of observer bias. In reactivity, the research subject or respondent changes behavior in reaction to the presence of the researcher or some aspect of the research situation. This was the nature of Freeman’s (Freeman, 1999) criticism of Margaret Mead’s work in Samoa (Mead et al., 1973) -- that she was hoaxed. However, Shankman found inconsistencies in Freeman’s critique, restoring respect to some degree for Mead’s work, though Mead was interestingly more of a reverse ethnographer – her descriptions of Samoan culture appeared to be more directed at increasing awareness of Americans' own biases and cultural practices than it was analyzing those of Samoans(Shankman, 2013). The second observer bias of Spano is culture shock. The new environment is so different, so foreign, so alien, that the implanted researcher cannot get their ground, can feel overwhelmed, can feel hopelessly unable to grasp what is happening. Spano calls his third bias “going native,” which refers to over-identifying and being overly engaged with the subject. Finally, he speaks of burnout, the inadequate or inaccurate observations and documentation that can occur from the arduous mental and physical strain of fieldwork. Spano found considerable evidence for observation bias in studies of police behavior – his area of interest. Taken together, we arrive at the idea that objectivity is not possible and that we can only collaborate to come to a mutual understanding of how things work for the benefit of those with whom we are interacting. Thus, the purpose of research becomes as important as the research.

The project of ethnographic anthropology has been the creation of theories, which within Eurocentric philosophy, that are universal and delocalized. When a theory is accepted, academic promotions occur, and further funding ensues. Beyond the prestige and the money, accepted theories can dictate public policy. A prime example is the way in which Morgan’s cultural evolution theories led to the Grant-Parker doctrine on assimilation of Native Americans, which led to residential schools, suppression of language and ceremony, and significant trauma. Burkhart (Burkhart, 2019) writes about indigenous philosophy being localized, relevant to the locale in which it originates and not necessarily generalizable to other locales and definitely not universal. The decolonization of anthropology appears to be moving toward a reduction of the Eurocentric objectifying gaze in which exotic others are studied by knowledgeable experts and toward a collaborative effort in which people are aided to speak for

themselves and for reasons that make sense to them and aid their positioning of themselves in the contemporary world in which we all find ourselves.

The problem, we seem to find, with building theories as the project for anthropological or ethnographic research is that it fragments rather than unifies, for if something is explained by “A” in reductionistic, empirical scientific logic, it is not explained by “B.” In all the siloes of the academic farm, scholars gather to debate theories and to determine, usually by consensus, which is correct. Mika, I think, says this well, when he writes, “[w]hile all walks of colonised life encourage concussion – in which the self is launched out from a ground of unity into one of disconnected illusion – the one we have to deal with most frequently as academics is the university. It is an interesting observation that, under the guise of objectivity, we often set out to ‘dis-cuss’ (shake apart) things as academics. Thus, we risk forcing asunder the very world that, as indigenous scholars, we maintain is interconnected. In other words, as a concussed entity, the academic self–discusses; both conditions apply within the academy. I consider this characteristic of fragmentation…. (p. 48)(Mika, 2019).”

## Conclusions

If we think of the *nagi* as a swarm of stories surrounding our bodies, sometimes at a distance, sometimes close, with each story containing a spark of the being who told that story, we enter into a fluid self which can constitute itself in response to the demands of an environment in which it is embedded, selecting the stories that best serve those demands. This parallels Leslie Marmon Silko's statement, “All we are, are stories,” in her novel *Ceremony.* The concept of the *nagi* situates Indigenous thought within a family of traditions, including dialogical self theory, Bakhtin’s theory of mind, Minsky’s Society of Mind, and Thompson and Varela’s embedded mind.

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