People from different cultures have different ways of interacting with the world around them. This influences what behaviours are desirable to have, and what things are most important to society. These opinions and beliefs form a worldview. Worldviews are a set of beliefs and values which determine how an individual interacts with the world around them: from the land, to the animals, to the people (Joseph, 2016). Indigenous cultures follow a holistic understanding of the world, and a unique outlook on how one should interact with one’s surroundings and nature (Joseph, 2016). In the next paragraphs, I will be defining social innovation and design for social innovation, as well as explaining Indigenous worldviews, in order to point out how indigenous knowledge and worldviews can help inform design for social innovation.

The concept of social innovation has been around since the 1960s, in academic circles and among practitioners, but it is only in the last decade that it has grown in popularity (Volynets, 2015). Over recent years, many social policy experts, researchers, and other observers have developed many definitions for what social innovation is (Volynets, 2015). A definition comes from Manzini:

- social innovation is a process of change emerging from the creative re-combination of existing assets (from social capital to historical heritage, from traditional craftsmanship to accessible advanced technology), the aim of which is to achieve socially recognized goals in a new way (Manzini, 2015, p. 11).

It is believed that if implemented successfully, social innovation can bring transformative change to societal challenges (Volynets, 2015). With social innovation comes design for social innovation. Manzini says that “design has all the potentialities to play a major role in triggering and supporting social change and therefore becoming design for social innovation” (Manzini, 2015, p. 55). Manzini gives a basic definition of design for social innovation: “design for social innovation is everything that expert design can do to activate, sustain, and orient processes of social change toward sustainability” (Manzini, 2015, p. 62). Design for social innovation uses different design initiatives, which have their own modes, timelines, and results, to tackle solutions to social problems (Manzini, 2015).

Indigenous is the term used to describe the collective group of Inuit, First Nations, and Metis; those who are native to the land. Traditionally, Indigenous people have a very different way of looking at the world than those of Western culture. Although there are many iterations of worldviews and practices among the variety of Indigenous people, there are some aspects that are shared. Zoe Todd (2019) explains how the major ideas in Indigenous cultures are the notions of relationality and reciprocity. According to Todd (2019), the ideas of relationality and reciprocity go hand and hand with how Indigenous people interact with the environment around them. The traditional roots of Indigenous cultures are based on their spiritual beliefs that “everything in the universe has a spirit and is animate” (Government of Alberta, 2016, p. 1). They believe that the entire universe is alive with a constant energy between all things that exists (Government of Alberta, 2016). Their society operates with relatedness in mind, meaning that everyone and everything is connected in some way (Joseph, 2016). Because of this connection, they believe it is important for humans to find a balance between themselves and the universe in which they live (Government of Alberta, 2016). Indigenous people see the land as sacred, and this idea is prominent in the way they live their life.
Indigenous cultures have their own versions of thanking the land and their prey after they are hunted (Government of Alberta, 2016). For example, traditional “Inuit hunters speak to a caribou's shua (its “living essence”) before letting their arrows fly. Afterward, they thank the animal for giving its life and places something in its mouth to aid it on its journey” (Government of Alberta, 2016, p. 2). Indigenous people have a respect for the land like no other and use these notions of relationality and reciprocity in their everyday lives.

In reflecting on the concurrencies between design for social innovation and Indigenous cultures, it is important to look at one important feature of this design approach: collaboration. Design for social innovation is a web of far-reaching, culturally profound visions of how the world could be improved, of a special capacity to relate to people directly concerned and give them a voice, and equally special creativity need[ed] to imagine feasible solutions and create conditions to tap the social energy available (Manzini, 2015, p. 63). Here, Manzini explains the importance of cultural collaborations when designing for social innovation, as different eyes can lead to different visions of a solution. In regard to collaboration, Indigenous knowledge and worldviews can add to design for social innovation by giving designers a new outlook on life itself. Indigenous people view the world as a wholly connected place, meaning that everything from our neighbour to the land we walk on is related. This idea can be brought into designing for social innovation as Western designers can take this notion and look at the world in a divergent, more related way. For example, if contemporary society instilled the same worldviews as Indigenous people, being that our surrounding environment is sacred and the universe as a whole is connected, we could potentially change the way society treats the earth. With the environmental issues we have today, it is important to find progressive and positive ways for people to interact with the earth. If designers use the ideologies of Indigenous people, they can potentially change the way Western society views the earth and create products or systems that can create a change. Manzini also explains that design for social innovation is “critical, cultural, and creative” (Manzini, 2015, p. 62). Again, this idea of utilizing the practices and worldviews of Indigenous people allows for a cross-cultural understanding which is beneficial when designing for social issues. Indigenous knowledge and worldviews can help inform design for social innovation in new and progressive ways. Design for social innovation thrives off of the ideas and visions of everyone from every culture and uses this knowledge to come to creative, unmatched answers to societal problems. By bringing the ancestral knowledge and worldviews of Indigenous people into the practice of design for social innovation, great things can occur. By implementing the idea of relatedness into their own lives, designers would be able to collaborate with others more effectively and therefore, would be able to see the world in a new way, bringing unique, cross-cultural views and solutions to the problems on the table.

“Everything in the universe has a spirit and is animate.” (Government of Alberta, 2016, p. 1)
References

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