
Nurturing Ethical Spaces

The notion of “ethical space” is a topic that Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals, organizations, and communities are increasingly exploring to enable collaborative working, learning, and meaning-making in a variety of sectors across Turtle Island. This document is a short primer on the origin, development, and strategies for implementing this approach in the context of the work of the RECOVER urban wellbeing project.

WHAT IS ETHICAL SPACE?

“Ethical space” is a term used to describe the places and times where knowledge systems, particularly Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems, interact in respectful and generative ways that produce outcomes that no single system could. By Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, these spaces are described as being created and maintained in two domains of *inner ethical space*, and *physical ethical space*.

Inner ethical spaces can be understood as the places and times where an individual acknowledges the presence of an “other”, and in relation to that other, feel able to privately reflect, learn, and transform.

Physical ethical spaces are the places and times where inner ethical spaces are cultivated. They are moments where dialogue is encouraged and where one can discuss contentious issues, ask questions, and express concerns without interruption and/or fear of judgement.

HOW CAN WE CREATE ETHICAL SPACES?

Like many concepts with roots in Indigenous ways of knowing and being, ethical space is a dynamic and relational construct that has no single formula.

Often, the stories, routines, and resources that produce ethical spaces with a given group are as unique as the group itself. However, we can glean insights from the many scholars and practitioners who generously shared their learnings about what can contribute to reliably creating and nurturing ethical spaces.

Considering Consent for Discomfort

Before embarking on a journey of creating ethical spaces, it’s important to consider the unfortunate reality that contemporary Canadians are seldom presented with opportunities to develop and practice cross-cultural literacy. Patience and warmth are helpful values to centre when inviting individuals to participate in ethical spaces, and sometimes, to experience discomfort.

De-Centering the Self

The first steps of creating ethical spaces involve practices that seek to help participants recognize their own worldview in order to place themselves in a wider circle of valid experiences, knowledge, and perspectives. This can be done through creating opportunities for storytelling about the self, such as introductions that include personal information.

Curiosity in the Other

With safety and equality established, it is possible to spark deep engagement among those in an ethical space by creating opportunities to explore what is similar as well as what is different among knowledge systems. The intent of these discussions is not to establish supremacy or cross-cultural validity, but rather to practice curiosity and sharing.

Transformation Along the Way

A core principle of an Indigenous way of knowing and being is existing in relationality and practicing reciprocity. In other words, in an ethical space, personal transformation in relation to the experiences in the space should be encouraged.

Reflection on the Journey

In creating ethical spaces, incorporating room for reflection on changing ideas, beliefs, and group dynamics is key. This can be done in a number of ways, including through dialogue, co-creation of artistic projects, or personal journaling exercises.

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