

# Indigenous relationality: definitions and methods

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## Abstract

The following seeks to advance relational research methods by providing more specificity in how relationality is defined, and by engaging commonly held refrains on relational research. Responding to concerns about Indigenous relationality being pan-Indigenous, we suggest a three-part framework that defines Indigenous relationality. First, relationality as a defining aspect of global Indigeneity; second, relational understandings that emerge from specific Indigenous nations and third, relationality as manifest within inter-Indigenous connections. Building on our definitional work, we argue that three common refrains within relational research methods should be extended. First, researchers should be able to balance a slippage between the particular context of Indigenous nations and the general context of Indigenous relationality. Second, we have to do more than simply value relationships, and consider how we use relationality for critical thinking. Finally, ensuring accountability within Indigenous research requires us to revisit how we analyze the concept of *community*.

## Keywords

global Indigenous politics, Indigenous relationality, Indigenous research methods, wahkohtowin

## Introduction

The increase of scholars from Indigenous nations becoming faculty members at universities has driven an exciting range of new research seeking to prioritize the goals and strengths of Indigenous peoples. This has been accompanied by efforts to centre relationships through the various teaching, research and service activities that Indigenous scholars undertake within the academy. While this flourishing of thinking about relationships has been productive and enriching, there is room to hone our articulation of what Indigenous relationality is, and what it should be doing. The task of thinking through Indigenous research activities has been taken up in various ways by a number of talented scholars spanning several disciplines (Stark & Starblanket, 2018). Still, we require further interventions that detail how relationality is taken up within social science research designs. Relationality has yet to crystalize into discernible methods for the social sciences beyond asking researchers to prioritize the importance of relationships in their various forms. We depart from widespread agreement that relationships are fundamental to Indigenous intellectual traditions and seek to sharpen our ability to define Indigenous relationality and relational research methods. We thank those Indigenous researchers who carved out the space to legitimize Indigenous research methods within universities and hope to build on their work.

Our article is responding to a concern we have about whether it is even useful to use the term Indigenous relationality when relational worldviews are ultimately embedded in the particular languages and traditions of

Indigenous nations. We maintain that deploying relational methods requires scholars to navigate the way relationality is context specific *and* is shared within the broader Indigenous world, especially when viewed from the standpoint of inter-Indigenous relationships—when different nations or people from different communities create shared spaces with each other without leaving behind their distinct traditions. Our first section investigates definitional dilemmas associated with Indigenous relationality—in what way is relationality simultaneously tethered to specific Indigenous languages and intellectual traditions while also being a concept with purpose beyond any single context. We explore three definitions of Indigenous relationality as a term that holds together global Indigeneity, the particular traditions of Indigenous nations and the relationalities that are created through inter-Indigenous connections.

After exploring this conceptual groundwork, our second section offers three insights into sharpening relational research methods by addressing three common refrains in

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need of being extended. First, we seek to address concerns about Indigenous relationality being a term that falls into a trap of being pan-Indigenous. We call for researchers to balance a definitional slippage in how they move between the three definitions outlined in the first section. Second, we suggest that relationality cannot be simply about prioritizing or valuing relationships, it must be used for critical thinking needed to navigate politically fraught contexts. Third, our commitment to relationality requires us to revisit how we understand accountability within our work and also in how we conceptualize and work with Indigenous communities. We detail the importance of creating horizontal accountability among Indigenous led research networks and draw from Gina Starblanket's (2018) article *Complex Accountabilities*.

While we limit ourselves to engaging with existing literature in our exploration of definitions and methods of Indigenous relationality, our insights have emerged from 5 years of helping to organize the Prairie Indigenous Relationality Network—a group of over 20 Indigenous scholars with ancestral ties to, or substantive relationships with the Canadian prairies. Here, we have chosen to engage with literature instead of providing an extended case study of the Prairie Indigenous Relationality Network, so we can sharpen our own analytic frameworks that have emerged from our long-standing conversations with others.

### Defining Indigenous relationality

Here, we offer three interventions. First, we assert that Indigenous peoples do have shared understandings of relationships and we provide two articulations of relationships in Northern Canada and Northern Australia that share a remarkable similarity to argue that it is possible to think of relationality at a global level. To advance this point, we have chosen to use the term *nation* throughout this article to refer to a diverse range of Indigenous collectivities of original and pre-state peoples with their own languages, histories, laws, territories and cultures. We then look more closely at the concept of *wahkohtowin*, often translated to be kinship, on the prairies—the particular concept of relationality that we most closely engage with. Finally, we engage with inter-Indigenous relationships to articulate a third path that illustrates why we cannot simply speak of relationality in either general or particular terms.

#### General and global

Indigenous relationality takes as its starting point to be the multiplicity of relationships that humans have with each other and the natural world. Understanding how we are situated within a dense series of relationships is a way of both describing and understanding the world (Dudgeon & Bray, 2019). Such an emphasis on relationships is not neutral but provides lessons on how we should order our societies.

We want to put forward two quotes that illustrate how Indigenous peoples' understanding of relationships helps to hold together the concept of global Indigeneity. The first is

from testimony provided by Philip Blake, a young Gwich'in political leader to the Berger Inquiry. The Berger Inquiry occurred primarily in Denendeh, Northwest Territories, Canada and was tasked with studying the impact of a proposed gas pipeline that would run along the Mackenzie River Valley. Most of the people along the pipeline route to this day are Dene. During this time, "traditional land-based harvesting activities" (Coulthard, 2014, p. 55) continued to constitute an integral aspect of the economy for Indigenous peoples. In other words, the region remained on the edge of, and only partially incorporated into, global capitalism.

Berger's commission travelled to all 35 communities along the Mackenzie River. The vast majority of the testimony was given by Indigenous peoples. Glen Coulthard (2014) in his book *Red Skin White Masks* quotes Blake:

If our Indian nation is being destroyed so that poor people of the world might get a chance to share this world's riches, then as Indian people, I am sure that we would seriously consider giving up our resources. But do you really expect us to give up our life and our lands so that those few people who are the richest and most powerful in the world today can maintain their own position of privilege? That is not our way . . . We have lived with the land, not tried to conquer or control it or rob it of its riches. We have not tried to get more and more riches and power, we have not tried to conquer new frontiers, or out-do our parents or make sure that every year we are richer than the year before. We have been satisfied to see our wealth as ourselves and the land we live with. It is our greatest wish to be able to pass on this land to succeeding generations in the same condition that our fathers have given it to us. We did not try to improve the land and we did not try to destroy it. That is not our way. (Watkins, 1977, as cited in Coulthard, 2014, pp. 62–63)

We see in this quote an understanding built on the idea of maintaining good relationships between people and the land. Coulthard (2014) points out that

[i]n the decades leading up to the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry, it became apparent to many people within our communities that the organizational imperatives of capital accumulation signified an affront to our normative understanding of what constituted proper relationships—relationships between people, relationships between humans and their environment, and relationships between individuals and institutions of authority. (p. 62)

Of note is that Blake's framing of resource extraction in service of the poor versus the very rich is not exclusive to Dene particularity. A similar sentiment was articulated in the results of a large-scale research project where several 100 people primarily from the Bardi, Kija and Jaru Indigenous peoples of northwestern Australia were interviewed about their relationships with the land (Hill, 1995). The research project was conducted in the wake of Australia's High Court decision in the court case *Mabo v. Queensland* (1992). This case ruled that Australian sovereignty could not be based on the legal principle of *terra nullius*, which held that Indigenous peoples did not have any legal claim to the land in the face of British

claims to sovereignty. In abandoning the principle of *terra nullius*, the *Mabo* decision also recognized that Aboriginal title existed in Australia. This decision was a result of decades of activism by Indigenous peoples in Australia. Indigenous peoples considered it a significant step in the right direction and the decision also caused significant anxiety for white Australians. Hill's (1995) research was conducted to inform public debate so that "the Aboriginal perspective of land . . . may guide the proposed national legislation on land rights" (p. 305).

The interviews were analyzed to draw out overarching themes about the ways Bardi, Kija and Jaru talk about land, and found that these peoples conceive of land in two main ways. First, through a spiritual connection to land, and second, as a source of knowledge that informs understanding of identity and culture. To our point here, Hill (1995) argues that

More importantly, in contrast to their historical treatment by white Australians, there is a general desire to share the land and its resources. One Aboriginal woman explained: "I mean we're not going to say 'You can't come in here! You can't go fishing!' or anything like that you know, and probably this major mineral deposit here somewhere, and if it's the last mineral deposit on earth, in Australia, we'll probably [say] 'Yeah go ahead and dig it up, if you need it.'" (p. 319)

What begins to be clearer here is that though the Dene, Bardi, Kija and Jaru are separated by time and space, their notions of relationality are not separated by reasoning. There is a general element that links these expressions to one another. They both demonstrate a similar pattern of understanding the world, the land and relationships between the two. Where Blake argued that a pipeline could potentially be used to ensure those with nothing had the means to live, the interlocutor in Hill's research couched consent for a mining project in the language of need, offering that there are situations when there is a *need* to do something. For both speakers, what is of utmost importance when making decisions is the consideration of how our decisions will affect relationships along various registers. In both cases, their orientations are not guided by an outright opposition to industrial development regardless of context. Nor are they primarily concerned with individual or an Indigenous nation's self-interest. Rather, their reasoning process is guided by concern for the well-being of others in situations of scarcity and managing unique but overlapping relationships.

### *Particular—prairie relationality and wahkohtowin*

Attention also needs to be paid to how relational worldviews are ultimately located in specific languages, locales and intellectual traditions of Indigenous peoples. The global dimension of Indigenous relationality does not let one off the hook from being able to work from specific traditions. Substantial scholarship has focused on the way Indigenous relationships on the Canadian prairies are constructed around kinship, and the Cree and Métis concept of wahkohtowin

(Eaker, 2021). Based on the worldview that everything has spirit and because other elements of existence have spirit, they are related to each other, wahkohtowin also details an understanding of how we should conduct relations between humans and between humans and the natural world.

Métis Elder and long-standing political activist Maria Campbell (2007) captures these tenets when she said,

There is a word in my language that speaks to these issues: "wahkotowin." Today it is translated to mean kinship, relationship, and family as in human family. But at one time, from our place it meant the whole of creation. And our teachings taught us that all of creation is related and interconnected to all things within it.

Wahkotowin meant honoring and respecting those relationships. They are our stories, songs, ceremonies, and dances that taught us from birth to death our responsibilities and reciprocal obligations to each other. Human to human, human to plants, human to animals, to the water and especially to the earth. And in turn all of creation had responsibilities and reciprocal obligations to us. (p. 5)

Métis scholar Brenda Macdougall also emphasizes the centrality of wahkohtowin, or wahkootowin as she spells it, within her study of Indigenous life in northwestern Saskatchewan. Macdougall's work is notable because it was through her relationship with Campbell that she embarked on her own process of learning about wahkohtowin. Macdougall (2010, p. 6) describes wahkohtowin as part of a "Métis worldview . . . that privileged family above all else" and can be described as a "'style of life' that reflected a shared cultural identity across northwestern Saskatchewan". This intervention stems from a close engagement with the context of Sakitawak or Île-à-la-Crosse. Macdougall (2010) provides us with a description that is worth quoting at length:

"Wahkotoowin" has been translated by scholars of the Cree language as "relationship" or "relation," but such a translation misses much of the meaning and sentiment that the term and its various derivatives actually express. As much as it is a worldview based on familial—especially interfamilial—connectedness, wahkootowin also conveys an idea about the virtues that an individual should personify as a family member. The values critical to familial relationships—such as reciprocity, mutual support, decency, and order—in turn influenced the behaviours, actions and decisions-making processes that shaped all a community's economic and political interactions. Wahkootowin contextualizes how relationships were intended to work within Métis society by defining and classifying relationships, prescribing patterns of behaviours between relatives and non-relatives, and linking people and communities in large, complex web of relationships. Just as wahkootowin mediated interactions between people, it also extended to the natural and spiritual worlds, regulating relationships between humans and non-humans, the living and the dead, and humans and the natural environment. (p. 8)

Locating our understanding of relationality within teachings associated with wahkohtowin is important because it does not collapse relationality to an edict that we have to be good to everyone or provide an endless well of



empathy or forgiveness in the obligations we owe to each other. Rather, *wahkohtowin* means maintaining minimum standards of behaviour between people. Voth and Loyer (2020) explain that

*Wahkotowin* does not position relationality as universal and equal, which means that it does not propose that we are related to everyone. For those who are not related to the Métis, there are expected behaviours through *wahkohtowin*, as any kinship system has limits. (p. 118)

These examples show that even in a shared geography like the prairies, there are local contexts that produce distinct forms of knowledge.

These interventions into the particularity of *wahkohtowin* demonstrate that tethering relationality to particular contexts helps to inform how we make decisions and how we should conduct ourselves within a range of relations. Places and languages give rise to these concepts and are inextricable components of meaning making.

### *Inter-Indigenous relationships*

Above, we defend both global and nation-based aspects of Indigenous relationality. Yet, the dichotomy between global and nation-based articulations of relationality can elide intellectual and political conversations *between* different Indigenous peoples. Inter-Indigenous relationships are different from global or pan-Indigenous accounts because they focus on the creation of new spaces involving traditions from multiple Nations.

Flaminio takes this up in her examination of kinship-visiting methodologies in the structure of Aboriginal Legal Services (ALS) in Toronto. ALS welcomes Indigenous peoples from all nations and anticipating a pan-Indigenous critique Flaminio (2019) argues,

ALS does not espouse one particular Indigenous nation's laws or procedures but rather offers programs that are suitable to the urban reality: Indigenous peoples from many different nations live in Toronto . . . . The staff members, however, do not view the programming as a strictly "pan-Indigenous" values-based approach, but rather as a type of urban Indigenous approach based in the common Indigenous laws and procedures connected to this land place . . . . This inter-cultural urban Indigenous welcoming approach, based on Elders and staff members honouring and sharing their own unique Indigenous cultural laws and protocols, is as much an expression of Indigenous laws in practice as the larger movement to re-invigorate distinct Indigenous laws, specific to each culture/language/land-based place. A specialized urban trans-Indigenous approach, that recognizes the importance of welcoming, diplomacy, and belonging, is required when urban staff members working at an urban Indigenous organization come from several distinct Indigenous nations and language groups, while the urban Indigenous clients are also coming from a number of distinct Indigenous nations and language groups. (p. 159)

We take Flaminio's reference to trans-Indigenous approaches as analogous trans-systemic law in which an intersocietal legal system is produced when different legal

systems interact with each other while leaving the legal systems of each society intact. Hence, inter-Indigenous relationships are not only about different collectivities interacting with each other, but also about how new forms of relating are created when people from different nations engage one another. Distinctive traditions are maintained but we create new forms of relationality through inter-Indigenous organizing.

Part of our understanding of inter-Indigenous relationships can also come from historical examples. For example, Rob Innes (2013) has detailed the political system of multi-cultural bands on the prairies prior to settler colonialism that were linked through shared understandings and practices of kinship—an alliance known as the *Nehiyaw Pwat*. Throughout the mid 1800s, the *Nehiyaw Pwat* maintained an alliance of dozens of local bands that were composed of people who identified as Cree, Metis, *Saulteaux* and *Assiniboine*. The *Nehiyaw Pwat* Alliance was a regional collective involving local bands composed of people from many different backgrounds, all while distinct languages and traditions were maintained.

Finally, we want to emphasize that inter-Indigenous relationality also requires a robust theory of Indigenous territoriality. Returning to Flaminio's intervention, our argument here is not that we should collapse First Nation and Metis people under a unified prairie Indigenous banner. As we touch on briefly in our section on *wahkohtowin*, relationality does not mean boundaries should fade into the background. Rather, the call is that we need to be able to think through practices of boundary making and classification that emerge from the history of settler colonization, particularly the forms of citizenship and government that have disadvantaged Indigenous women, queer and two-spirit people. We return to how relationality can inform our critical thinking in later sections and discuss how relationality and our own understandings of *wahkohtowin* can inform the maintenance of respectful boundaries.

### **Indigenous relationality as a research method**

These three definitions are unlikely to be helpful if they are not connected to how research is conducted by Indigenous researchers. To this end, how should researchers take up relationality in their research methods? In the next sections, our driving concern is to use the above relational definitions to inform discernable methods within the social sciences from Indigenous perspectives, or in our case, a prairie Indigenous perspective, that we hope carry relevance to a wider Indigenous world. We explore three features that we believe can sharpen our use of Indigenous relationality in the ways we conduct research.

#### *Definitional slippage*

First, we want to respond to the refrain that Indigenous relationality must be anchored to the language and intellectual traditions of a particular community because using the general term of Indigenous relationality risks

diluting and blunting the specificity of Indigenous knowledge. At the risk of belabouring the point, the specificity of Indigenous knowledge is vital. Cutchá Risling Baldy (2015) provides a compelling example through her exploration of how coyote often stands in for an all-encompassing native trickster metaphor but doing so obfuscates specific coyote teachings within nations. We do not deny that one should locate Indigenous knowledge within particular Indigenous traditions, as we have attempted to do, but we also want to recuperate a position that it is possible to speak about Indigenous relationality in general terms.

Indigeneity is a global concept, as illustrated by scholars like Sheryl Lightfoot (2016). Indigenous peoples have experienced colonial violence through our removal and dispossession from our lands, while at the same time, enduring the devaluation of our societies and attending laws, institutions and modes of living in relation to our oppressors. It is no surprise that after 500 years of colonial expansion and settler colonial entrenchment, Indigenous has emerged as concept to unite various peoples around the world (Lightfoot, 2016). Yet, as we argue above, Indigenous peoples are not simply united by a common experience of oppression because it is also possible to point to concrete instances where Indigenous peoples across time and space have similar understandings of how we use relationships in decision-making processes. For Indigenous researchers, these shared histories are further solidified by existing within a larger field of Indigenous studies where we read and learn from Indigenous peoples' writing informed by other particularities, recently exemplified by the *Handbook on Critical Indigenous Studies* (Hokowhita et al., 2022).

As such it is our position that as Indigenous peoples, we live in both the particular world of our local and regional context and within the general realm where we have shared understandings of relationships. As we have been setting up, a constructive definitional slippage is possible because Indigenous research is not limited to either particular or general understandings of relationality but can thoughtfully balance both.

We believe working with relationality requires one to articulate both the general and particular qualities of the concept, especially because forcing a choice between particular or general uses of relationality shuts down our thinking around inter-Indigenous relationships—a vitally important form of Indigenous collective organizing in the present. Researchers must be skilled at navigating the various forms of relationality that exist at the level of global Indigeneity, traditions based in Indigenous languages and the existence or potential of inter-Indigenous relationships. We call for researchers to embrace a constructive definitional slippage, where one gains the capability to skilfully move between the three modes of Indigenous relationality, while simultaneously avoiding tropes of pan-Indigeneity.

To close with an example, we live in spaces where Indigenous peoples congregate from all over. While we need an understanding of territoriality that privileges the traditions of peoples on whose lands we work, the concept of inter-Indigeneity allows us to think about how various

traditions can be in dialogue with each other and create new forms of hosting and visiting.

Take this passage from Voth and Loyer (2020), speaking from a Métis positionality, who call for a reciprocal visiting to guide those living outside of their traditional territories, in this instance, discussing living in Treaty #7 territory of present day Calgary, Alberta:

If this ethic of reciprocal visiting is to be respectful and attuned to the Blackfoot and the land, it requires the establishment of a new political relationship. Relationships between the Blackfoot Confederacy and the Nehiyaw Pwat were fraught with tension and filled with acrimony. But that doesn't mean that needs to continue. What if we opened up new dialogues as Métis people with the Blackfoot and other signatories to Treaty 7, and asked to build a new set of revisable treaties that would allow us to continue to visit in their territory? Doing so would come with risks, because the Blackfoot and other Treaty 7 peoples may say no. We would then have to confront that, and if we are living an ethic of reciprocal visiting, we would need to leave or at least accept that we are bad visitors and unwanted guests. But engaging these acts of respecting territory and authority allows for moments of correction that should have happened a long time ago. (p. 123)

Voth and Loyer are pointing out that their understanding of being guests is informed by the *particularity* of their Métis traditions and teachings about visiting. An ethic of reciprocal visiting allows prairie Indigenous peoples to think about how we share spaces together, without evaporating the ways different nations assert nationhood and territoriality. This is especially important because Indigenous peoples must continue to assert forms of territoriality in the face of a settler state that would prefer to not deal with Indigenous peoples' connections to land. Thus, capable Indigenous researchers should be able to skilfully navigate specific contexts where our deployment of relationality is not predetermined but can draw from various iterations of Indigenous relationality to think about the complex and diverse situations we find ourselves in.

### *Relationality is for critical thinking*

The second refrain that we want to extend is that relationships are central to Indigenous research. Take, for instance, Shawn Wilson's (2008) seminal study on Indigenous research methods—"The importance of relationships, or relationality of an Indigenous ontology and epistemology, was stressed by many of the people who talked with me about this topic" (p. 80). Wilson (2008) goes on to quote his friend Peter who he interviews within the research: "It's collective, it's a group, it's a community. And I think that's the basis for relationality. That is, it's built upon the interconnections, the interrelationships, and that binds the group" (p. 80).

There is no doubt placing the highest value on relationships as a research principle is a necessary part of relational research, but it is not sufficient. We must also articulate how relationality informs our critical thinking. Furthering Indigenous self-determination is difficult work and simply talking about the importance of relationships will only get us so far. That is because how we prioritize collective relationships is contested and open to

interpretation. Indigenous feminists have made this point forcefully in regard to how Indigenous men have asserted Indigenous nations must prioritize the collective and achieve sovereignty before we are able to combat gender inequality within our communities or that for Indigenous women to call themselves feminist undermines Indigenous sovereignty movements (Ross, 2009). But as Sarah Deer (2015) succinctly argues “Sovereignty suffers when women suffer” (p. 13).

Rauna Kuokkanen’s (2019) use of relationality also draws our attention to how the collective is contested in her study of how Indigenous peoples must restructure relations of domination to achieve self-determination:

[Lateral violence] is produced by two different interpretations of self-determination. For Tailfeathers and the other women participating in the peaceful blockade . . . self-determination in their interpretation is about the health and well-being of the people and land alike. For her band council, self-determination is seen as being in charge of the band’s own affairs. (p. 46)

In addition to considering competing understandings of relationships within communities, research designs also need to appreciate how the challenge of relationality is thinking about inter-Indigenous relationships as well. This creates certain new challenges for both research designs and researchers as colonialism has produced a situation where Indigenous governments tend to harden boundaries between each other instead of thinking about forms of shared jurisdiction (Nadasdy, 2017). As a researcher, we should be responsible for asking questions about how community boundaries have been historically constructed. If we are to pursue relationality as a research method, we must build in appreciation for Indigenous political systems where different sites of collective authority—including but not limited to Indigenous governments—are capable of creating shared jurisdictions with each other.

How do we respond to a situation of mistrust between Indigenous political collectives within our research projects? Imagine working with a Métis community that has no desire to collaborate or share information with the First Nations folks down the road, or elsewhere on the prairies. How do we respond to community members who want to enforce strict boundaries around a community? This is a difficult situation. We need to continue working on the scripts and sensibilities that allow us to creatively respond to mistrust within inter-Indigenous relationships. Reproducing misinformed and damaging perspectives to one’s own, or other Indigenous communities is not being a good relation. As Jace Weaver (2007) has argued,

Commitment to Native community does not mean wallowing in victimhood and guilt. Nor does it mean presenting the most “Indian” side of everything, in the face of contrary evidence. And it certainly does not mean surrendering our research to tribal councils. It means service to Native peoples. But it also means being committed to truth, accuracy, and academic freedom. Without these, all the words in the world are worthless to us as scholars and ultimately to those for whom we purport to advocate. (p. 239)

Placing relationality at the centre of Indigenous research might also mean having to stand up against individuals or groups who want to harden boundaries between Indigenous peoples. To extend Weaver’s point, not doing so and handing those questions of research design over to others breaks our relational responsibilities as Indigenous researchers.

Importantly, discourses about how we constitute Indigenous political authority and pursue, or shut down, inter-Indigenous relationships are fraught with past impositions of race categories and gendered attacks on Indigenous citizenship in the face of a rich tapestry of overlapping kinships that transcend tribal boundaries. After all, Innes’ historical work on the Nehiyaw Pwat aimed to understand why Cowessess First Nation welcomed back his family and others who were gaining or regaining Indian status after amendments to the Indian Act 1985 that partially reversed discriminatory legislation where Indian women lost their status when marrying men without Indian status.

The emphasis on relationships does not mean our end goal is the elimination of conflicts. Relationships also occur in a world of differing perspectives and understandings that lead us to work through disagreement and conflict. As such, relationality provides forms of critical thinking that help us to exercise discretion, tact and judgement all while managing unavoidable trade-offs in how we carry out our relationships and build new ones. Relationality also requires us to live in accordance with *wahkohtowin* and should be a practice that one undertakes as a researcher (Buhler et al., 2014). How does one engage in or with social science research on relationality when a core objective of relationality is living in accordance with Indigenous teachings about how to maintain good relationships? For us, this raises a number of important questions. How does one assess and potentially document living in accordance with *wahkohtowin*? How do we resolve the tensions between the requirements placed on us by the university to produce publications and the work of maintaining good relationships with communities and families? What these questions help show us is that relational methods cannot simply ask us to value relationships because answering the above questions likely entails working through competing visions of how relationality is pursued within a given context. Conflict itself is not an indication something is wrong within Indigenous communities. Napoleon (2011) points out that “When laws are broken with no recourse, the legal order begins to breakdown” (p. 237). In other words, robust Indigenous legal systems are not built to eliminate conflict; rather, they function to respond to conflict.

From this standpoint, relationality is not a simple matter of creating good relationships but thinking about how we create relationships that are capable of making judgements and decisions that have the power to further Indigenous self-determination. Here, it helps to speak of relationality at a general level because it links people of like mind who want to remodel the world away from the destructive tendencies found within the various systems of hierarchy and oppression we live within. At the same time, these



battles will be fought within particular contexts that involve complicated stakes that ask us to weigh and balance the relative importance of the different unique fields. Relationality requires us to make linkages across contexts in service of creating new fields of action. It means that relational methods will not be built on outlining predictable strategies and pre-determined outcomes. Relationality is potentially transformative without being deterministic; it can bring about change without having to pre-determine what a proper outcome or decision looks like prior to understanding the contexts we find ourselves in. That requires us to think and act critically from the creative standpoint of how to carry ourselves in a way that promotes good relationships.

### Revisiting accountability

The final refrain we want to take on is the understanding that within relational research methods that we must be accountable to Indigenous communities. Perhaps, in its most robust and well cited form, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) has offered that Indigenous researchers build accountability with their collaborator or partner Indigenous communities. Tuhiwai Smith (2012) frames this both as a question of “to whom is the researcher accountable” (p. 176), and in the now well-trodden path of “reporting back” (p. 16), accountability to communities becomes a central element of decolonizing research methodologies. Here again, this intervention is a precondition of relational research methods but alone is not sufficient because it does not capture how we foster ethical relationships within universities. We suggest building the institutional capacity for horizontal accountability—by which we mean peers and colleagues holding each other to account—through Indigenous research networks. While these networks facilitate things like information exchange and create intellectual spaces to advance the political projects of Indigenous self-determination, they also provide opportunities to ask difficult questions, challenge and encourage revision to research, teaching and leadership activities.

While we share the view that individuals must ultimately be responsible for their behaviour, this frame lends itself to a limited form of accountability because the university provides a range of institutional protections to faculty. Personal responsibility is limited in two ways. First, researchers who maintain high levels of conventional productivity can be shielded from being accountable to communities by their employers. In the opposite direction, it is also possible for researchers to have strong relationships with communities but treat collaborators and university staff in disrespectful and opportunistic ways. While indigenizing the procedures and norms of the university might be a useful long-term project, we believe that we can also take immediate action in the present through prioritizing horizontal accountability. While a legal principle like *wahkohtowin* clearly involves duties around maintaining standards of personal behaviour, research accountability cannot simply be about asking people to act

in a good way. Indigenous research networks allow us to create multiple and substantive points of contact with each other so we can facilitate a robust form of accountability.

Gina Starblanket also provides an important analysis of “accountability to the community” through her concept of *complex accountability*. Starblanket (2018) looks at how the scholarship on relational accountability creates research designs and modes of analysis that assume communities can speak with a singular, unified voice, “oversimplifying and universalizing the different objectives and priorities of Indigenous peoples within the collective” (p. 3). In doing so, we suppress very real and important struggles for justice within communities, particularly those of Indigenous women, two-spirit and queer groups. Starblanket provides a nuanced picture of how a complex accountability expands our notions of relationality by calling into question: the practice of locating representative authority within male-dominated Indigenous governments without providing a justification; treating individuals as if they have a singular identity; treating issues of gender as an add-on; or falling prey to worries that we undermine self-determination if we do not present a unified voice.

Importantly, even when issues of gender are identified, an “incorporative traditionalism” (Starblanket, 2018, p. 10) can shut down tough questions about existing power relations by suggesting those problems will be solved if we simply return to traditional ways that recognize diversity. Indigenous feminists “show that it is possible to respectfully engage in conversations that are neither politically sanctioned nor that align with community conventions” (Starblanket, 2018, p. 13). Complex accountability illustrates how we can use relationality as a mode of critical thinking to understand various community dynamics from the outset of our research designs, including who we choose as representative voices and analyzing how relations of power can elevate some voices and silence others when we invoke *the community* within our research.

We take inspiration from the lodge Maria Campbell maintains with a network of primarily Indigenous women, a model that we see as having resonances in the work of some of their members such as the All My Relations research cluster lead by Kim Anderson at the University of Guelph (2022). In our own Prairie Indigenous Relationality Network, multiple points of contact are maintained between close partnerships that come and go, larger research clusters, organizing regular academic gatherings, coordinated granting strategies and bodies that drive collective research. All these arrangements require us to pour energy into the creation and maintenance of our own institutional capacity. Showing up in these spaces provides much greater opportunities to hold each other accountable and create nuanced understandings of how we understand and practice accountability.

### Conclusion

Relationality is important to social science research designs, but only asserting this point is no longer sufficient. If relationality is important purely as a statement of orientation,

then the concept can easily be taken up and deployed in self-serving ways that reproduce harmful power dynamics under the umbrella of a relational paradigm. This has long been the intervention made by Indigenous feminists about the power dynamics embedded in tradition (Martin-Hill, 2003). Like tradition, relationality is not a neutral container holding universal goods. Instead, what we have offered in these pages is a way for Indigenous social scientists to have an ability to navigate definitional slippage between the general and particular manifestations of relationality, while also accounting for the way relationality creates inter-Indigenous research imperatives. All of this is needed because relationality is power laden and navigating these complex power dynamics requires deliberate critical thinking skills.

Even community accountability needs to be subject to critical thinking. Particularly for university-based Indigenous research faculty, we call for the creation and deepening of our institutional capacity to create forms of horizontal accountability that centre relationships with, and responsibilities to, other Indigenous scholars. Doing this expands the notion of accountability while also enriching the work we are conducting by engaging the insights and brilliance of our colleagues. Our relationships with each other should also work in service of deepening our understanding of what accountability to communities looks like. Starblanket's (2018) examination of accountability reminds us that who we choose as representative community voices is itself contested. Communities themselves have internal struggles for justice and we can and should bring those struggles into our research designs in a way that centres questions that challenges patriarchy within Indigenous communities. By deepening our ability to critically use relationality to address power within and outside of Indigenous communities will place us in a better position to overturn colonial dynamics within our research.

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### Glossary

Nehiyaw Pwat	Iron Alliance; a political, military and economic alliance of dozens of local bands that were composed of people who identified as Cree, Metis, Saulteaux and Assiniboine
wahkohtowin; wahkootowin	kinship

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