

Principles to Draw Together Intersectionality with Indigenous and Western Approaches to Knowledge Creation

Introduction

We have identified a set of principles common to both intersectionality and the frameworks that try to link Indigenous and Western ways of knowing. These principles were discussed repeatedly and in various forms in the academic literature and in our conversations with key informants and wisdom keepers. They are also acknowledged in a range of research protocols developed by, or in collaboration with, Indigenous Nations and communities, as well as in work that advances intersectional knowledge.

The seven principles are: Reciprocity, Relationality, Reflexivity, Respect, Reverence, Responsivity, and Responsibility.

Linking Frameworks	Intersectionality
Reciprocity: <i>We must value and engage with ways of knowing other than our own</i>	
All knowledge systems can make unique contributions to research and deserve equal consideration. ¹ There is an ethical obligation to pursue reciprocity or exchange across differing knowledge systems, to ensure co-existence in mutual protection, benefit, and continuity. ²	Intersectionality advocates for reciprocity through the inclusion of marginalized peoples' perspectives in research and policy development. Recognizing and disrupting power imbalances by examining the implications of diverse knowledge systems on different groups of people is also important. ³
Relationality: <i>All of creation is interdependent and interconnected in complex and sometimes antagonistic ways.</i>	
Researchers should take a multifaceted approach to any research subject. ⁴ To capture complex interconnections and address the associated relational obligations, researchers must build long-term, collaborative and reciprocal relationships of trust and understanding with research subjects, participants, collaborators, environments, etc. ⁵ Relationality also means that there are opportunities for solidarity building across different worldviews, which fosters socio-political resistance and reconciliation. ⁶	Intersectionality focuses on human beings, and not on relationships between living and non-living entities. However, intersectional theorists "see all bodies as connected to one another and dependent on each other for survival." ⁷ Intersectional research also embraces a kind of relationality in its use of interdisciplinary fields of study to adequately account for a wide range of sociohistorical realities from diverse vantage points. ⁸ As well, intersectionality considers the links between global, local, and personal institutions, governments, organizations, families, and individuals.

This is one of a series of five fact sheets drawn from a research paper called Learning across Indigenous and Western knowledge systems and intersectionality: Reconciling social science research approaches (2018) by L. Levac, L. McMurtry, D. Stienstra, G. Baikie, C. Hanson and D. Mucina. The fact sheets were authored by J. Stinson, designed by Ellyn Lusic and Tiffany Murphy, and formatted by B. Ryan. The fact sheets, full research paper, and related resources are available at www.criaw-icref.ca.

Linking Frameworks	Intersectionality
Reflexivity: <i>Researchers must continuously examine the significance of their positions within existing power relations.</i>	
<p>Reflexivity is necessary for conducting research that is “culturally safe”, or respectful of difference, because it exposes and challenges power imbalances.⁹ Self-examination and critical reflection enable researchers to examine and take responsibility for how they impact and are impacted by research processes and participants.¹⁰ Three layers of reflexivity – “self-reflexivity, inter-personal reflexivity and collective reflexivity” allow researchers to consider “interpersonal and collective dynamics during the research process, and any effects that the research may potentially have into the future...”¹¹</p>	<p>Explicit in intersectionality’s critique of power is the mandate that researchers and policy makers must practice reflexivity that acknowledges the importance of power within ourselves, in our relationships, and within society more broadly.¹² Reflexivity also requires attention to how our position in time and space shapes (and is shaped) by our perspectives and experiences. Consequently, we must practice self-location, which means analyzing how our worldview and access to power depends on our positions in time and space.¹³</p>
Respect: <i>Research must be designed and directed by affected people and groups to ensure that it is respectful of difference.</i>	
<p>Participant engagement and control of research is necessary to preserve/restore peoples’ autonomy and self-determination, to honour differences, to correct power imbalances, and to capture contextual complexity. This form of relational respect helps to ensure the relevance, utility, validity, accessibility, and impact of research.¹⁴ Researchers should also engage with community collaborators through all phases of research and incorporate multiple ways of knowing at every stage.¹⁵ Ensuring that research is not imposed on others also includes demonstrating respect for intangible cultural property, empowerment of participants through capacity development and accessible knowledge sharing, and respect for animals and environments engaged in research processes.¹⁶</p>	<p>Intersectional researchers demonstrate respect for research participants by inviting them to discuss aspects of their experience and identity that they believe to be relevant to the research project. In this way, researchers can avoid asking questions that reduce, label, or segregate various dimensions of the individual, and instead enable self-determination. This is key to preventing researchers from exercising undo power over participants by diminishing or misrepresenting them. Respect includes understanding that “each subject is located in an interlocking network of oppressions and empowerments that render them both vulnerable [some more than others] and capable of exploiting the vulnerability of others.”¹⁷ Researchers are reminded that the privilege of some is based on the oppression of others, and that they must in-turn steer clear of paternalistic research practices.</p>
Reverence: <i>Research should be informed by spiritual values and practices.</i>	
<p>The metaphysical or spiritual plain, accessed through ceremonial practices such as fasting, smudging, and prayer, is embraced by some decolonizing research methodologies as a legitimate source of knowledge that should play a lead role in research.¹⁸</p>	<p>Reverence for the metaphysical is not a principle that explicitly appears in intersectional research. However, the influential concepts of “spirit-murder” and “spirit-affirmation” were introduced in 1989¹⁹ to describe the impact of inequity on the human spirit. This suggests that intersectional thought does include an appreciation for the metaphysical.</p>

Linking Frameworks

Intersectionality

Responsivity: Knowledge systems are fluid and responsive to change.

Indigenous ways of knowing are responsive; they are not static. The process of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, histories, and cultures can be seen as part of a continuum of ongoing change and adaptation achieved by Indigenous peoples. For example, “[the] entire Anishnabek path of life story is all about reconciling change, reconciling new additions as you come along, and it’s said that you have seven additions, or challenges, or paths on your main path. You can get stuck on those paths and some people do, and those paths are important, but you always have another path...”²⁰

Intersectionality focuses on the fluidity of identity categories, recognizing that they correlate to shared but not universal experiences. One’s relative position of power may also shift in varying contexts, for instance, from oppression to power, or from power *over* others to power *with* others. Consequently, while intersectional researchers are concerned with giving voice to subjugated knowledges, they are also careful not to represent those voices as static or unchanging.²¹

Responsibility: Research should further social justice and wellbeing.

The research process can provide opportunities for “recovery, healing, and development”²², or transformative social justice. To achieve this, researchers must be attentive to power imbalances, historical violence, and, inequality.²³ Researchers must also be concerned with their impact on “the social and physical environment, as well as future generations” and “the physical, emotional, social, cultural, and spiritual wellbeing of individual research participants, as well as the wellbeing of the broader community.”²⁴

Intersectionality values research as a social justice intervention. Researchers elevate the perspectives of marginalized peoples, to address social, structural, and systemic inequities.²⁵ Consequently, resistance and resilience are key concepts in intersectional analyses.²⁶ In contrast to Indigenous methodology, intersectional theorists do not typically see their responsibility extending to physical or natural environments unless research participants identify those as key components to their wellbeing.

Applying these principles to research

The following three examples illustrate some ways in which these principles can be incorporated into research.

Example 1: Ethical space for a sensitive research topic

Engaging First Nations women in the development of culturally safe human papillomavirus screening²⁷

This was a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project that aimed to reduce cervical cancer by developing culturally safe approaches to cervical screening. Cervical cancer rates were twenty-times higher in Canadian First Nations communities in Alberta, NWT, Manitoba, and Ontario than in non-First Nations communities. This difference was associated with an under-screened population due to the “remoteness of many First Nations communities lacking local screening facilities and low awareness of the need for screening to prevent cervical cancer... [and] may be exacerbated by negative experiences First Nations women may have had with the mainstream health care system.”²⁸

The project was directed by a sense of **responsibility**, because it tried to address the wellbeing of First Nations women with regard to their geographic marginalization and systemic experiences of injustice.

The project also acknowledged the **responsivity** of First Nations communities, that employ modern western medical practices where appropriate. Further, stakeholders developed culturally informed strategies, such as incorporating STI prevention into the teachings of Elders.

Researchers attempted to demonstrate **respect** by initiating relationships with local First Nations’ They worked collaboratively to develop the research strategy, responsibilities and roles, and agreements identifying risks for, and expectations of, the research team and participants.

Example 2: Learning from the grandmothers

Incorporating Indigenous principles into qualitative research²⁹

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This research project used qualitative methods informed by Indigenous cultural practices to better understand the midlife health experiences of Elder Indigenous women. The research team showed **reverence** for the importance of Indigenous spiritual values and practices by examining how spirituality impacts women's well-being in their midlife.

The principles of **reciprocity** and **reflexivity** were demonstrated by the researcher's public and private journal writing, through which she reflected on the challenges of engaging with difference. Furthermore, she undertook instruction from Elders to "enhance [her] cultural competence for current and future interactions with research partners."³⁰

The researcher was also **responsive** and expanded her academic toolbox by employing culturally appropriate methodologies, such as storytelling, to gather data.

Finally, the project acknowledged **relationality** by drawing on intuition as a kind of data. This "arose from the grandmothers' accentuation of holistic learning, which involves all of the senses, not just those related to cognition."³¹

Example 3: Blending Aboriginal and Western healing methods

Treating intergenerational trauma with substance use disorder in Aboriginal peoples who live in Northeastern Ontario, Canada.³²

This research explored how Indigenous healing methods and the Western "Seeking Safety" model can be developed to respond to intergenerational trauma and substance use disorders in Northeastern Ontario. Various forms and sources of trauma in Indigenous communities over the past 400 years are discussed at length, focusing explicitly on residential schools and related "lateral violence directed toward family and community members, thereby creating intergenerational cycles of abuse, which can resemble many of the experiences at residential schools."³³

The article reflects **responsibility**, by challenging and responding to the impacts of colonialism. It also promotes **reciprocity** and **responsivity** by arguing that a combination of Indigenous and Western treatment options (such as the presence of Elders in treatment programs, the participation of non-Indigenous providers in community events and ceremonies, etc.) increases individuals' access to programs and decreases dropout rates.

Reverence for Indigenous spirituality is notable in the overarching goal of combining Aboriginal healing practices and Western medicine, and in the incorporation of the Medicine Wheel into the Western "Seeking Safety" model. The Medicine Wheel is an interconnected system of Indigenous teachings which associates directions (North, South, East, and West) to colours, stages of life, and aspects of the human experience, including spiritual well-being, in order to represent and understand life as holistic and balanced.

Conclusion

These principles and examples of their application can guide scholars, policy-makers, and others doing research to advance the work of truth and reconciliation. How exactly to apply these principles within specific research projects must be done on a case-by-case basis, and through conversations between collaborators.



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