

# “Relationships are at the heart of good research”: Exploring relational accountability in Ontario’s Indigenous Mentorship Network

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## BACKGROUND

- Indigenous peoples worldwide experience poorer health outcomes, and these disparities are caused by ongoing processes of colonization, environmental dispossession and structural discrimination.
- Addressing these health inequities requires a reorientation in how Indigenous health research occurs: community-led research, privileging Indigenous voices, knowledges and worldviews.
- Relational accountability refers to the social, cultural, and spiritual practices in which research partners and communities engage to build and maintain ethical and culturally safe research spaces (Ermine, 2005; 2007; Kovach, 2010).
- Understanding the processes that build relational accountability, we can better support students undertaking Indigenous health research.

## OBJECTIVES

- To understand students’ perceptions of relational accountability.
- Explore how relational accountability is applied in their research relationships:
  - with their supervisors,
  - mentors,
  - peers, and
  - communities that they work with.
- To examine factors that support and constrain relational accountability in Indigenous health training environments.

## METHODS

- This research uses a qualitative and inductive approach as it seeks to investigate the applied ways relational accountability builds for the first time. It is a case study of IMN-Ontario.
- Thirteen graduate students participated in semi-structured interviews during the months of July-September.
- All participants are undertaking Indigenous health research in masters, PhD or professional studies. Indigenous and non-Indigenous students from a variety of disciplines and institutions participated.
- All participants are a part of the IMN-Ontario, and attended the 2018 or 2019 Summer Institute. As a fellow attendee of these institutes, it allowed me to build relationships with the participants prior to this research project.
- Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.
- Interviews were thematically coded using NVivo. This is the process of assigning a theme or “Code” to text, in order to analyze for recurring themes in the interview data.

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## RESEARCH FOUNDATIONS

### Indigenous Health

- Indigenous peoples in Canada are extremely diverse, with distinct cultures arising from the connections they have with their local environments – fostering spiritual, cultural and social connections (Richmond & Big-Canoe, 2018; United Nations 2015).
- Land, knowledge, and health are interconnected.
- Health is conceptualized as a balance between physical, spiritual, mental and emotional health.

### Indigenous Health Geography

- A subdiscipline of human geography that focuses on the intersection of Indigenous peoples’ health and environments.

### Indigenous Health Training Environments

- The Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) was created in 2000, with 13 research institutes within it.
- CIHR has introduced several programs since its inception to help build Indigenous capacity in health research, train Indigenous health researchers, and improve research relationships with Indigenous communities.
- The Indigenous Mentorship Network Program has supported the next generation of Indigenous health scholars through mentorship, scholarships, training and networking since 2017 and is a 5 year program.

### Research Relationships

- Relational accountability was first theorized in research relationships by Wilson and Wilson (1998).
- In 2001, Wilson describes it is essential in Indigenous methodologies and research, as we must be accountable to “All our relations” in research.
- Wilson (2008) introduced the three R’s of relational accountability: reciprocity, responsibility, and respect.

## FINDINGS

### Theoretical

- Relational accountability can be viewed in a holistic way: Understanding how the four foundations and influences are connected, but also how it builds physically, spiritually, mentally and emotionally
- This research contributes to how ethical research is conducted
- Contributes to ontology of Indigenous Research, bringing attention to the importance of being attentive to all relations in health training
  - Must be accountable within the relationships in the training environments as well as external relationships
- Transitioning to a relational ontology may include a shift from individual to relationship based research, from outcome to process driven, developing from secular to spiritual and from a hierarchal to collaborative dynamic.
- Safe spaces exist beyond physical places and can include relationships and interactions
- Doing things in a good way should be at the center of research relationships
  - The intention of the researcher and research is important, and doing things in a good way should be at the center of all research relationships

### Methodological

- Mentorship networks and student organizations provide safe spaces for Indigenous students to express themselves without fear, and feel comfortable with like-minded people
- Time is essential for building relationships, and the time necessary for building these relationships is often more than academic timelines permit
- Relational accountability must be part of the research process

## REFERENCES

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## RESULTS

### 1. Reconceptualizing Relational Accountability

Based on the common experiences and perceptions that students shared in their interviews relational accountability can be described as “the commitment to doing things in a good way, while considering both the specific and multitude of relationships that exist through space and time.” (p. 27). This captures the recurring themes of time, environments, all relations and good intentions. All 13 interview participants responded to the question “What does relational accountability mean to you?”, which was used to inform this reconceptualization.

### 2. Introducing Four Foundations for Building Relational Accountability

The four foundational pillars from which relational accountability in Indigenous health training environments builds: time, relational ontology, values, and benefitting community. The number of respondents mentioning and total number of mentions for each theme related to these pillars are displayed in *Table One*.

### 3. Applied Examples of Influences of Relational Accountability

This research identified 71 supports, 29 strains and 11 tensions that influence the process of building relational accountability.

- Supports describe factors that positively influence relational accountability or one or more of its four dimensions.
- Strains describe negative influences.
- Tensions lay in the middle and are factors have the potential to act positively or negatively, depending on the context.

### 4. Conceptual Model Displaying Relatedness between Foundations and Influences

These findings have been presented in a conceptual framework (*Figure 1*) to display the relationship between time, relational ontology, values, benefitting community and supports, strains and tensions. Time is displayed as the river, relational ontology the landscape, values as the sun, benefitting community as the lake, supports is the paddle, strains are the clouds and tensions as the current (*Table 2*).

Table one: Time, relational ontology, values and benefit to community as foundations for building relational accountability.

Dimensions of relational accountability	# of mentions (%)	# of respondents mentioning (n=13) (%)
<b>Time</b>		
Time	41 (22) <sup>a</sup>	12 (92) <sup>b</sup>
<b>Relational Ontology</b>		
Relationships	45 (24)	13 (100)
Relational	9 (5)	6 (46)
<b>Values</b>		
Respect	28 (15)	6 (46)
Reciprocity	21 (11)	7 (54)
Responsibility	22 (12)	9 (69)
Doing things in a good way	11 (6)	8 (62)
<b>Benefitting Community</b>		
Benefits community	13 (7)	6 (46)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>190</b>	

<sup>a</sup> Presents the number of mentions the code, and the percentage of total mentions. Due to rounding, the percentages do not sum to 100.

<sup>b</sup> Presents the number of respondents mentioning the code from total sample (also a percentage).

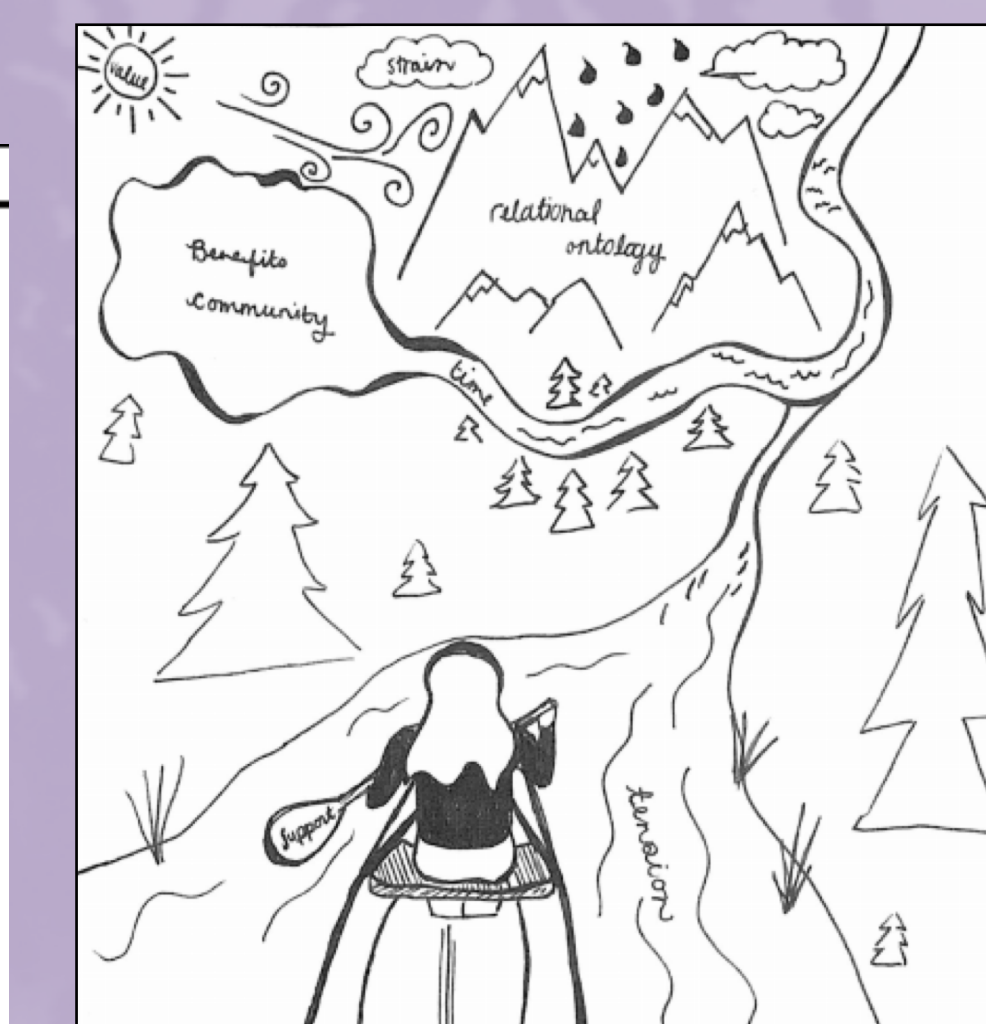


Figure one: Relationship between the four foundations and the influences (Reitmeier, 2020).

Table two: Meaning of the dimension and influence symbology as displayed in figure one.

Dimension/Influence	Symbol	Meaning
Time	River	Time is circular, and flows like a river. Past, present and future are connected.
Relational Ontology	Landscape	The world is interconnected, just as landscapes are a scale that connect different parts of the environment.
Values	Sun	Respect, reciprocity, doing things in a good way – values drive relational accountability similarly to the sun driving Earth’s processes.
Benefitting Community	Lake	Where the water flows to, or from – benefitting community is both the motivation and the goal throughout the research process.
Support	Paddle	Supports help guide and move one forward in the research journey.
Strain	Cloud	Weather is short term, and similar to inter-personal strains. Climate is long term, alike structural constraints.
Tension	Current	The current can either help or impede you, depending on which way you are traveling and which way it flows. This represents the spectrum of ways a tension could influence the building of relational accountability.