

## FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES

# Relational Accountability as a Conflict Resolution Framework for Rebuilding Trust in Indigenous Research Partnerships

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Conflict is an inevitable part of research, even when research emphasizes collaboration, reciprocity, participatory, and a community-based approach. For community-based Indigenous research, this is compounded with the enduring influence of colonial research paradigms and historical harms. Addressing conflict in research, especially within Indigenous partnerships is essential for meaningful collaboration. This paper presents Relational Accountability as a methodological framework for addressing conflict and harm that may occur in community-based participatory research. It emphasizes rebuilding trust and restoring relationships within Indigenous research partnerships by reframing research as a practice grounded in the ethics of relationality and contextual understandings. This framework further calls for research relationships to extend beyond standard ethical approval and tokenistic consultation, and urges researchers to uphold principles of respect, reciprocity and responsibility throughout the research in response to conflict and harm. We present the context of our experiences within a research partnership where harm occurred, and we apply the Relational Accountability framework to guide our process in relation to collective work and Indigenous research partnerships, Indigenous and institutional ethics, Indigenous self-determination, and addressing the harm.

Research has long been entangled with colonial systems of control, particularly in relation to the study of Indigenous Peoples. Historical examples of academic and government-led research clearly demonstrate how knowledge has often been produced about communities rather than with them, without consent, meaningful involvement, or benefit (Cram et al., 2013; Hayward et al., 2021; Maar et al., 2007; Mair, 2011; Poudrier, 2007; Simonds & Christopher, 2013; Tait, 2001). Notable cases of these unethical studies illustrating a long-standing pattern of extractive research include: the nutrition experiments conducted in residential schools between 1942 and 1952 (Mosby, 2013); the unauthorized use of blood samples from the Havasupai Tribe (Dalton, 2002; Garrison & Cho, 2013); the 1979 “Barrow Alcohol Study” involving Inupiat residents of Utqiagvik, Alaska (Foulks, 1989); the skin-grafting experiments performed on Inuit in the early 1970s (Emberley, 2008); and the coerced sterilization of Indigenous women (Stote, 2015). Cram and colleagues (2013) describe the apprehension Indigenous peoples feel toward research by explaining that, “the ‘bad name’ that research

has within Indigenous communities is not about the notion of research itself; rather it is about how that research has been practiced, by whom, and for what purpose that has created ill-feeling” (Cram et al., 2013, p. 11). These extractive practices reinforced asymmetrical power dynamics with researchers, institutions, and the state retaining control over how knowledge was generated, interpreted, and disseminated.

Despite widespread calls for decolonizing methodologies and ethical engagement with Indigenous peoples and communities, many research practices continue to replicate these colonial processes and power dynamics. In the context of Indigenous research, there is often a rhetoric of change as language emphasizes collaboration, reciprocity, or ‘community-based’ approaches (Harrison, 2001; Holkup et al., 2004). Yet in practice, researchers may still maintain authority over applying for funding, framing of research questions, methods, interpretation of data, and control of outcomes. In some cases, research partnerships conclude upon the completion of the study, with relationships between academic and community partners formally or informally dissolving once project deliverables have been met, funding cycles have ended, or knowledge outputs have been produced. This pattern has been noted within critiques of community-based and participatory research, where partnerships, despite being framed as collaborative and reciprocal, may remain bounded by dominant Western research norms, institutional timelines and priorities, and structural barriers to funding, rather than sustained relational commitments (Brabeck et al., 2015; Buchanan et al., 2007; Flicker et al., 2007; Israel et al., 1992, 1998; Mitchell & Baker, 2005; N. Wallerstein & Duran, 2010; E. Wilson et al., 2018). This disconnect between participatory, collaborative, and community-based discourse and practice reveals the enduring influence of colonial research paradigms, even within efforts that claim to be transformative (Buchanan et al., 2007; Morton Ninomiya & Pollock, 2017).

Although approaches such as community-based participatory research (CBPR) and participatory action research (PAR) have sought to address these inequities through collaboration, reciprocity, and shared decision-making, they are often implemented within institutional frameworks that position participation as project-based rather than recognizing it as ongoing ethical obligation, prompting Indigenous scholars to argue that relational accountability requires a deeper shift in how research itself is understood and enacted (Copenance et al., 2020; Dawson et al., 2017; Israel et al., 1998; LaVeaux & Christopher, 2009; S. Wilson, 2008). Collaborative research involving Indigenous peoples has been critiqued for conflating these partnership approaches with decolonizing methodologies, and for, at times, reproducing colonial power relations (de Leeuw et al., 2012). Grounded in Indigenous epistemologies, relational accountability positions knowledge as inherently relational and insists that researchers are accountable not only to participants or community partners, but also to the broader web of relationships that include families, communities, Nations, land, and future

generations (S. Wilson, 2008). In this framing, accountability is not merely procedural or satisfied through consultation, advisory structures, or co-design, but is an ongoing ethical responsibility enacted through sustained, reciprocal, and respectful relationships before, during, and beyond the life of a project (de Leeuw et al., 2012; Kovach, 2010; LaVeaux & Christopher, 2009; Morton Ninomiya & Pollock, 2017; S. Wilson, 2008). As such, relational accountability extends beyond other participatory frameworks in emphasizing responsibility within relationships, challenging dominant Western assumptions about who holds authority over knowledge and how that knowledge should be used. While conflict is an inherent aspect of relationships, principles of relational accountability offer a meaningful framework for addressing wrongdoing, navigating misunderstandings, and restoring balance following harm. When taken seriously, relational accountability extends beyond ethical conduct to encompass ongoing responsibility to relationships, including the work required to repair trust and sustain collaboration. Although a substantial body of literature has examined the benefits and methodological approaches of community-based and participatory research, less attention has been paid to how these partnerships respond to and work through conflict. This paper contributes to that gap by focusing on the relational processes involved in addressing tension and repair within research partnerships.

Relational accountability, a core principle in many Indigenous research methodologies, offers a framework for a meaningful path forward by reframing research as a practice grounded in the ethics of relationality and contextual understandings (Chilisa, 2020; Denzin et al., 2008; King, 2015; Kovach, 2021; Weber-Pillwax, 1999; S. Wilson, 2008). It emphasizes relationships between researchers and communities, between people and land, and across generations; and that the researcher is accountable to all of these relations (Chilisa, 2020; S. Wilson, 2008). Relational accountability extends beyond standard ethical approval or superficial, tokenistic consultation, and instead, calls for researchers to uphold principles of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility throughout the entire research process and lifecycle (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001). It challenges scholars to cede control, listen deeply, and engage in research as a shared, negotiated, and community-directed undertaking well beyond the requirements of a funding application or institutional ethics protocol. Furthermore, it calls on researchers to shift understandings of validity and reliability in research projects away from western concepts to one that is centered on whether the researcher has fulfilled their role and obligations of the relationship to the community which the research was being done with and for (S. Wilson, 2001).

The growing visibility of Indigenous-led research partnerships is due, in part, to advocacy from Indigenous communities demanding meaningful involvement in research, as well as increased funding opportunities dedicated to Indigenous research (Castellano, 2004; C. Reading et al., 2014). Within the scholarship on Indigenous methodologies, ‘relational accountability’ is

frequently cited as foundational (Chilisa, 2020; Kovach, 2010; Smith, 2021; S. Wilson, 2001, 2008). However, what does this principle require in the aftermath of conflict and/or harm that occurs during the research process? Relational accountability teaches that knowledge creation and sharing are embedded in relationships and invites us to move beyond an instrumental view of research to consider how we remain accountable, especially when research does not go as planned (Brant et al., 2023; D'Costa, n.d.; Fraser, 2022; S. Wilson, 2008). When harm occurs through the research process, the question becomes not only: *How do we proceed?* But also: *How do we repair?* And *What does it mean to act with integrity when relationships have been strained or broken?*

This paper presents Relational Accountability as a methodological framework (S. Wilson, 2001, 2008) for guidance in addressing conflict and harm that can occur in community-based participatory research processes, focusing on rebuilding trust and restoring relationships in Indigenous research partnerships. We first present the context our experiences in a research partnership where harm occurred and then work through utilizing a Relational Accountability framework for guidance on different areas of conflict and harm in research processes, including collective work and Indigenous research partnerships, Indigenous and institutional ethics, Indigenous self-determination, and addressing harms.

### Context

In 2018, an Indigenous community health organization invited our research team consisting of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars to collaborate on the development and piloting of an urban health program within their agency. The goal of this initiative was to improve health outcomes for Indigenous birthing people and their babies in Winnipeg, Manitoba through culturally grounded care and support. Established in 1994, the agency is Manitoba's only Indigenous community health organization providing trauma-informed, anti-racist, wrap-around care grounded in harm reduction principles. In addition to comprehensive primary care services, the agency delivers a range of integrated programs focused on housing, parenting, and men's healing. In recent years, it has further expanded its services through the introduction of an Indigenous-led Rapid Access to Addictions Medicine (RAAM) clinic and a Mobile Healthcare Clinic, with planning also underway for Manitoba's first supervised safer consumption site. Their mission, vision, and values describe a blending and balancing of traditional and contemporary ways of knowing and learning, and a deep commitment to supporting the urban Indigenous population of Winnipeg, including Two-Spirit, Trans, and Queer peoples.

Accordingly, all research conducted in partnership with the agency is required to follow both broader Indigenous protocols and the specific ethical framework developed by the agency itself. At the outset of the project, we began envisioning a five-year plan rooted in caring for our community and honouring traditional practices. The PI initiated the project with ceremony to

affirm collective intent and seek ancestral and spiritual guidance prior to grant submissions, consistent with “research as ceremony” as a methodological and ethical orientation (Copenance et al., 2020; S. Wilson, 2008). During this process, the project was gifted a name and accompanying cultural teachings to guide its approach. The process reflected Indigenous ways of knowing and doing (Kovach, 2021), the centrality of cultural protocols in research (Smith, 2021), and the view that Indigenous methodologies are inseparable from the values and practices of the communities in which they are situated (Chilisa, 2020). The subsequent success of the first set of grant applications was received as validation of the path that had been set.

As the project expanded, there was a noticeable shift in practice where cultural instructions that had once been central to carry out the work, gradually began to assume a lower priority in response to what was perceived as ‘more important’ or urgent project work. For instance, we had been culturally instructed to gather and feast the work four times per year, typically aligning with the seasonal solstices. Far from being symbolic add-ons, these gatherings were vital acts of respect, honouring the project’s intent and recognizing the unique contributions each of us made during that season.

In practice, this often meant that a team member’s family took on the responsibility of preparing meals for community members such as the leadership team at our partner agency and university research team members. On these occasions, multi-generations would work in the kitchen and package food items, offering their time and labour as an act of collective care. Although the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted many of these processes, we adapted the teachings by creating individual care packages and safely delivering them throughout the city. This effort, while logistically challenging compared to hosting a gathering, was grounded in the same principle of caring for our relatives to honour the spirit of the instructions, even under restrictive conditions.

However, even when public health restrictions were lifted by the Spring of 2022, the project’s cultural components were never fully restored. Instead, these acts of relational care and accountability were replaced with acts of convenience, such as gift cards for commercial food services. While perhaps efficient, these substitutions marked a departure from the relational and ceremonial dimensions that had once grounded the work. The shift reflected a deeper concern that as institutional and funding body timelines, deliverables, and administrative demands took precedence, the project moved further away from the original commitments to honour relationships and cultural protocols through love, reciprocity, and shared presence.

While it is neither necessary nor productive to enumerate every way the project failed to meet community expectations, it is essential to recognize the resulting damage our actions as academics in positions of power inflicted on these relationships. Where there was once a sense of kinship and mutual respect reflected in regular communication and a shared commitment to the work, interactions with the community agency gradually diminished,

and eventually, ceased altogether. This breakdown did not signal the end of the project itself; rather, it marked a shift away from a community-led approach toward a more conventional and colonial academic model, one that re-centered institutional priorities and the researcher as in control. The PI shifted their leadership style and recentered institutional power, shaping the direction and decisions in ways that significantly departed from the original intent of the project. While the project was initially framed as a collaborative, community-led effort within research grants and in publications, the control over key aspects such as the allocation of resources gradually sidelined the community partner organizations. As the work evolved, decisions were made without consulting these partners, or even fully informing them, leaving them without meaningful input or the ability to shape outcomes that directly affected their agency and the communities they serve. In the end, the community partner organizations were left carrying the consequences of a project they were no longer true partners in, raising concerns about informed consent, ethical accountability, and the fundamental responsibilities of academic researchers working in community-engaged contexts.

In the fall of 2024, the sudden departure of the original PI, prompted a shift in both leadership and project direction. It's within this context that the research team and authors of this paper centered the principle of 'relational accountability' as a guiding methodological framework for repair. While the actions of the former principal investigator are not ours to assume responsibility for, there remains an ethical obligation to engage in processes of repair in order to restore balance and realign with our own values and commitments. The ceremony in which the research team participated constituted a meaningful and relationally grounded commitment, one that carries significance beyond the formal roles held within a research project. As such, the collective sense of responsibility extended beyond project completion to include honouring the relationships and commitments established through that process. This necessitated an intentional effort to uphold those commitments while continuing the work in a manner that was accountable to the community and consistent with the principles that guided our involvement. This shift demanded critical self-reflection of our individual and collective roles in the harm, recognizing that power imbalances, academic privilege, and weak institutional accountability had shaped our actions, and ultimately fractured the trust our community partner organizations had placed in us. It also required a renewed and intentional commitment to restoring trust and rebuilding relationships, not solely to preserve the integrity of the research project, but out of deep respect for the ethical responsibilities we carry within the research relationship itself.

Relational accountability reminded us that our responsibilities extend beyond the project's deliverables and timelines; they are grounded in the ethical imperative to honour the people, communities, and knowledges we engage with through the work. This meant creating space to listen with intention and care, to take responsibility without defensiveness for what roles

we did hold within the project, and to rebuild partnerships on terms defined by the community, while recognizing that true repair would be measured not by academic success, but by the strength and reciprocity of the relationships we are accountable to.

### **Collective Work and Indigenous Research Partnerships**

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of human relationships, particularly in collective work where individuals bring diverse perspectives, lived experiences, values, priorities, and expectations. Classic definitions describe conflict as “a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources” (Boulding, 1962, p. 5). Within research partnerships, such differences can generate tensions as collaborators navigate varying interests, cultural frameworks, language, and institutional demands (Guenther, 2009). Although conflict is often framed as negative or disruptive, scholars of conflict transformation remind us that it can also serve as a catalyst for growth, learning, and strengthened relationships when engaged with openness and accountability (Lederach, 2003). Constructively addressing conflict requires processes that emphasize dialogue, mutual respect, and relational responsibility, rather than avoidance or reliance on hierarchical authority (Fisher et al., 2006).

In Indigenous research contexts, conflict must be understood not merely as interpersonal disruption but as a critical moment to reaffirm commitments to relational ethics and accountability (Kovach, 2021; S. Wilson, 2008). Tensions often arise from misunderstandings, unmet expectations, power imbalances, or the collision of institutional demands with community priorities (Brunger & Wall, 2016; Castleden et al., 2010). These dynamics are further complicated by the historical and ongoing experiences of Indigenous communities, many of whom have been over-researched, misrepresented, or harmed by academic institutions (Bull, 2010; Hayward et al., 2021; Smith, 2021). Even well-intentioned projects may falter when academic timelines move faster than community processes, when consultation is insufficient, or when unexamined assumptions shape decision-making.

Naming and engaging these tensions is therefore not simply about keeping projects on track but about recognizing the real impacts that research practices can have on people, relationships, and collective well-being. When approached with humility, reflexivity, and care, conflict becomes a generative space for repair and co-creation, rather than a marker of dysfunction. Avoiding or suppressing conflict risks deepening harm, while embracing it creates opportunities for honesty, mutual problem-solving, and the strengthening of partnerships. In this sense, acknowledging conflict as an expected part of relational work allows research teams to slow down, centre community voices, and identify pathways forward that are both ethical and self-determined.

Recognizing this, we understand that moments of conflict and harm compel us to confront uncomfortable truths about how power operates within research relationships: whose voices are prioritized, how institutional

authority and academic expertise shape decision-making, and the gaps between our stated values and our actions. These moments expose the often-unseen ways that project leadership and institutional structures can overshadow or silence the knowledge, priorities, and concerns of community partners, even within methodological frameworks that claim to resist such dynamics. They also prompt critical reflection on whether principles central to relational accountability such as respect, reciprocity, co-leadership, reflection, and responsibility, are genuinely enacted in our daily practices or remain aspirational rather than embodied.

Such reflection is difficult, as it surfaces tensions between institutional expectations including grant timelines, deliverables, metrics of success and the slower relational pace of trust-building and shared decision-making that community-centered research requires. It further challenges researchers to acknowledge when their actions, even unintentionally, have contributed to harm, and to accept responsibility for addressing that harm in ways determined by the community. Confronting these truths is not a matter of self-criticism for its own sake, but a necessary step in creating conditions for meaningful change, narrowing the gap between values and practice, and aligning research more closely with the ethical and relational commitments it claims to uphold.

Approaching conflict and harm through relational accountability frames such moments as opportunities for greater honesty, deeper engagement, stronger and more accountable relationships, and recalibration of the work to ensure it remains rooted in community needs and priorities. As part of the iterative nature of relational practice, this requires humility, a willingness to apologize and make amends, and openness to being transformed by what is learned. Most importantly, it demands a sustained commitment to honouring responsibilities within the research relationship, not only in moments of harmony, but especially when tensions arise, and trust is most at risk.

### **Indigenous Research Ethics and Institutional Research Ethics Boards**

As ethical frameworks have evolved and scholarship on Indigenous research methodologies has grown, it has become evident that ethics cannot be reduced to formal protocols, institutional approvals, or procedural checklists (Hayward et al., 2021; Piquemal, 2000). Much of the current discourse emphasizes how to engage ethically from the outset, whether that be through community consultation, shared governance structures, or the integration of Indigenous ethical principles. However, far less attention has been paid to the ethics of accountability after harm has occurred, particularly in circumstances where trust has been broken, as was the case in our experience. As Morton Ninomiya and Pollock (2017) argue, this could stem from a reluctance to critically examine research challenges, limited prompts within academic publishing to do so, insufficient emphasis on reflexive research practices, and a lack of consistent accountability within research ethics processes. As Holkup and colleagues (2004) note, an important ethical consideration is how to manage information that may portray a community in a negative

light. While their discussion focuses on the reporting of participant-related findings and the potential for such disclosures to cause harm or undermine community trust, this concern extends to the research process itself. A failure to acknowledge challenges encountered in Indigenous research risks minimizing the complexity of these engagements and obscuring the relational, ethical, and structural dynamics that shape the work.

Indigenous research ethics are grounded in principles that go beyond standard institutional review processes; they emphasize the principles of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility, that are found within relational accountability (CIHR et al., 2018; Cram et al., 2013; Kovach, 2010; Smith, 2021). At the heart of Indigenous research ethics is the recognition that research is not simply the collection of data or the production of knowledge; rather it is a relational process that connects people, lands, histories, and futures (Hart, 2010; Lavallée, 2009; Tuck & Yang, 2012). This understanding further deepens the obligations that researchers carry, not only in meeting academic standards but also those to the communities, knowledges, and cultural protocols they engage with. These core ethical commitments include honouring Indigenous sovereignty, ensuring community leadership and consent throughout all stages of the project, protecting Indigenous intellectual property and data, and prioritizing the well-being of the community over the researcher's or institution's interests. Ethical research with Indigenous peoples requires humility, transparency, and a long-term commitment to relationships that extend beyond the life of any single project or grant.

However, when a research project is interrupted, delayed, or discontinued, regardless of the reason, communities are often left without a clear process for ensuring ethical accountability and addressing the impacts of that disruption. This lack of closure can result in confusion, harm, or a sense of abandonment, particularly when expectations have been set around long-term collaboration or meaningful outcomes. This also often leaves communities and partners without the support they had been promised through the project. In many Indigenous research contexts, formal agreements such as letters of support or partnership commitments submitted within grant applications are not just administrative requirements, rather they are built on trust, relational accountability, consensus building and mutual understanding (Holkup et al., 2004; Madden, 2008; Saunders & Dubois, 2019).

Community partners can engage in research in both formal and informal, yet meaningful ways. Their decision to participate in or endorse a research project, is not simply based on the project's stated aims, but on the trust they have in the researcher or research team. The ethical integrity of the work is deeply tied to those relationships (Juhnke, 2025; Legault et al., 2025). As such, when a project cannot proceed, ethical responsibility and accountability does not end with the cessation of research activities or the return of funds. Researchers maintain an ongoing obligation to communicate

transparently, and collaborate on next steps, even if that next step is not moving forward with the project, but rather co-developing a respectful and culturally grounded process for ending the relationship to provide closure.

The complexity of research timelines and the need for meaningful consultation with multiple partners can present significant challenges to maintaining alignment and responsiveness throughout the project. Coordinating across various individuals, organizations, or Nations often requires a substantial amount of time. Each partner may have distinct protocols, decision-making processes, and timelines for engagement, all of which must be honoured. Furthermore, academic institutionalized protocols most often prioritize western colonial methodologies that not only exclude Indigenous methodologies but actually runs counter to them (Lindstrom, 2022; Smith, 2021). This can create tensions between institutional pressures for expedience and the relational commitments that are inherent in community-based or Indigenous research partnerships. Navigating these dynamics requires flexibility, patience, and a strong commitment to relational accountability over procedural ease.

Tensions can also arise around the sequence in which partners are consulted, particularly when partner relationships carry differing histories, priorities, or degrees of trust. In cases where the project was endorsed, initiated, or made possible through the leadership of a community organization, those partners may expect a stronger voice in decision-making, particularly during moments of uncertainty or harm. While academic processes often assume an equal distribution of roles across co-applicants, the reality is that equity in contribution does not always reflect equity in power or accountability. In these moments, academics must be willing to relinquish control and allow community leadership to guide the path forward. Failing to do so undermines ethical responsibilities, strains longstanding relationships, and erodes trust across the network of collaborators. When a project is transitioning, delayed, or shifting directions, members of the research team may begin to create distance from a previous iteration or leadership, which can leave community partners managing the fallout or unmet expectations on their own, placing the burden of communication and relationship repair solely on them. At the same time, emerging scholars, especially those working in community-based or Indigenous research, are often left with minimal guidance or institutional support as universities and funding agencies prioritize their own administrative processes and timelines, which rarely align with the researchers' relational and ethical obligations to community partners. This disconnection leaves early-career researchers in a difficult and vulnerable position as they navigate competing demands without clear protocols, mentorship, or actionable support. Consequently, ethical accountability to the community is often diminished, not by deliberate neglect, but from a lack of structural support needed to uphold it.

Indigenous research ethics emphasizes reciprocity, respect, and a responsibility to relational commitments and relational continuity. Honouring these principles requires more than adherence to institutional ethics protocols; it demands an ongoing commitment to the people and communities who make the research possible.

### **Indigenous Self Determination**

Relational repair in Indigenous research partnerships is inseparable from the principle of Indigenous self-determination. In this context, self-determination refers to the inherent rights of Indigenous Peoples to exercise authority and control over decisions that affect their lives, lands, and knowledges, including the ways in which research is conducted (Battiste, 2007; Castleden et al., 2012; United Nations, 2007; S. Wilson, 2008). Within research, this principle means that communities must hold the power to define priorities, establish governance structures, and determine how knowledge is generated, interpreted, and shared (Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2021). Repair, therefore, is not simply about restoring trust on the terms of researchers or institutions; it is about affirming and upholding the sovereignty of Indigenous communities to lead, shape, and direct the research that involves them.

Ermine (2007) describes the ethical space of engagement as the need for a dialogical space where Indigenous and Western knowledge systems can encounter one another on equitable terms. Fundamentally, sustaining this space calls for recognition of Indigenous Peoples' inherent rights to self-determination and governance over research that affects them; without it, the space defaults back into colonial patterns of dominance and assimilation. This understanding is reinforced in the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (Canadian Institutes of Health Research [CIHR] et al., 2018), which in Chapter 9 establishes that research with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples must respect their jurisdiction, collective rights, and governance structures. It explicitly affirms that ethical research requires engagement and collaboration that recognizes community authority to define priorities and direct the research process.

Without centering self-determination, efforts at repair risk becoming superficial gestures that leave intact deeper institutionalized patterns of colonial power. By contrast, meaningful repair requires shifting decision-making power to community partners, honouring community-led priorities and stewardship of projects, ensuring iterative and ongoing consent throughout the research process, and recognition and respect for Indigenous governance systems and cultural protocols. In this way, relational accountability and repair are realized not as acts of benevolence on the part of researchers, but as the ethical enactment of Indigenous rights and responsibilities within research relationships.

## Shifting Decision-Making Power

Shifting decision making power to community partners means moving beyond surface-level consultation or tokenized inclusion to create space where Indigenous communities hold meaningful authority throughout all stages of the research process – from defining the research questions to designing the methods, interpreting the results, and determining how findings are shared or used. It is insufficient to invite Indigenous community partners into pre-established projects or ask for their input on decisions that have already been shaped by academic, funding, or institutional priorities. Instead, shifting decision-making power to community partners calls for researchers to actively relinquish control over areas where they typically hold authority, and recognizing that the expertise, priorities, and lived realities of the community is necessary to guide the work. At the same time, it is equally problematic to engage Indigenous communities and partners at the outset of research for the purposes of securing funding, followed by a failure to sustain meaningful engagement throughout the life of the project. This pattern appears to be occurring with increasing frequency as funding opportunities place greater emphasis on engagement with Indigenous communities. When relationships are initiated but not meaningfully maintained following successful grant awards, trust is eroded and partners may be left uncertain about the status, direction, or outcomes of the work. While some of these challenges may be attributed to the slow and often uncertain timelines associated with research funding cycles, ongoing, transparent communication remains essential to upholding relational accountability and maintaining trust. Rather than allowing gaps in activity to weaken relationships, research teams must prioritize ongoing engagement with partners to ensure clarity around timelines, expectations, and emerging opportunities.

This shift requires researchers to intentionally step back, listen, and take on a supportive role rather than direct the process. In response to community concerns with research, our approach has been to treat relational accountability not as an abstract principle, but as a concrete practice that requires an intentional redistribution of power within the research process. This involved stepping back from decision-making roles that are often assumed within academic research and instead centering community leadership by offering a clear budget and asking how we move forward given the funding and timelines. It demands researchers to critically examine where they are retaining decision-making power, whether due to habit, institutional pressure, or discomfort with uncertainty, and to intentionally create space for community leadership, even when it disrupts academic norms or demands shifts in timelines, outputs, or measures of success. While the Principal Investigator holds formal responsibility for the success of the project, and their career progression is often tied to its outcomes, we understand these pressures as part of the broader academic context rather than a competing priority with our community partner. At the same time, we believe that our relational and community-engaged processes are working toward the

same goals, supporting both meaningful outcomes for community partners and the overall success of the project. Shifting power calls upon researchers to advocate for these aspects of relational accountability to the academic institution when needed. In this role, researchers act as a bridge between community and institution, translating community priorities, values, and governance protocols into institutional contexts that may not otherwise recognize or accommodate them. This bridging work requires the careful navigation of institutional structures, ensuring that community voices and decisions are carried forward with integrity and that the obligations of relational accountability are upheld. In response to community requests for clarity following changes in leadership, we prioritized transparency and created space for partners to understand what had occurred and to determine the implications for ongoing and future projects. Rather than unilaterally determining next steps, we supported community partners in taking on decision-making roles regarding whether and how projects would proceed. This approach resulted in some grant funded initiatives continuing in an adapted form, while others were paused, or transitioned to new leadership structures. In practice, this meant working to translate community decisions into academic and administrative systems that often require formal approvals, including navigating instances where prior authorization structures remained tied to former leadership. This involved careful negotiation of institutional constraints, ongoing communication, and a commitment to carrying forward community decisions in ways that maintained trust and accountability. Through this process, power was meaningfully redistributed, reinforcing the principle that research direction should remain responsive to and guided by those most impacted by the work. At its heart, this strategy is about recognizing that research is not simply an intellectual exercise, but a relational and political process, and that honouring Indigenous self-determination and relational accountability means following the leadership of those who are most impacted by the work. By doing so, researchers not only strengthen the ethical foundations of the partnership but also help create outcomes that are more meaningful, relevant, and beneficial to the communities they aim to serve.

### **Honouring Community-led Priorities and Stewardship**

Another key strategy is to ensure that research is grounded in community-led priorities and stewardship (CIHR et al., 2018; Kovach, 2021; J. L. Reading & Wien, 2009; Smith, 2021; S. Wilson, 2001). When this is absent, research risks becoming extractive, serving the interests of academic institutions, funding agencies, or researchers' professional advancement rather than addressing the needs and goals articulated by the community itself (Tuck, 2009). Community-led research is therefore not simply about involving communities as participants or collaborators, but about affirming their authority as rights-holders, knowledge-holders, and leaders in determining what is important, relevant, and necessary (Kovach, 2021; Smith,

2021; United Nations, 2007; S. Wilson, 2008). This often requires disrupting established academic agendas, disciplinary boundaries, and even the funding priorities that can constrain genuinely community-driven inquiry.

It is important to distinguish between community-based or partnership research and community-led research, as they differ significantly in the depth of community involvement and decision-making authority. In community-based or partnership models, community members may contribute to the research process, yet academic or institutional partners often retain ultimate control over agendas, outcomes, and data (N. B. Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). By contrast, community-led research shifts authority decisively to the community. While partnership approaches emphasize collaboration and shared responsibility, community-led approaches centre community sovereignty, ensuring that research is accountable to local priorities, grounded in community knowledge systems, and aligned with self-determined goals.

This commitment to community-led research entails active community leadership in governance across the project's lifecycle. This includes the full spectrum of decision making and exercising authority over budgets and financial expenditures. Crucially, it extends to community stewardship of data, knowledge, and outcomes, encompassing decisions about how data is stored, who has access, how it is interpreted, and how findings are disseminated or withheld. Such stewardship is not reducible to formal agreements, authorship arrangements, or ethics protocols. Rather, it reflects a deeper ethical responsibility to ensure that research produces meaningful benefits for the community and resists reproducing extractive dynamics that privilege institutions or researchers over the people most directly affected.

To ensure that community priorities flowed directly to the community in ways they define, we asked not only what the community needed, but how they preferred to receive benefits. Based on these conversations, we implemented a wide range of community-defined outputs, including upskilling, resource sharing, support for community-driven publications, public presentations, and other forms of return that are culturally meaningful and politically impactful. By taking these steps, we approach partnerships with accountability, and work to shift the research relationship from one of extraction to one of reciprocity, respect, and shared purpose which lays the groundwork for more ethical and sustainable collaborations.

### *Operationalizing Ongoing Consent Process*

Practicing consent as an ongoing process rather than a one-time agreement is central to relational repair and self-determination through an accountability framework, as it recognizes that relationships, contexts, and understandings can evolve over time. In many academic or institutional settings, consent is often reduced to a one-off transaction that is either obtained through a letter of support included within a grant application, or through a signed consent form at the beginning of a project. From that point on, researchers may assume they have ongoing permission to proceed without further check-

ins. In the context of Indigenous research partnerships, however, this static approach of consent fails to honour the dynamic and relational nature of the community-based research.

In our case, we approached ongoing consent as a continuous process that created opportunities for engagement to allow communities to raise concerns, ask questions, renegotiate terms, shift directions, or even withdraw their participation if they feel their needs or priorities are no longer being met. It also requires researchers to remain responsive and attentive throughout the project, continually asking: *Are we still aligned? Are we still working in a way that feels right and respectful to the community?* We supported mechanisms for community guidance and oversight where desired through formal check-ins or relational practices (e.g., informal check-ins, being present), depending on what the community identified as appropriate.

This approach shifts consent away from being a bureaucratic checkbox, or a legal safeguard or procedural requirement, and reframes it as a living, relational commitment grounded in respect and accountability. Consent in this framework acknowledges community members' feelings, perspectives, and needs that may evolve as the work unfolds, emphasizing the iterative and ongoing cyclical nature of consent where agreements are revisited, reaffirmed, or renegotiated in response to changing circumstances or insights (Chilisa, 2020; D'Agostino et al., 2024). Researchers are expected to treat the process with humility, be open to hearing difficult feedback, adjust their practices, or even let go of projects if that is what the community decides. Ultimately, this approach strengthens the foundation of trust and mutual respect, ensuring that research is truly co-created and ethically grounded at every stage.

### ***Affirming Indigenous Governance Structures and Dispute Resolution Protocols***

Valuing Indigenous governance structures and dispute resolution methods is critical as it ensures that repair processes are guided by the values, protocols, and decision-making systems that hold meaning and legitimacy within the community. In our experience, when conflict or harm arises in research partnerships, the response often defaults to institutional mechanisms such as university ethics protocols, legal departments, or formal grievance procedures that may be unfamiliar, inaccessible, or misaligned with Indigenous ways of resolving disputes. These institutional tools are designed to appear standardized, prioritizing procedural compliance or risk management over genuine relationship repair. In doing so, they often do only the bare minimum to address harm, while further entrenching power imbalances by sidelining community authority and ignoring the dynamic, relational nature of accountability.

Dispute resolution mechanisms can play a critical role in addressing breaches of trust, including those among research partners, or harms experienced in this case by community members, students, or collaborators (Barsky, 2016). Such processes should be designed to move beyond punitive

or bureaucratic responses, which often reproduce existing power imbalances, and instead foster dialogue, mutual understanding, and repair. Drawing on principles articulated by Pranis et al. (2003), this approach emphasizes relational processes that create space for all voices to be heard, centre shared responsibility, and prioritize healing and the restoration of relationships over blame or sanction. In doing so, conflict is understood not as a violation to be managed through authority, but as a disruption in relationships that requires collective engagement, accountability, and sustained dialogue to restore balance within the community. In community-engaged research, this involves recognizing the asymmetry of power between academic institutions and communities, and creating pathways for communities to raise concerns, seek redress, and influence outcomes. For example, some research partnerships have used restorative justice circles to bring together affected parties in facilitated dialogue, focusing on acknowledging harm, rebuilding relationships, and determining concrete steps toward repair (Sawin et al., 2023). However, if these dispute resolution processes remove power from the community, they risk recentering the very institutions that have produced systemic inequities in the first place. Christie's (1977) foundational articulation of the restorative tradition described how criminal justice institutions and lawyers in particular "steal conflicts" from those directly affected, thereby consolidating institutional authority at the expense of community agency (p.4). A parallel dynamic occurs in research, where universities and funding agencies often position themselves as the rightful arbiters of conflict and harm. Academics, as products of these institutions, are not neutral actors but participants in structures that perpetuate exclusion and disempowerment. When accountability is mediated primarily through academic or institutional mechanisms, the process can reproduce the same hierarchies that generated the harm, leaving communities further marginalized while preserving the authority and legitimacy of the academy.

While these can be effective models, they should not be treated as the sole or universal approach. Dispute resolution processes must remain flexible and responsive to the specific cultural, relational, and institutional contexts in which research takes place, as well as attentive to both structural and interpersonal dimensions of harm. Importantly, they should provide opportunities for rebuilding trust and relationships, while ensuring that lessons learned inform future practice. In this sense, dispute resolution is not an ancillary component of research governance but an ethical obligation that upholds the integrity of research partnerships.

Our team recognized the importance of affirming Indigenous governance structures and dispute resolution protocols as central to how harm and conflict are addressed within these partnerships. In practice, this meant intentionally not defaulting to institutional mechanisms as the primary response to conflict, and instead, working to ensure that processes for addressing harm were guided by the values and decision-making processes that hold meaning and legitimacy for our research partners. This involved

deferring to community-identified leadership to guide how concerns should be raised and addressed, creating space for dialogue processes, and recognizing conflict as a disruption in relationships needing repair. By honouring this approach, researchers signal their respect for community sovereignty, self-determination, and accountability to the relationships they hold. They acknowledge and recognize that repair is not something to be decided or delivered by academic institutions, but something to be co-created through reciprocal and culturally meaningful processes. This not only strengthens the ethical foundations of the research partnership but also helps shift the broader research landscape toward practices that honour Indigenous leadership, knowledge systems, and relational responsibilities.

Throughout all of these Indigenous self-determination processes, the researcher must approach the work with humility, recognizing their role as a guest and learner in the community space. Ongoing consent and a willingness to be guided by the community through shifting decision-making power, honouring community led priorities and stewardship of the project, and affirming Indigenous governance structures and protocols, are essential to rebuilding trust and ensuring that the partnership rests on a foundation of accountability.

### **Addressing the Harm**

When harm is unintentional or arises from the pressures and constraints of broader institutional structures, the responsibility to acknowledge and address conflict through the repair of damaged relationships remains with the researcher. Within Indigenous research paradigms, accountability cannot be reduced to questions of individual culpability or intent. Rather, it is grounded in the broader web of relational obligations that extend to community, to land, to knowledge systems, and to the integrity of the research process itself (S. Wilson, 2008). This understanding positions accountability as a collective and ongoing responsibility that persists regardless of circumstance. The researcher is therefore called to respond not only by recognizing the harm but also by actively engaging in processes of reparation that honour the relational commitments upon which the research rests. In this sense, accountability entails more than formal compliance with procedural ethics; it requires a sustained commitment to relational integrity, whereby the restoration of trust and respect becomes central to the continuation of research relationships. Importantly, when harm has occurred, it is necessary to return to the original intent of the project to realign the goals and values of the work. In our experience, this process of reflection had revealed that components of the original research agenda were no longer aligned with community priorities. In this case, accountability required the team to step back and fully discontinue the initial project direction and try to move forward in a good way without being restrained by previous promises.

While many academic institutions are beginning to grapple with what it means to 'Indigenize' or 'decolonize' their policies, protocols and procedures, and ethical frameworks, these shifts are often slow, carry uneven power

dynamics, and face limitations for these shifts by the very systems and structures they seek to transform (Legault & Bleau, 2025; Omodan et al., 2023). As Indigenous and allied scholars who conduct Indigenous research while also working within and for these colonial institutions, we must also engage in ongoing critical reflection: *what does it mean to conduct research ethically and relationally while working within systems that run counter to many Indigenous principles and values, such as rewarding individual success, productivity, and academic authority? What does it mean to be true to ourselves in research, to know who we are and where we come from, while navigating the tensions of a colonial academic structure and granting agencies that confers power upon the scholar?* These questions are central to any meaningful commitment to relational accountability, and they demand that we confront not only the systemic challenges of institutional research but also the internal contradictions we carry with us as researchers embedded in these systems.

As a step in addressing the harm that had occurred during our research process, as outlined in the background section above, was that our research team prioritized repairing the relationships with the community partner agencies. We hoped that, in doing so, Indigenous academics and collaborators who were also affected by the situation would come to understand the complexity of the circumstances we were forced to navigate. Recognizing that relationality is rooted in accountability, we sought to engage with community partner organizations directly and transparently, before informal channels such as rumors or speculation could shape perceptions of the leadership change.

In these conversations, we explained the circumstances surrounding the former Principal Investigator's departure and, importantly, invited community partners to determine the path forward, including new leadership decisions, in a way that respected their autonomy and avoided prescriptive direction from the research team. In reflecting on this experience both personally and professionally within the framework of relational accountability, we recognized that this decision was not ours to make unilaterally, nor was it the former Principal Investigator's to determine, despite the formal and colonial process set out by the granting agency. Instead, we committed to moving forward with flexibility, creativity, and care. This meant listening to our community partners and adjusting timelines, processes, and roles to ensure that the next steps are driven by their priorities and expectations.

Repairing the relationships that were harmed during our project required humility, transparency, and vulnerability. It meant choosing to sit with discomfort, not as a passing state, but as an ongoing practice. It demanded that we, as researchers, lean into difficult conversations that we had with openness and sincerity. For us, this repair involved uneasy phone calls, heartfelt apologies, moments of grief, guilt, and tears, not for the sake of

absolution, but because relational harm was deeply felt by everyone involved. It required self-reflection beyond individual actions to examine how our roles, positions, or silence may have contributed to the harm caused.

There is no denying that mistakes occurred throughout this process, and with each subsequent conversation a deeper understanding has emerged of how others experienced the harm, as well as the gravity and complexity of its impacts. We also recognize that some individuals and organizations directly affected have not yet been reached by the research team, and that there remain those who continue to carry hurt and who hold us, as a research team, accountable. These feelings and perspectives are valid and warrant acknowledgment, even when they are difficult or painful to hear and accept. Owning these realities is an essential part of accountability, requiring that recognition of harm be coupled with a commitment to respond with humility, responsibility, and meaningful action. Relational accountability requires that we hold space for this discomfort and resist the urge to minimize or explain our truth as a way to justify our own actions.

Despite the challenges and harms that unfolded throughout this process, there have also been profound expressions of generosity and care. In moments where disappointment and frustration were warranted, community partners nonetheless modeled the strength of relational ethics by demonstrating what it means to lead with compassion, to extend support when it is most needed, and to offer forgiveness even when it is not owed. These actions should not be understood as diminishing the seriousness of the harms that occurred, but rather as powerful examples of relational leadership that foreground values of compassion, reciprocity, and responsibility. Such demonstrations of care create the conditions for repair, showing that accountability is not only about acknowledging wrongdoing but also about nurturing the possibility of renewed relationships. They remind us that repair is possible, and that the work of moving forward in a good way is both a personal obligation of researchers and a collective responsibility shared across the research partnership.

In some cases, relational repair can extend to challenging the systems and structures that created the very conditions for harm. This includes engaging in institutional advocacy such as challenging university policies, funding structures, and research ethics protocols that may have constrained community decision-making, marginalized Indigenous leadership, and/or privileged academic priorities over those of the community. These structural harms are often experienced collectively, yet they are typically addressed as isolated incidents. Genuine accountability requires that researchers refuse to leave the burden of repair solely on its community partners and instead take on the responsibility of leveraging their institutional access and influence to advocate for structural change within the academic system. In response to harms that emerged within our own project, it became evident that relational repair must extend beyond interpersonal processes to include critical engagement with the systems and structures that produced the conditions

for harm. This necessitates forms of institutional advocacy that interrogate and challenge university policies, funding mechanisms, and research ethics frameworks that may constrain community decision-making, marginalize Indigenous leadership, and privilege academic priorities over those of the community. Such structural harms are often experienced collectively, yet they are frequently addressed as discrete or individualized incidents, thereby obscuring their systemic nature. Meaningful accountability, therefore, requires that researchers resist displacing the burden of repair onto community partners and instead assume responsibility for mobilizing their institutional access and influence to advocate for structural transformation within the academic system. This responsibility must be accompanied by sustained institutional support, including regular and proactive engagement from research support offices, facilitation of introductions and dialogue with institutional ethics boards, and the development of mechanisms that enable concerns arising from community-engaged research to be addressed at the appropriate levels of authority. Importantly, there must be explicit recognition that early career researchers, in particular, often lack the decision-making power required to enact structural change and should not be positioned as solely responsible for addressing harms that are produced by entrenched institutional processes. Without such recognition, there is a risk that responsibility is individualized while the underlying conditions remain unchanged.

This advocacy also comprises of actively working to redirect institutional benefits and resources toward community priorities and resisting structures that reward extractive research practices (Buchanan et al., 2007). An example is, Canada's Tri-Agency funded projects which often generate direct financial benefits for the administering academic institutions through its Research Support Fund. While the Tri-Agencies may increasingly prioritize Indigenous and community-based research, it is not fully acknowledged that such projects are not possible without the leadership, consent, and expertise of those community partners. These dynamics call into question where power truly resides if the university is the administering institution that benefits from the Research Support Fund and not the community organization. From a decolonial lens, we can argue that this benefit, stemming from structural power, should not be within the university, but within the community itself. A relationally accountable approach therefore demands that researchers recognize, respect, and actively reinforce community power not only through practice, but through advocacy and systemic change.

Ultimately, relational accountability is not about restoring a project; it is about restoring trust, recognizing the humanity of those who were impacted, and accepting that re-entry into community spaces may not be on the researcher's terms. Repair is relational, not transactional. It must be earned, not expected. Without meaningful processes for relational repair, ethical Indigenous research risks being reduced to performance relying on symbolic acts of inclusion while avoiding the deeper, often more difficult, work of

rebuilding trust. If we are to take seriously the calls for decolonizing research, we must also take seriously what it means to remain accountable to our relationships when things go wrong.

### Conclusion

Conflict is an inevitable part of research yet can be a source of growth when addressed with openness and accountability. Within Indigenous research, it emphasizes the importance of relational ethics and honest recognition of historical harms. At the same time, many Indigenous researchers may encounter tensions where institutional power imbalances and pressures conflict with community priorities. In these circumstances, humility, responsibility, and focus on community priorities are essential.

In response to these challenges, ethics in Indigenous research extend beyond protocols and checklists, framing research as a relational process that ties people, lands, histories, and futures together. Accountability to communities continues even after projects end or shift, yet, often the burden falls on communities and researchers when institutions fail to provide adequate support or closure. Relational repair begins with affirming community sovereignty and shifting decision-making power to Indigenous partners. Ethical engagement with Indigenous peoples and communities, as affirmed in TCPS2 (CIHR et al., 2018), requires respect for Indigenous governance, rights, and protocols. True repair goes beyond symbolic/tokenistic actions by fostering equitable dialogue between knowledge systems and centering community priorities.

Genuine sharing of power in research means Indigenous communities lead every phase, with researchers stepping into supportive roles. This shift calls for self-reflection, disrupting academic norms, and advocating within institutions for community priorities and governance. By centering Indigenous self-determination, research becomes relational and produces outcomes meaningful to communities. Community-led research further positions Indigenous peoples as rights-holders and leaders, with full authority over governance and outcomes. Stewardship spans across the entire research lifecycle to ensure direct and meaningful benefits defined by those affected.

Central to reciprocity is the recognition that consent is an ongoing relational commitment and not a one-time transaction. It requires ongoing reaffirmation and allows communities to renegotiate, redirect, or withdraw as needed. When harm occurs, repair is guided by community governance and dispute resolution, not institutional compliance mechanisms that reinforce power imbalances. Effective approaches are relational, flexible, and restorative, and foster dialogue and trust.

In principle and practice, Indigenous research should not be defined by institutional protocols, but by relationships grounded in accountability and respect. Through shifting power, honouring sovereignty, and centering community leadership and priorities, research evolves from an extractive model into a transformative practice built on trust and defined by the communities themselves.

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We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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