

# Co-responsible relational research practice

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# Research as joint reflection in action to “chart a course forward”

Research - defined in a way which enables us all to be and become “researchers” (Dan Wulff & Sally St. George, 2020): A process of enlisting partners to jointly reflect together in action – with the intention that participants can learn together to “chart a course forward” (2020, p. 70). (*The Sage Handbook of Social Constructionist Practice*.)

Partners – those who “share a concern” (or concerns) and wish to “examine issues that concern us” (Wulff & St . George, 2020, p. 72).

I will add (implicit in their discussion) that the practical intent, as suggested by Indigenous scholars (those hailing from or with ancestry from colonised societies), is to cultivate, or regenerate/revitalise, “relational balance” in our various relations in which we are enmeshed. And this is all with a view to forwarding increased social and ecological justice (including human and more-than-human worlds). I will be exploring what it may mean to take co-responsibility for our involvements in the web of relations.

# The (performative) notion of relational responsibility

The idea (and practice) of co-responsible research activity of course draws on a notion of relational responsibility.

Sheila McNamee and Kenneth Gergen (Preface to their edited book on *Relational Responsibility*, 1999, p. xi) suggest that use of the term *relational responsibility* means that we treat “individuals” as existing “**only by virtue of their creation in relationships**”-

This is in contrast to treating people as the locus of actions and outcomes for which they seemingly bear individual responsibility, such that blame or credit can be assigned to particular individuals.

In a relational account (ontology), we do not posit that there is such a “thing” as individuals separate from their immersion in relationships. Or rather, we invite people to regard “the world” as relational. The ontological statement has a performative function. It is an invitation to regard “the world” this way.

# Undercutting the (dominant) ideology of individualism

McNamee and (Ken) Gergen (1999, p. 8). The ideology of individualism “generates a sense of fundamental independence or isolation” (and is not without consequence for our ways of living together).

McNamee and (Ken) Gergen (1999, p. 8) : Despite the ideology (prevalent in much scholarly and everyday discourse) of “individuals” as the locus of action, other discourses exist, albeit not occupying a central place.

Although the book is, as they mention, devoted to practice (such the practice of mental health, organisational development, politics, judicial systems, and education, and practices of everyday living”) , they look to what they call certain “potent forms of relational intelligibility as they have emerged in the scholarly world” (p. 11), which help support the theory (and attendant practice) of relational responsibility.

# Some scholarly work that points in this direction

I am going to hone in on, and discuss further implications of one of these that they locate – namely, the notion of “**systemic process**”, especially as elaborated in “general systems theory” (1999, p. 1).

I am going to relate this to notions of relationality created by Indigenous sages and scholars (that is, as proffered by sages and scholars hailing from, or with ancestry from, colonised geographical areas).

But first I want to point to Ken Gergen’s book on *Relational Being*, which offers further metaphors within scholarly theory and other arenas of discourse (2009, p. 388).

# Relationality in discourses in “academia” and beyond

In considering “metaphors of relational existence” that might help us to generate an awareness of the “profound significance of relationship”, Gergen (2009, p. 388) refers, *inter alia*, to:

- Process philosophy, which facilitates a dialogue between scientists and theologians (on **processes** rather than **entities** as the basis of existence);
- Systems theory, which provides conceptions of “parts” of the whole as never being isolated units separate from their existence within the whole;
- Buddhism offers a theory and practice for a good life based on moving beyond a world of **independent entities**;

# Continued

- In African culture the concept of *Ubuntu* emphasises care and compassion for all: “the ubuntu spirit is carried in the phrase, **“I am who I am because of who we all are.”** (We shall see later that most African sages and scholars, along with other Indigenous authors from other geographical contexts, include as part of the community “all of creation” - and not only “human” being – Bagele Chilisa, 2020, p. 24). And many also refer to the importance of fostering relationality (“balanced” relationships) across the globe in the search for a widely conceived social and ecological justice.
- The concept of *Ba* as developed by the Japanese philosopher, Kitaro Nishida, who refers to a relationship in which **“all participants are united in the sharing and synthesising of subjectivity”**.
- The metaphor of *the carnival*: festive sensuality becomes the route to a **“primordial conjoining”** and a relational source of all vitality (2009, p. 388)

# Relationality as conceptualised by Indigenous sages and scholars

- Ken Gergen's reference (2009) to the African concept of Ubuntu is important for the purposes of this presentation – I want to suggest that Indigenous worldviews (and attendant implications for relational co-responsibility in the research process) **have not been sufficiently credentialised in “scholarly” discourses**, including scholarly discourses pertaining to research practices.
- I want to propose that **Indigenous conceptions of being answerable to our relations (in our knowing-and-being) offer a constructive route towards envisaging and practicing co-responsible relational inquiry.**
- As Cree scholar Shawn Wilson indicates, Indigenous scholars are “in the process of shaping, redefining and explaining their positions” (2008, p. 54). And he suggests that we should not be conditioned to believe that Indigenous ways of knowing are important only to (and relevant for) Indigenous people.

# Relational responsibility in an Indigenous paradigm : answerable to our relations

We can draw wisdom (when considering co-responsible research practice) from Indigenous scholars' expressions regarding the development of an Indigenous paradigm of research/ fifth paradigm (alongside what Cynthia Dillard, 2006 has called the “big four”). This offers a specific relational ontology, epistemology and axiology, grounding how research can be performed in such a way that we are mutually “answerable to our relations”. I will elaborate on this further later.

But besides making this point (about the importance of Indigenous views on relationality and implications for research practice), I want to extrapolate also from McNamee and Gergen's reference to **systems thinking** as another (related) strand of relational theory - and I want to point to implications for inquiry practices as undertaken by professional researchers and others.

# Some ways of defining systemic processes

McNamee and Gergen (1999, p. 16) refer to various authors' (scholarly) understandings of "systemic processes" as expressing a "universe in which there are no isolated units" - e.g., Bateson (1979), Von Bertalanffy (1968) and Laszlo (1973).

Or as Mustafa Emirbayer (1997) states (focusing on what this means for us as "knowers"), as analysts we should **not** try to "locate units or elements of action **and [then] determine their interactions** - "elements are not detachable or independent entities" (p. 286). Emirbayer speaks of this as a "*Manifesto for a Relational Sociology*". See also Koenig, Pomeroy, Seneque, and Sharmer's (2021, p. 2) pinpointing of Emirbayer's (1997) work as part of the "relational turn" in Sociology. (See also Donati , 2012, 2017.)

# “Understanding” is an intervention in relational flows

Emirbayer : “It makes no sense to envision constituent elements apart from the flows in which they are involved” (p. 289). But he also points to some perplexities and challenges using a systems theoretical view.

As “observers” we do need to make analytically drawn boundaries – how do we move from flows of relational transactions (in which we admit everything is ultimately connected to everything else) to define an “area of investigation”, which also involves some kind of intervention in the unfolding dynamics”?

Normative implications of relational inquiry: Emirbayer: “Practical leverage of relational thinking: **Reconstructive implications**: we can indicate “how actors can reconstruct the relational contexts in which they are embedded” (p. 310).

# Practical implications of systemic thinking

- Emirbayer asks: **What sorts of transactions ought to be most highly valued in a processual, relational view** of the world? (309).
- Values are byproducts of actors' engagements with one another (and as we must admit, we as “knowers” – professional researchers, along with others – are not neutral in this relational process).
- The concept of *boundary* judgements (as used by certain self-named critical systems thinkers - CST) points to choices that we as “knowers” make as we become involved in an arena of exploration” (2020, p. 72). (“Relational webs possess no clear-cut natural boundaries” – Emirbayer, p. 303)
- Emirbayer: the “overall intractability of the boundary problem” - how do we justify the boundaries that we draw ? Boundaries are constructions as to what relations to include in any investigation and who is to be involved (as stakeholders who have a stake in the way issues are considered).

# Stakeholder theory/theorising

CST thinkers offer guidelines based on social and ecological justice considerations – involve stakeholders of the issues under consideration so that their wellbeing is accounted for (see Gregory, Atkins, Midgley & Hodgson's, 2020 stakeholder theory). The most marginalised in the social and ecological fabric have to be given prime consideration when following a justice agenda.

Here is where the transformative and Indigenous paradigms for social research also join forces in advocating a social and ecological justice agenda to guide the research process: cf. Fiona Cram & Donna Mertens (2016).

This is also in keeping with Yvonne Lincoln & Egon Guba who suggest that we need to take a posture of “activism with respect to all stakeholder groups with which we (as inquirers) interact, particularly those that are in some way disempowered” (Lincoln & Guba, 2013 , p. 78).

# Reflect on our choices of boundary judgements

Gail Simon (2014), who looks at links between “Systemic inquiry” and “qualitative inquiry” asks us to consider the question “what choices am I making and with what possible *consequences* for me, for them, and for others not present? (2014, p. 21).

Gerald Midgley (2000, 2008) as a CST thinker states that the (Cartesian) separation of “subject” (knower) from “object” (of knowledge) is so engrained in Western thought that it is very difficult to identify (that is, to consider what is being included in the analysis).

**E.g: If our analysis is bounded by economic considerations, we can look at the economics of logging a rain forest [is there a market, will it increase GDP?] - rather than consider who are displaced from their ancestral homes and also look at the issue of preservation of diversity** (2000, p. 44). This way of observing/drawing boundaries is therefore already an intervention with likely impacts on “the world”.

# Research is interventive in some way

Research is necessarily interventive – so we need to try to intervene in ways that disrupt injustice as defined in the setting and specifically as experienced and discussed by those most marginalised (and communicated also if we listen to, and engage with, the voices of “nature”).

Many Indigenous authors point to the problem of the Cartesian divide between subjects (knowers) and objects (that to be known) . This divide (prevalent in Western thinking) is accompanied by an appeal to be detached from “the world” in order to better get to “know” it (e.g., see the critique of the dualistic stance offered by Bagele Chilisa, Margaret Kovach, Shawn Wilson, Linda Smith)

It is this Cartesian seeing of “the world” as “out there” that means that we can deny (co-)responsibility for our involvements in *bringing forth worlds* at the moment of “knowing”.

# Link co-responsibility with caring (doing “science” is a caring profession!)

In the Cartesian-inspired view it is the responsibility of “scientists” to strive for objectivity (e.g., Martyn Hammersley & Anna Traianou (2014): They claim that science is not a “caring profession” – the goal of science is to “produce sound knowledge” (para 6.2). (I examine this argument in depth in Romm, 2020a and 2020b.)

But once we admit that doing research is *generative* (future forming) rather than mirroring of “realities” (cf. Ken Gergen, 2015; Aaron Kuntz, 2015) *we can (and must) link responsibility to **caring about how we might affect the relations of which the research is a part** (and not apart)*

# Transmaterial worlding – includes participation of the “nonhuman”

- Gail Simon and Leah Salter (2020, p.87): suggest that we need to extend “social constructionism” to “resituate the concept of *social* in the posthuman to broaden who/what counts as worthy of study and inclusion as a research participant (e.g., the participation of the “**more-than-human**” as some **Indigenous authors define the “nonhuman” world**” – Jenny Ritchie, 2015, p. 82; Pinkie Mabunda & Veronica McKay, 2021, p. 376) [Or Ken Gergen (2021): who speaks of constructing a comm universe]
- **Stakeholders are those most affected by any framing of issues** . Many self-named CST thinkers recognise (along with Indigenous authors whom they often cite) that we must find ways to include the voices/participation of those who apparently have no voice, such as plants, animals and the ecosystem as a whole. (Midgley, 2000; Ison, 2017; Stephens, Taket and Gagliano, 2019; McIntyre-Mills 2014, McIntyre-Mills & Corcoran-Nantes, 2021; Romm, 2018, 2021.)

# Karen Barad's posthumanist position

Barad (2007, p. 32)

“By ‘posthumanist I mean to signal the crucial recognition that nonhumans play an important role in naturalcultural practices, including everyday social practices, scientific practices, and practices that do not include humans. But also, beyond this, my use of ‘posthumanism’ marks a refusal to take the distinction between ‘human’ and ‘nonhuman’ for granted”.

The distinction between human and nonhuman is often rendered fuzzy in Indigenous thought, for example, via the understanding of people's relationship with their totems (cf. Romm & Patricia Lethole, 2021: Prospects for sustainable living with focus on interrelatedness, interdependence and mutuality: Some African perspectives (in *From Polarization to Multispecies Relationships in an era of Mass Extinctions*. Cham: Springer.).

# Mary Gergen

Mary Gergen indicates that constructionist-oriented social researchers (who appreciate that the world as “known” is always a co-construction) “are conscious of how a research practice constructs the research participants, themselves, and the world. As well, **they may be sensitive to indigenous viewpoints which may diverge from their own, differential power relations among diverse groups, and ethical concerns that are absent from those accepted in Western scientific communities** [especially insofar as the Indigenous paradigm is de-credentialised] (2020, p. 19).

In all cases,” **the hope is that the research practice will contribute to enhanced ways of relating among various groups”** (Gergen, 2020, p. 19).

(Her focus on “enhanced ways of relating” echoes the Indigenous argument concerning the deployment of research to try to nurture/strengthen relationality.)

# Relational appreciation or relational responsibility?

- Mary Gergen: wonders if we should just as well (or rather) speak of relational **appreciation (instead of relational responsibility)**, in order to draw out the importance of people's caring for each other and in this sense becoming "responsible" in their actions (responding to others).
- I will point to how Indigenous scholars have offered views on what this might mean in terms of professional researchers and others' responsibilities to be **"answerable" to our relations" (in caring mode)** – which should include our taking a stewardship role in regard to "non-human" nature (of which we are part).

# Co-responsibility – being & feeling mutually responsible for the quality of relationships

- If we link responsibility to **caring and not detachment in the research process this allows us to link our co-responsibilities as inquirers to feeling mutually responsible for trying to improve the quality of relationships (in the context of intra-action)**. I use the term intra-action as does Karen Barad (2007) – to differentiate from **interaction** of isolated entities (see also Emirbayer, 1997). But later I will suggest that Barad does not take sufficient account of Indigenous thought, and that Andrew Pickering (who also offers a performative posthumanist vision of our involvement in the world) does.
- The “common” thread of Indigenous thinking (as located by Indigenous authors from various parts of the globe) lies in an appreciation of relationships/connectedness and how we are “responsible **with** each other” and concomitantly with “Mother Earth” for forwarding “continued evolution” (La Donna Harris & Wasilewski, 2004).

# Responsibility implies being oriented (with others) to inject more balance in a fragmented world

For Kovach, “responsibility implies knowledge and action. It seeks to genuinely serve others, and is inseparable from respect and reciprocity” (p. 178)

- “Research in service of social and ecological justice is inseparable from this value [of reciprocity]. Global warming, oil wars, religious dogma, poverty, isolation, unhealthy coping— there is evidence everywhere of a struggling world, angry and fragmented. The research community is becoming mindful of its complicity in this disorder” (2009, p. 174).

(She says this in performative vein – pleading for us to become more mindful.)

Similarly, Jenny Ritchie (2015) states that:

“I believe that as scholars we have an ethical obligation to share responsibility for repairing the world and that our local Indigenous knowledges [practices of knowing] are integral to this process (2015, p. 82).

Ritchie urges “non-Indigenous critical scholars” to take a stance of “opening one’s worldview to respectfully incorporate an Indigenous [relational] worldview” as part of the process of engaging in “transformative social, cultural, and ecological praxis” (p. 82)”.

# Indigenous onto-epistemology and axiology

A treatment of “reality” and of “being” as relational implies that we seek as knowers/actors to engage with the world to create/restore balance , while we appreciate that other actors – human and more than-human – too are part of this process of developing the relationships.

The ontology (conceiving the world as relational) thus carries what Motsamai Molefe an African philosopher speaking about Ubuntu calls a “**normative load**” to strengthen connectivity “in” the world as we engage with, and contribute to, its unfolding (2014, p. 129).

# Wilson's diagrammatic depiction of Indigenous paradigm (2008, p. 70)

Wilson indicates via the circle that we cannot separate the components of the paradigm to guide the ceremony of research, where we together seek a “raised state of consciousness” (p. 69).

“**Relationality** seems to sum up the whole Indigenous research paradigm to me. Just as the components of the paradigm are related, the components themselves all have to do with relationships” (Wilson, p. 70).



# Ethical accounting for and being accountable to the ecologies of relationships

Marc Higgins (who defines himself as having a “longstanding involvement with cross-cultural educational programming in over 50 reserve and urban Aboriginal communities” - website of the University of Alberta) shows resonances between Karen Barad’s argument and the intentionality in Gregory Cajete’s “ecology of relationships” (Cajete is Tewa writer and professor from Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico) : **Both signal “a way-of-knowing-in-being in which the world is enacted through the flux of relationships”** (Higgins, p. 269).

He highlights that Cajete (2000) reminds us that:

- within many Indigenous languages the expression “All my relations” is an epistemological, ontological and ethical accounting for and being accountable to the ecologies of relationships we find ourselves in and constituted by, which extends beyond the immediate present to include generations past and those still yet-to-come. (Cajete, 2000: 178; Higgins, 2016: 269)

# Need to enrich our (scholarly) discourses on relationality

Rosiek, Snyder and Pratt (2020) - with Snyder being Native American Indigenous - also suggest that we must be careful of attributing the insights of performative posthumanism to Western authors, forgetting the resonances with Indigenous approaches to knowing and to being, which pre-date Western colonial encounters.

**These approaches to knowing and being (as normative options), when revitalised, can indeed help to enrich Western “posthumanism – in order to enrich our discourses in the academy – 2020, p. 19)**

Rosiek et al. feel that the “lack of attention” to Indigenous ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies as expressed by Indigenous scholars **needs to be corrected as a matter of decolonisation**. They state:

**“Social scientists using Karen Barad’s concept of agential realism should also be reading and citing Indigenous studies literature on agent ontologies” (2020, p. 331).**

# Andrew Pickering uses Indigenous examples in his posthumanist argument

Pickering (in his posthumanist performative approach) does refer to Indigenous ways of knowing and living: In both his 1995 book and 2013 article, he refers to what he calls “nonstandard agency” of human and nonhuman being (admitting that these distinctions are humanly created) (1995: 243).

Barad claims (2007) that in Pickering’s approach, and his use of the term “performative” he does “not acknowledge its politically important genealogy” in theorists such as Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, and Joseph Rouse (2007, p. 410). She criticises him for not recognising this.

But I regard his account of the Genealogy of his argument as more sensitive to Indigenous traditions:

# Pickering's reference to Castaneda's (non-anthropocentric) anthropology

Pickering (1995) regards “the most vivid illustrations” of the posthumanist account as coming “not from European history but from Carlos Castaneda’s popular anthropology (Castaneda 1968 and its many sequels)”. He notes that Castaneda, was apprenticed to a Yaqui Indian known as Don Juan. Don Juan “introduced him to a set of complex disciplines through which he was able to emulate some of his master’s feats [such as], flying like a bird, being in two places at once, conversing with the spirits of hallucinogenic mushrooms, and so on (1995, p. 243).

In his *Being in an Environment: A Performative Perspective*, Pickering offers an evocative metaphor to indicate his preferred way of engaging in/with the world : he speaks of the “dances of agency [human and non-human] that explore a world of endless emergence and becoming” (2013, p. 78).

# A non-anthropocentric approach expressed in Wangari Maathai's autoethnography

A (non-anthropocentric) example of a sense of spiritual connection with “trees” (this time where the connection became cut, due to humans treating trees in instrumental terms for the benefit of using the land for economic use) can be found in Wangari Maathai's autoethnographic account (2006) of her work as founder of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, which spread to become a Pan African Green Belt Network. (She won the Nobel peace prize in 2004 for her contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace.)

In her 2006 memoir she considers a *mutual shaping* occurring (in regard to a particular fig tree of her youth), where the new owner of the land acted without respecting the tree (cutting it to grow tea), *which in turn acted back in response*.

“Ironically, the area where the fig tree of my childhood once stood always remained a patch of bare ground where nothing grew. *It was as if the land rejected anything but the fig tree itself...* .”(2006, pp. 121-122)

# Steps in the research “dance song” (on the paradigmatic research floor)

Using a metaphor (in some way similarly to Pickering’s metaphor of dancers, 2013, but she applies this to the realm of our engaging with different paradigms for social research), Chilisa uses the metaphor of a dance song and different steps taken by the dancers as they “dance with rhythm” (2020, p. 21).

She invokes the metaphor of the “dance song” in Botswana culture (p. 21) and suggests [pleads performatively] that Indigenous paradigms **“are allowed to dance their own steps” (rather than being subsumed under “other” paradigms or indeed ignored/given scant attention by the other dancers) .**

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In the dance song, each dancer “dances with rhythm compatible with the song” [the song of doing what we can call “worthwhile” research that arguably makes a difference to the lives of participants and concerned stakeholders by being geared to performing **“Research for a Change”** – Wulff, 2021].

# Indigenous contributors on the paradigmatic dance floor

What I also want to draw out from Chilisa is that the postcolonial Indigenous research paradigm has “application” when conducting research “in former colonised societies in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Indigenous peoples in Australia, Canada, and the United States *and other parts of the world and among the disempowered historically marginalised groups [these are people who may have become disempowered in various ways through the course of history]*” (p. 23).

The Indigenous paradigm thus has broad potential application and its “moves” should not be ignored or de-credentialised relative to the other dancers on the dance floor (e.g., postpositivist, constructivist, pragmatist and transformative-oriented)

The dancers can learn from one another’s steps and make moves accordingly!

# My choice of examples (interpreted through the frame of co-responsibility)

My choice of examples: i) Christine Schmalenbach & Mechthild Kiegelmann, 2018; ii) Francis Adyanga & Norma Romm, 2020-2021)

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- i) an active ethnographic (consciously interventive) study in El Salvador (informed by the transformative and Indigenous paradigms),
- ii) and active focus group (FG) research supporting collective movement towards social and environmental justice (Uganda) .

These examples can be seen to resonate with the “song” of feeling accountable (as a matter of caring) for our involvements in the mutual shaping of “the world” .

Time will not permit more than a brief rendition of my interpretation of the examples through the frame of co-responsibility.

# Active ethnographic research with involvement in improving relations

Christine Schmalenbach and Mechthild Kiegelmann (her dissertation supervisor) report on Schmalenbach's ethnographic research in a school setting in a community in El Salvador (2018). Schmalenbach notes that she herself has a multicultural and multi-local background (thus undercutting the idea that we are normally positioned in specific "cultures" – we can "be" in and converse across cultural heritages).

They make the general point that "In the face of globalisation, more and more researchers have multicultural and multilocal backgrounds (Abstract).

Schmalenbach defines herself as writing (in this article) from her perspective as a German researcher who grew up in Mexico and has undertaken research in El Salvador .

The research was undertaken at a "marginalised urban school and its direct surroundings in El Salvador" (2018, Abstract).

# Obtaining access through trust (Kovach: relational sampling, 2009, p. 126)

She had been invited by an NGO who “had worked in the comunidad for years. Their dependability and respectful interaction with the people there had earned them the trust of the residents of the comunidad” (2018, § 14).

She was invited to organise her doctoral dissertation around an involvement in the school. She decided to concentrate on the issue of how co-operative learning in the school could be encouraged: “both [the] co-workers from the NGO and teachers told me they would be grateful for any idea that helped them facilitate the learning of the students”. Likewise conversations with parents indicated that they felt she could become a resource for the school with her skills in special education and in co-operative learning.

To organise the research, she chose a “transformative paradigm” (Mertens) while also drawing on the work of Chilisa (2012) and other authors from the area of postcolonial indigenous research.

# Researchers (co-researchers) as part of interconnected circles of relationships

She expresses that “central to both [transformative and Indigenous] paradigms are such values as "respect, connectivity, reciprocity, and a desire to see research contribute to a better future" (citing Cram, Chilisa & Mertens 2013, p.17).

While conversing with Donna Mertens at a conference (during the doing of the research), Donna encouraged her to "look for strengths by focusing on the survival strategies that participants [students] were using to get through their daily [and challenging] lives" (2018, § 30). Henceforward she started applying this approach "more consciously to the interviews and conversations I had in the field" ( § 30.).

# Seeking strengths (non-deficit approach)

By directing the research in this way, we can say that *she took some responsibility for her use of "words" during the conversations, which in turn met with positive response from the participants.*

Consider also Norman Denzin's point that "words matter" as they have a "material presence in the world" (2001, p. 24).

And consider this in the light of the question of *co-responsibility for unfolding outcomes* in "the world" as people pay attention to, and respond to, one another's moves (in a dance of agency).

# Sharing of ideas and possibilities for action

In the whole process of the research she herself was not shying from “carefully bring novel ideas to the field ” (Schmalenbach & Kegelmann, § 56).

To me this is consistent with, for example, Kovach (2009, p. 125) who points out that “sharing stories” (among participants and/or between the initiating researchers and participants) in a **mutual encounter may shift understandings, discourses and options for conceived action.**

Wilson too refers to this (2008, p. 100). He expressly indicates to participants: “I don't want there to be any feeling of me just recording your thoughts without **sharing my own** [contributing]”).

It is also consistent with Bekisizwe Ndimande's (2018) point that research methods can be deployed/re-tuned in "decolonising" style, which breaks with prevalent Western views of using research to "find out" perspectives independently of the *relational encounter in which "knowing" between selves-in-relation is developed.*

# Nurturing relationality

The "data" that became generated were a product, inter alia, of, these interventive interviews — including many other encounters, for example, through her "looking for intersections in which different groups of participants had the space to share their points of view with others" ( § 53).

In this way she created more space for relationality in the setting - between the students, between them and their teachers, with parents etc. - by involving people to “share their points of view” and thus develop their understandings in relationship with each other.

In addition, by exploring co-operative learning with the participants, she could contribute to creating a ripple effect in the wider society towards this, and away from the (ideological) focus on individual “success” (especially that the NGO too was interested in possibilities for instantiating co-operative learning and could use the experiences/understandings from this research as “resource”)

# Active FG research exploring mobilisation against irresponsible foreign “investment”

In March 2020, while Francis Adyanga was driving his brother to Nwoya district in Northern Uganda, they he had a conversation about some protests against a factory operating in the area (of which his brother was aware). On his way back from dropping his brother, he stopped in the village hosting the said factory and informally/randomly spoke with a few people at the trading centre so as to understand from their experiences, some of the issues that his brother had raised in the car ride.

According to the villagers the factory had not functioned according to promises made to them re the buying of cassava for factory production; and meanwhile had been polluting the waters and land of the community.

In response the community had *mobilised as a collective*, albeit that initially they had not acted as such but complained only as separate households about issues to do with working conditions.

# Initiating the research project

Francis mentioned this to me in passing while we were attending an online Society for the Advancement of Science in Africa (SASA) conference (organised, *inter alia*, by Francis) towards the end of 2020 – that is, while we were waiting for the other attendees at the conference. (I was in South Africa and Francis in Uganda, with COVID 19 prohibiting travel.)

We realised that we could *use our research skills to set up focus group (FG) sessions in the community, where they could continue to discuss together how they had developed the momentum of the “movement” against the companies* (there were two but for brevity I am mentioning only one of them) and how they had built a collective agency to confront the felt injustices.

# Research as value-invested (Gergen, 2020, p. 19) in re-exploring notions of “development”

Interview guide: we created questions that would spur the participants to further discuss their way of mobilising and also draw out lessons that could be learned for themselves and to share with other actors in Uganda as elsewhere.

During the FG sessions, we (Francis and the research assistants - RAs) tried to present themselves as being part of the community of people across the globe concerned with exploring the injustices attendant on notions of “development” which ride roughshod over social and ecological justice concerns.

We indicated to participants (as part of the interview guide also for the RAs) that we were concerned with promoting further discussion and learning around this in the local community, for their benefit and also for the benefit of wider audiences.

# Indigenous ways of knowing as linked to exploring “good” ways of living

According to many African sages and scholars, “knowing” is not treated as separate from practical involvement in “the world” (e.g., Ossai, 2010; Adyanga, 2019.)

Chilisa (2017): Defines transdisciplinary “knowing” as where professional researchers across disciplines enter the conversational arena with communities, to collectively engage in deliberations around issues of concern (and especially of concern to those most marginalised) .

Thus far economic policy is more geared towards attracting “investors” than considering how the investment could pan out (unless monitored) in terms of poverty reduction for the marginalised and in terms of ecological concerns.

Nevertheless, fortunately, the National Environmental Management Authority (NEMA) had been set up in Uganda to monitor environmental impacts – there was thus an opening for the community that they capitalised upon (with much effort involved!)

**(Find spaces in the context to pursue a public “good”.)**

# References to relational principles during the discussion

While speaking about their mobilising against the factory (which occurred through various actions that they identified in community meetings) they also discussed *what could be considered as enhancing “good relations” between themselves and (responsible) foreign investors and also in relation to “the environment” (which they did not see as separated from them as something “outside” )*

That is , they spoke together about the importance of relational principles (which they called neighbourly relations) in and between countries and they also referred to the importance of venerating the entire web of life.

As one of the men in FG1 stated: *“ You see everything you find in our society living or nonliving depends on each other to be able to regenerate. So when the Indians pour waste into the river, they are disrupting the web of life”.*

# Contribution of women in insisting on collective mobilisation (and urging it to be non-violent)

In the FG forums the men showed appreciation (sometimes teasingly) to the women for their insisting that the matters must be taken up in a public way.

Various men and women pointed to the role of women in promoting community-level meetings – so that the villagers' complaints would not be confined to their individual homes.

The FG discussions themselves may have had the function of reminding the participants of the crucial input of the women and could have served to strengthen both the men and women's recognition of the partnership of men and the women in the community –

During the FGs they discussed among each other how it came to be “agreed” that they would not use violence – but would protest peacefully – this was mainly because the women and the elders put forward arguments against the use of violence in this case.

# Discussion around their “strategies” for mobilisation

The intervention of the local radio, Mega radio, who proceeded to publicise the environmental issues (after the local leaders initially did not act) was regarded as crucial in spurring the leaders to call in NEMA to investigate . The villagers also surmised that their protest at a particular gate – that is, the gate of another company too could have been important. (Their deliberations and their import are currently all being written up for submission to TQR. Some aspects of the research have been written in the SASA conference proceedings, 2022.)

The **style of discussion in the FG sessions** was very much in line with how Wilson describes Indigenous preferred ways of building up collective insights – as people build on, while also modifying others’, statements by offering new angles to be then taken up by others or shifted again, etc. (2008, p. 100) . In this way people elaborate on ideas and learn from other participants as a collaborative process.

# We are all researchers!

As indicated earlier when we “trained” the research assistants and also written into our interview guide we wanted the participants to all feel that they were part of a research process which was being facilitated. As Wulff and St. George (2020, p. 68) indicate, the idea was to encourage their recognition that “we are all researchers”.

Interestingly, when we asked the participants right at the end (as also provided for in our interview guide as an important question) how they had experienced the sessions, one of the men (speaking on his behalf but in true Indigenous style also invoking a “we) stated as follows:

# Experience of co-research

Man speaking in one of the FG sessions:

- *First, thank you for making us know that we are now researcher with you.*
- *Second, my experience talking with others and with you in this group has taught me that there are people out there who care about the sufferings of others. Imagine you came all the way from the University to listen to our problems. We often think that people who teach in the University, I hear they are called professors don't like mixing with us who have not gone to school or went to school but drop out in primary or secondary school. So I am very happy to share my views with professors and to see that they came down to listen and also learn from a peasant farmer like me.*

# Appreciation of the caring approach

A female participant expressed it thus:

*For us the Acholi people, we have a saying that “be thankful to people who have helped you in your time of need”. I want to thank you my sons for coming here. I thank you for talking to us ... and helping us know that we have sons in the University who cares [about issues of justice].*

And in another FG session when Francis asked this question, namely, “Are there any final thoughts or comments or questions for us?”, again one of the women chose to use the opportunity to thank him for “*taking the time to talk to us*”:

# Professional researchers requested to be mediators in relation to district and national government

*(Lady speaking): I thank you for taking the time to talk to us. Please make our views to be heard by the RDC, Chairman LCV [Councillor] and our member of Parliament. The problem we are facing, they need to come and listen to us. If possible, send our concerns to the President because he is the one who told us on the day of opening the factory that the factory will lead to job creation, market for our agricultural products to improve our living conditions. Let him know that factory has led to sufferings of people in our village.*

Francis did provide a report to the Resident District Commissioner (which he discussed with her at length). She said she would speak to the factory owner to alert him to how unhappy the community was with their way of operating . Francis also had meetings with two Parliamentarians who showed concern and who undertook to take the matter further up in Parliament –

Researchers seen as involved – such that they may be asked to play a mediating role in speaking to, e.g., the RDC and the Parliamentarians on the basis of the research. **In this sense their “status” as professional researchers is helpful for the community.**

# Injustice is becoming “normalised” (taken as “normal” way of being, albeit oppressive)

We also asked them during the FG sessions at one point what we should highlight when sharing their insights with others:

**What do you think others wanting to organise for (more) justice may learn from our sharing of this experience through the articles and book chapters that we will be writing?**

*(Lady speaking in one of the FGs): They can learn that injustice exists in all society and that is becoming normal since there are **people who normalise the injustices. They should know that there are challenges when confronting injustices, but they must not be discouraged by the challenge.** No challenge is greater than the power of the oppressed poor who have come together. They should know that by coming together, you overcome all fears and you stand to face your tormentor with boldness – people clapping in the background and shouting “yes, it is true”.*

# Work towards “neighbourly relations” within and between countries & respect the whole web of life

The insight that “injustice is becoming normalised” points to a recognition that across the globe the dominant narrative (even though many people may realise that it is what David Korten calls “bogus”) is that an economic system in which *“the few monopolise control of society’s productive resources to extract unearned monopoly profits at the expense of the many”* (Korten, 2014, p. 2) seems justified.

Counter stories often consciously draw for their strength from what Korten calls “deep Indigenous roots” (2014).

Here (from these Ugandan participants) we detect how these roots offer a counterpoint to the operation of an economic system which is “devoid of care” (in the words of Harris & Wasilewski, 2004, p. 501).

This is not to say that all elements of ancient Indigenous societies express equally and as strongly the principles of seeking harmonious relations also across bounded communities and in relation to nature; but it is to say that **these kinds of axiological principles (and the underlying onto-epistemology) arguably need to be revitalised in order to co-generate a life-giving/regenerative story for the current/future era.**

# A final note on the dissemination/discussion workshop

We held a “dissemination” workshop in February 2021 to discuss with the participants (and others in the community) our summary of the main points that had arisen across the four FG sessions and to ask if they felt anything needed modification/addition.

Many of the issues connected with land ownership arose as participants took the floor to speak: they considered the land issue as crucial to take into account when “Inviting” foreign investors, they suggested the selling of land as being a communal decision (because it may have community-level consequences). Their recommendations (e.g., also for doing background checks on potential investors’ track records in other contexts) also pointed to options for creating more balanced relationships – in keeping with Marence Bart-Williams’ plea to “Change Your Channel” (2015) – to draw attention to global imbalances and exploitative relationships between the “investors” and the apparent “beneficiaries” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AfnruW7yERA>)

As Kovach notes (2009) we as professional researchers can all too easily be complicit in confining to the shadows (as Marence Bart-Williams names it) this exploitation – and we are co-responsible with participants for exploring alternative options (and for sharing these with wider audiences, as I am doing here too).

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