Thinking and Researching Relationally: Enacting Decolonizing Methodologies With an Indigenous Early Childhood Program in Canada

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Abstract
Decolonizing methodologies are gaining increasing prominence in diverse research contexts in which Indigenous peoples are researchers, research partners, participants, and knowledge users. As political and intellectual allies committed to actively resisting and redressing the colonizing potential of research and advancing social change, non-Indigenous scholars are also enacting decolonizing methodologies. By drawing on the author’s experiences as a non-Indigenous researcher partnering with an Indigenous early childhood program in Canada, this article illustrates the interconnected ways in which relationality provides the necessary epistemological scaffolding to actualize the underlying motives, concerns, and principles that characterize decolonizing methodologies. Relationality draws attention to the multiple intersecting influences that shape research and knowledge itself, emphasizes reciprocity, and is compatible with many Indigenous worldviews. This article contributes toward the ongoing international dialogue about decolonizing methodologies and is directed primarily to non-Indigenous researchers and graduate students who are questioning how to “do” community-based decolonizing research involving Indigenous peoples.

Keywords
community based research, critical theory, social justice, ethical inquiry, methods in qualitative inquiry

What Is Already Known?
- There are historical and ongoing concerns that Indigenous populations worldwide tend to not benefit from research.
- The principles of decolonizing methodologies are central to undertaking ethical research with Indigenous populations in colonial-settler countries, such as Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States.
- How to enact decolonizing methodologies is subject to ongoing dialogue and debate.

What This Paper Adds?
The inseparability between epistemology and methodology; specifically the continuities between grounding research in relationships, engaging in critical reflexivity, and generating contextualized knowledge with the underlying, guiding motives, concerns, and principles of framing research as decolonizing. How “thinking relationally” can provide the epistemological scaffolding necessary for enacting critically oriented and decolonizing research that benefits Indigenous peoples and advances social change.

Introduction
In colonial-settler countries, such as Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States, decolonizing methodologies are gaining increasing prominence in diverse research contexts in which Indigenous peoples are researchers, research partners, participants, and knowledge users (Chilisa, 2012; Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008). Methodology refers “to the theory of how knowledge is gained, or in other words the science of finding things out” (Wilson, 2008, p. 34). Importantly, research

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methodologies represent philosophies or worldviews created in specific sociocultural, political, and historical contexts. As Māori scholar Smith (2012) describes in her seminal text, understanding the etiology of and necessity for decolonizing methodologies requires an understanding of the colonizing reputation and history of academic research in settler-colonial societies. As a distinct philosophical orientation, decolonizing methodologies have evolved in response to multifaceted factors that are rooted in colonial oppression, including the historical context in which Indigenous peoples have been overresearched and “Othered” in the research process (Smith, 2012); Indigenous scholars’ resistance to the imposition of hegemonic research theories and practices that are founded on the history, culture, and worldviews of Euro-Western thought (Bishop, 2005; Chilisa, 2012; Mutua & Swadener, 2004; Sherwood, 2010), and the commodification of Indigenous knowledges (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; McGuire, 2010). Decolonizing methodologies also emerged in response to the inadequacy of dominant research methodologies to benefit Indigenous peoples and to advance global issues of social justice and human rights (Chilisa, 2012; Smith, 2012).

Mutua and Swadener (2004) describe decolonizing methodologies as a “messy, complex and perhaps impossible endeavor” (p. 7). This approach to research does not include prescribed or mandatory methods or take a “linear, goal-orientated, rationalist form” (Cannella & Viruru, 2004, p. 123). Rather, decolonizing methodologies are underpinned by an interrelated set of concerns, motives, and guiding principles that shape the entire research process (Swadener & Mutua, 2008). By revealing, resisting, and dismantling the colonizing potential of taken-for-granted ways of organizing, doing, and disseminating knowledge and research, decolonizing methodologies aim to reconstruct the entire research process and the epistemologies3 that inform them (Swadener & Mutua, 2008; Weber-Pillwax, 2004).

Scholarship on decolonizing research continues to evolve globally as Indigenous scholars seek to promote Indigenous peoples’ individual and collective healing and well-being by reclaiming and implementing epistemologies and methodologies that are grounded in distinct Indigenous knowledges, values, ethics, and belief systems that are developed in particular geographical contexts (Kite & Davy, 2015; Rix, Wilson, Sheehan, & Tujague, 2018; Sherwood, 2010; Walker, Fredericks, Mills, & Anderson, 2013). There is also growing critical scholarship and dialogue about the epistemic space generated by decolonizing methodologies for Indigenous and Western knowledge systems and researchers to cocreate knowledge (Beeman-Cadwallader, Quigley, & Tarajean, 2011; de Leeuw, Cameron, & Greenwood, 2012). In drawing on their experiences of doing decolonizing research in diverse global contexts, Beeman-Cadwallader, Quigley, and Tarajean (2011) note:

The majority of the decolonizing project place Native and Indigenous peoples (researchers) at the centre of this work; however, decolonizing projects—if they are to be sustained—require political and intellectual allies working together to generate continued dialogue in cross-cultural contexts. (p. 5)

In the Canadian context, Mi’kmaq Elder, Albert Marshall coined the phrase of “two-eyed seeing” in recognition of how Indigenous knowledge as a distinct epistemological system can exist in parallel with Western knowledge (Iwama, Marshall, Marshall, & Bartlett, 2009). A two-eyed seeing decolonizing methodology supports Indigenous and non-Indigenous healthcare providers and researchers to engage in co-learning through mutually respectful, transparent, and equitable relationships; drawing on both worldviews in order to benefit Indigenous peoples’ health and healing (Bartlett, Marshall, & Albert, 2012; Marsh, Cote-Meek, Toulouse, Najavits, & Young, 2015).

Beeman-Cadwallader et al. (2011) assert that although much has been written about the centrality and guiding principles of decolonizing methodologies—less has been written about how you do research that is decolonizing. Thus, the onus is often placed on researchers to know how to put the principles of decolonizing methodologies into practice and for Indigenous communities to assert their rights and hold researchers and academic institutions accountable.

In this article, the author draws on her experiences, as a Euro-Canadian occupational therapy researcher, of implementing a methodology that aimed to be decolonizing in her doctoral research with an Indigenous early childhood program known as the Aboriginal Infant Development Program (AIDP) in Canada (Gerlach, 2015). This critical, qualitative inquiry aimed to generate knowledge, from the perspectives of Indigenous parents, Elders, AIDP workers, and administrative leaders, on how AIDPs influenced families and children’s health and well-being and responded to health and social inequities affecting families and children experiencing social disadvantages (Gerlach, Browne, & Suto, 2018). In drawing on these experiences in this article, the author seeks to illustrate the interconnected ways in which relationality provided the necessary epistemological scaffolding to actualize the underlying motives, concerns, and principles that characterize decolonizing methodologies. The article begins with a discussion about what it means to think relationally and the relevancy of relational epistemologies to the author’s research motives and concerns. The article then explores the continuities between the author’s experiences of grounding her research in relationality and her research relationships, critical reflexivity, and the knowledge construction process—highlighting how relationality supported her research motives and actions in ways that are consistent with a methodology that aimed to be decolonizing. This article is directed primarily to non-Indigenous researchers and graduate students who are questioning how to “do” community-based decolonizing research involving Indigenous peoples (Beeman-Cadwallader et al., 2011; Morton Ninomiya & Pollock, 2017). It is also relevant for researchers who are seeking to undertake critical research in order to inform and advance social change and justice.

Thinking Relationally

The primary motivation for undertaking research with AIDPs was grounded in the author’s experiences of working as an
occupational therapist for over a decade with Indigenous communities, families, early childhood organizations, and colleagues in Canada. These community experiences and learning, particularly in relation to the author’s positionality in a colonial-settler society, informed and fueled her motives to undertake research that employed decolonizing research practices. Prior to starting her doctoral research, the author started to critically examine the nature of her thinking and knowing; recognizing that doing decolonizing research required that knowledge be viewed differently (Beeman-Cadwallader et al., 2011).

The author had frequently used the phrase “it all comes down to relationships” to describe how her approach to occupational therapy with Indigenous families and children was implicitly grounded in, and shaped by, her experiences of being in relation with community. Western philosopher Thayer-Bacon (2010) defines knowledge, as:

"Something people develop as they have experiences with each other and the world around them. People improve on the ideas that have been developed and passed to them by others. They do so by further developing their own understandings and enlarging their perspectives. With enlarged perspectives, they create new meanings from their experience. (p. 9)"

This definition resonated with the author’s emerging habit of circling back-and-forth between knowledge gained through her lived experiences, observations, interactions, and reflections from being in community and her theorizing in academia. As Thayer-Bacon’s (2003) states, “describing knowledge as ‘knowing’, reminds us that it is a verb always in process, emphasizing knowing’s transactional qualities and not describing ‘it’ as a finalized object or product” (p. 10). Thus, a relational epistemology emphasizes the transactional and embedded nature of knowing. Rather than being an objective spectator to reality, we are part of reality—affecting it as we experience it (Thayer-Bacon, 2003). In other words, the knower and the known cannot be separated.

As a Euro-Canadian researcher, the author was highly cognizant of her moral and ethical responsibility to generate knowledge that would ultimately benefit AIDPs and Indigenous families and children. Cree scholar Wilson’s (2008) conceptualization of relational accountability represents an approach to thinking about and doing research that is based in a community context (be relational) and demonstrates “respect, reciprocity and responsibility (be accountable as it is put into action)” (p. 99). Relational accountability and integrity shape which knowledge is sought, how it is gained, analyzed, and used by the researcher (Wilson, 2008).

Although it is important to recognize the distinctive nature of Thayer-Bacon’s (2003) and Wilson’s (2008) respective approaches to relationality, they converge in their belief that knowledge cannot be separated from the relational contexts in which it emerges. This perspective is in sharp contrast to the claims of neutrality and objectivity of positivist epistemologies and research, which have been critiqued for being “a significant and useful tool” of colonization; perpetuating essentialized and racialized discourses about Indigenous peoples (Sherwood, 2010).

There is immense variability within and between Indigenous philosophies (Battiste, 2008). However, relational epistemologies are often at the core of many Indigenous knowledge systems (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Castellano, 2000; Greenwood, de Leeuw, Lindsay, & Reading, 2015; Little Bear, 2000; Tagalik, 2015) and Indigenous research methodologies (Hart, Straka, & Rowe, 2017; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). The dynamic and relational nature of Indigenous knowledges is conveyed by Greenwood (2005) as follows:

"The foundations of Indigeneity, then, are comprised, in part, of values that privilege interrelationships among the spiritual, the natural and the self; reflect a sacred orientation to place and space; encompass a fluidity of knowledge exchanged between past, present and future, thereby allowing for constant and dynamic knowledge growth and change; and honour language and orality as an important means of knowledge transmission. (p. 554)"

Moreover, relational perspectives of health and well-being that encompass socioemotional, cultural and spiritual dimensions, and historical, sociocultural, and economic factors have started to infiltrate and influence the provision of health care with diverse Indigenous populations. Evidence suggests that relational understandings of Indigenous peoples’ health, as it takes into consideration the historical and ongoing effects of colonization, have the potential to inform new approaches to health promotion for this population (Hovey, Delormier, & McComber, 2014).

Taking up a relational epistemological stance in her research with AIDPs supported the author in moving beyond positivist and individualistic analyses which have been critiqued for obscuring Indigenous families and children’s unique sociocultural identities, histories, and locations in settler-colonial societies (Gerlach et al., 2018; Gerlach, Teachman, Laliberte Rudman, Huot, & Aldrich, 2017). In seeking to generate knowledge on the complexity of Indigenous children’s lives and well-being in diverse family and community contexts, relational epistemologies were well aligned with the author’s pragmatic use of postcolonial (Gandhi, 1998) and Black feminist scholarship (Collins, 2009) and Indigenous feminist perspectives (Anderson, 2000). Grounding this research in a relational epistemology and informed by these distinct but complementary critical perspectives provided a broad and inclusive theoretical framework that foreground the intersectional, contextual, and praxis-oriented nature of knowledge production.

Interpersonal relationships are a central underpinning of relational epistemologies, decolonizing research, and Indigenous research paradigms (Wilson, 2008). The following section explores the continuities between grounding research in relationships, engaging in critical reflexivity, and generating contextualized knowledge and explores their alignment with
actualizing the underlying principles and motives of a decolonizing methodology.

**Continuities Between Relationships, Reflexivity, and Knowledge Construction**

**Grounding research in relationships.** From a relational stance, the relationships we have with each other are central to being knowers and being able to contribute to the construction of knowledge (Thayer-Bacon, 2003). Thus, relational processes of knowing take place in the context of relationships at a particular time and place and are always situated (Kovach, 2009). Through her prior experiences, the author had come to understand the centrality of prioritizing time for building relationships with community members and colleagues. Over the course of many years and a shared interest in rethinking how to provide early intervention with Indigenous families and children, the author came to know the AIDP leadership and several AIDP workers and had collaborated on a project prior to starting this research (Gerlach, 2007). Her long-term relationships, and reputation within the broader Indigenous early childhood community in British Columbia, were also fundamental to being trusted to undertake research with an Indigenous early childhood program. This relational foundation provided a safe space to initiate a dialogue with the AIDP leadership about a research partnership, and over the course of many months, they collaborated on a research proposal that was mutually relevant, meaningful, and addressed their respective motives and priorities (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2014). The AIDP leadership identified the need for research to more explicitly describe and frame, from a theoretical perspective, how their programs influenced children’s health and well-being. The author’s primary motives were to understand how AIDPs engaged with families and were responsive to health inequities affecting Indigenous children. A memorandum of understanding, between the AIDP leadership as a community research partner (CRP) and the author, outlined the study purpose, design, and expectations for knowledge dissemination and formalized their research relationship. However, it was through their ongoing open and honest conversations, characterized by “a bidirectional flow of knowledge” (Ross et al., 2010) that the author felt more able to navigate her ethical obligations to academia and her relational accountability to the CRP and more broadly to Indigenous families.

**Engaging in reflexivity as a relational process.** Kovach (2009) succinctly states, “we know what we know from where we stand. We need to be honest about that” (p. 7). Grounding research in a relational epistemology shifts the focus beyond specific research methods to thinking critically about self in relation to the knowledge construction process (Wilson, 2008). From this perspective, and consistent with framing research as decolonizing, the researcher is not viewed as a neutral instrument but as someone who brings his or her own social identities and locations, including his or her cultural, social, historical, political, theoretical, and personal self into the research process. Thus, as the primary data collection instrument, a researcher’s social location is epistemologically and methodologically significant (Rix et al., 2018).

Critical reflexivity is an essential methodological tool in “navigating a moral path” before, during, and after research that seeks to be decolonizing (Bishop, 2005)—influencing the quality and credibility of the findings (Chilisa, 2012; Donner & Chari, 2010; Kovach, 2009). Moreover, Beeman-Cadwallader and colleagues (2011) propose that it is not specific methods per se that make research decolonizing, but rather “it is the intent or mindfulness taken when practicing the methods” (p. 7). As summarized in Figure 1, the author found it helpful to frame her concerns and motives as recurring critical reflexive questions as she reflected on and navigated the uncertain terrain of her relationships with and accountability to the CRP, research participants, and more broadly, the current and future families who access AIDPs and the Indigenous early childhood community in British Columbia.

As an occupational therapist seeking to engage with Indigenous families and community members, critical reflexivity had been an essential and ongoing feature of the author’s practice (Gerlach, 2007; Gerlach, Sullivan, Valavaara, & McNeil, 2014). In continuing this practice as a researcher, the author kept reflexive field notes during her doctoral coursework to examine her research interests and motives and throughout the research process—continually reflecting on issues related to her positionality. For example, during data collection, the author became aware of the fluid and relational nature of her positionality with different research participant groups (Alcoff, 2009; Hoskins & White, 2013). In particular, she reflected on how her intersectional social identities of “Euro-Canadian,
female, researcher, occupational therapist, and mother” shaped how she sought to build rapport, find common ground, and create “an ethical relational space of engagement” (Ermine, 2007) with each participant. The following is an excerpt from her field notes:

I tend to share my role as a mother as well as my background of working in First Nations communities as a way of finding some common ground. I think I use these aspects of my identity with caregivers to put them at ease although I don’t consciously think of this at the time. Whereas with AIDP participants I tend to share my professional identity as a way of conveying that I understand what they are saying.

Through her relationships and experiences in communities prior to this research, the author had become aware of how the privileged and sometimes uncomfortable space that she occupies in a colonial-settler society, is always and irretrievably constituted and shaped by the broader historical and contemporary relations of power between the Canadian state and Indigenous peoples (Gerlach et al., 2014). Thus, she consciously sought to convey humility and move away from “researcher as expert knower” toward “researcher as learner” in a relational process of knowledge generation (Doane & Varcoe, 2015). The following is an excerpt from her field notes:

There is a dynamic balancing process in the interviews whereby I continually attend to my agenda and the verbal and sometimes emotional responses of the participants. I think this is particularly the case where the power imbalance is more evident: with caregivers and with one or two AIDP participants who I sense feel somewhat intimidated by the interview questions. Perhaps because of my clinical background, I attempt to be responsive to the participants’ needs first and my agenda is secondary.

Strategies to attenuate researcher–participant power imbalances, included (1) using plain language to clearly convey both verbally and in writing information about the study, (2) reviewing the voluntary nature of the study with all participants at each data collection time point, (3) providing the choice of individual or small group interviews, (4) being as flexible as possible in timing and location of data collection, and (5) conducting interviews in a conversational style that prioritized participants’ comfort and emotional safety over the research agenda. Although the author sought to foster the conditions for safe relational spaces, she was also mindful that it is only research participants who can truly declare whether they experience the research space as safe. As discussed in the following section, the author also sought to attenuate her power in the analytical and knowledge generation and sharing processes.

Generating contextualized knowledge. Relationality reinforces complexity and the multiple ways in which people are both shaped by and shape other people’s responses, situations, experiences, and contexts (Doane & Varcoe, 2015). Congruent with this epistemology, decolonizing methodologies place participants’ feelings, perspectives, experiences, resistance, and the immediate and broader contexts of their lives at the center of analysis in order to understand and advance social change (Chilisa, 2012). Critical to this approach is a fundamental shift to learning from Indigenous peoples rather than about them (Marker, 2009); recognizing that Indigenous peoples are “the experts of their lives and the conditions that mediate them” (Salmon, 2007, p. 983).

Grounding research in relational epistemologies and informed by the aforementioned critical theoretical perspectives provided a comprehensive viewpoint, which was highly aligned with a decolonizing methodology—collectively creating an intellectual space for generating complex, contextualized, and nuanced knowledge centered on Indigenous participants’ perspectives and lived experiences. Consistent with this framing, the initial phase of analysis centered on the data that provided analytical insights into the complexities of families and children’s lives and the impact of multifaceted social and structural factors on their well-being and engagement in AIDPs. This analysis provided a critical starting point for analyzing the data that centered on how AIDP policy and practice interventions were responsive, and could be further responsive, to Indigenous families’ lived realities and priorities (Gerlach, Browne, & Greenwood, 2017; Gerlach et al., 2018).

An early synthesis of analytical insights was shared and discussed with the CRP, some of the research participants, and various members of the broader Indigenous early childhood community in British Columbia. Due to the scope of the study, it was not possible to engage with all research participants in the analytical process. Nonetheless, these discussions were essential to extending and refining the analysis and to informing the framing and wording of the findings, so that they were meaningful, respectful, and could be readily taken up and used by the AIDP leadership in policy and practice contexts.

An important motive common to decolonizing research and relational accountability is the purposeful representation of communities (Beeman-Cadwallader et al., 2011). As Wilson (2008) notes, foregrounding “the positive” is an explicit resistance and counter narrative to the plethora of research “done on Indigenous people in the past [which] has focused on epidemiology and ill-health rather than on health” (p. 109). In the context of the research undertaken by this author, an explicit intent in interpreting and discussing the findings in relation to female parents was to foreground their agency, strengths, and resistance while at the same time in no way diminishing the very real challenges they faced in raising their families. This intent is aligned with the inherently strengths-based nature of relational processes of inquiry (Doane & Varcoe, 2015) and avoids inadvertently contributing toward racialized discourses in which Indigenous women are “inferiorized” in their mothering roles (de Leeuw, 2014). During the writing process, several discussions took place with the CRP about representing findings that were potentially unflattering for AIDPs. In the context of the findings as a whole, it was agreed that these findings had important implications and should not be excluded.
Relational accountability in mobilizing the knowledge generated by the research involved translating the findings into a community research summary that was made available on the AIDP website (http://aidp.bc.ca/office-documents/), co-authorship with the AIDP leadership on publications for academic and practice journals (Gerlach, Browne, Sinha, & Elliott, 2017; Gerlach & Elliott, 2017), and joint presentations at community gatherings and early childhood workshops throughout British Columbia and national and international conferences. The continuation of a professional relationship between the author and CRP beyond the end of this study, as they explore further opportunities to work together, is perhaps a testament to the depth of the relational underpinnings of their researching together.

Conclusion

Decolonizing scholarship continues to develop in diverse global contexts as Indigenous scholars explore and develop decolonizing research methodologies by affirming and implementing Indigenous epistemologies (Chilisa, 2012; Kovach, 2009; Stanton, 2014). As “political and intellectual allies” committed to actively resisting and redressing the colonizing potential of research and advancing social change, non-Indigenous scholars are also enacting decolonizing methodologies (Browne et al., 2016). In contributing toward the ongoing international dialogue about decolonizing methodologies (Beeman-Cadwallader et al., 2011), this article draws attention to the inseparability between epistemology and methodology; specifically, how relationality can provide the epistemological scaffolding necessary to enact critically oriented and decolonizing research that aims to advance social change. This article also foregrounds the continuities between grounding research in relationships, engaging in critical reflexivity, and generating contextualized knowledge and the underlying motives, concerns, and principles of framing research as decolonizing. This article is relevant for non-Indigenous researchers and graduate students who are questioning “how to do” decolonizing research that involves and aims to benefit Indigenous peoples. The relational process of inquiry described in this article is also highly relevant for researchers engaged in critical work that aims to advance social change and justice with diverse population groups.

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Notes

1. As stated by Gracey and King (2009), “There are over 370 million Indigenous peoples living worldwide, in countries on every continent . . . . Though a contested and fluid concept, some common elements of Indigeneity include: self-identification as Indigenous peoples by individuals and acceptance as such by their community; historical continuity and land occupation before invasion and colonization; strong links to territories (land and water) and related natural resources; distinct language, culture, religion, ceremonies, and beliefs, and a resolution to maintain and reproduce ancestral environments and systems as distinct peoples and communities” (p. 66).
2. The term “Othering” was coined by Gayatri Spivak to represent a process through which non-Western peoples, cultures, and knowledges are constructed as inferior; creating false and simplistic characterizations of complex societies into binary opposites of colonizer/colonized or first world/third world (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007).
3. Wilson (2008) describes epistemology as the study of “the nature of thinking or knowing. It involves the theory of how we come to have knowledge, or how we know that we know something” and “is tied into ontology, in that what I believe to be ‘real’ is going to impact on the way that I think about that ‘reality’” (p. 33).
4. Parentheses are Wilson’s (2008).
5. Pillow (2003) describes reflexivity “as involving ongoing self-awareness during the research process which aids in making visible the practice and construction of knowledge within research in order to produce more accurate analyses of our research . . . . It is a deconstructive exercise for locating the intersection of author, other, text, and world.” (p. 178).

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