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## Relationally Responsive Standpoint

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## Relationally Responsive Standpoint

### Cover Page Footnote

The authors acknowledge and pay their respects to the many Elders and community members from across the continent currently known as Australia, who shared their cultural processes and knowledge on our travels over the years.

## Relationally Responsive Standpoint

### **A way of coming to Indigenous Standpoint Theory**

This paper is a commentary responding to the problem of Indigenous post-graduate students and scholars struggling with an understanding of Indigenous Standpoint Theory and either disengaging with it or including it in shallow or tokenistic ways that fail to advance knowledge in this emergent field (Foley, 2018). A framework grounded in respectful protocol is suggested as a way of coming into this knowledge safely and with cultural rigour.

This framework was designed on the continent currently known as Australia by a Murruwarri Elder and a young Bama researcher over four years of journeys along song lines stretching from Qld and NSW to WA and Victoria, in dialogue with many Elders and knowledge keepers. It was designed to bring Indigenous students and scholars into a personal connection with Indigenous Standpoint theory before undertaking scholarly reading in the discipline. It has been adapted over the last decade to suit different contexts and audiences, suggesting a culturally appropriate way of coming into four different layers of knowledge in the development of an Indigenous standpoint, responding to the relational obligations we have to country and community (Martin, 2008). There is a need for these elements to be covered in the self-reflective work of Indigenous scholars prior to and during the research process, whether the researcher's identity is shaped by embeddedness or disruption within Indigenous knowledge contexts (Moreton-Robinson, 2013).

### **Ethical Process**

An Aboriginal standpoint is not a performance or display of identity nor a platform for presenting unexamined self-narratives as research (Nakata, 2007), but a complex lived reality in a framework of Law, relations, knowledge and practice (Rose, 2005). In relationally responsive standpoints, our relationships to people, Law and place shape our obligations, ethics and boundaries regarding what and how we investigate in the world (Porsanger, 2004). These relational protocols determine what we know, how we know it and what we do with that knowledge. The proposed values for this work are as follows:

- *What we can know is determined by our obligations and relationships to people, ancestors, land, Law and Creation.*
- *What we know is that the role of custodial species is to sustain creation, which is formed from patterns of complexity and connectedness.*
- *The way we know this is through our cultural metaphors.*
- *The way we work with this knowledge is by positioning, sharing and adapting our cultural metaphors.*

Relationally responsive standpoints involve adapting operational processes (methodologies) that extend your intellectual processes (epistemologies) in response to expanding relational processes (ontologies) (Ryan, 2005). “Relational process” is at the heart of being – in Aboriginal worldviews an entity cannot exist unless it is in relation to something else, and so our ontology (way of being) is a process of relating to the world (Sheehan and Walker, 2001). This is shaped by our epistemology – our process of knowing and thinking, which is in turn shaped by our operating process or methodology (Steinhauer, 2002). Whatever metaphor you use as an Indigenous person to describe these layers of relatedness – doing, knowing, being; hands, brain, heart; methodology, epistemology, ontology – there is something missing. The missing part is spirit, informing your ways of valuing or axiology (Kahakalau, 2004).

This is the most basic expression of Law, and the foundation of an Aboriginal standpoint (Wilson, 2008). You have to work backwards in this process, from Law to relations to knowledge to practice. Spirit to heart to brain to hands. Axiology to ontology to epistemology to methodology. Valuing to being to knowing to doing. So that first step is always respect. After you have shown this respect, then you are ready to connect, reflect and direct. Figure One shows these processes with some different kinds of metaphors that might be used to understand them. These processes could also be seen as stages of knowledge transmission, in a learning cycle that could be used in any context.

<b>Process</b>	<b>Metaphors for Process</b>					
<i>Ethical Process</i>	Axiology	Law	Valuing	<b>Respecting</b>	Spirit	Root
<i>Relational Process</i>	Ontology	Existence (relations)	Being	<b>Connecting</b>	Heart	Stem
<i>Intellectual Process</i>	Epistemology	Knowledge	Knowing	<b>Reflecting</b>	Brain	Branch
<i>Operational Process</i>	Methodology	Practice	Doing	<b>Directing</b>	Feet/Hands	Leaf

Figure One: Different metaphors describing layers of Standpoint

In academia, axiology and ontology are usually implicit, unspoken, unquestioned, assumed (Ardill, 2013). As a result the default ways of valuing and being in the academy remain Anglo, colonial and predominantly male (TallBear, 2014). However, in relationally responsive standpoints, the core business is transparent and rigorous Law and relations. So it is important to prioritise these first two stages of the process. If the first two stages have integrity, they inform the second two, which then emerge appropriately and authentically. The protocols implicit in this process ensure that our core responsibility is to increase connectedness (Martin, 2008). The process provides built-in mechanisms for community ownership and benefit of knowledge production, ensuring obligations to the community are met beyond the requirements of institutions and service providers (Smith, 2012).

A relationally responsive standpoint demands that you work with local knowledge to produce cultural processes, not just cultural content (Frazer and Yunkaporta, 2019). Most importantly, your projects must be made to fit the cultural field, rather than the culture being manufactured to fit the project. Token cultural items inserted like book-ends at the beginning and end of an event do not constitute an Indigenous Standpoint. **Your culture is not what your hands touch – it is what moves your hands. Your hands must not be guided by someone else’s rationality, but by your own relationality** (Yunkaporta, 2019). If you follow this way, responding to authentic relationships, you will be able to read the warning

signs that will prevent you from overstepping, offending and transgressing. Even better, you will be able to co-create the shared meanings and language needed for genuine (and productive) inclusion of Aboriginal knowledge in the academy (Rigney, 1999).

This approach also makes room for inclusion of Indigenous spiritual ways of knowing to guide and shape research in culturally rigorous ways (Wilson, 2008). Figure Two shows a boomerang that was made by the authors as part of the process of Indigenous knowledge production in creation of the framework. It was given to a local artist in Dubbo to paint, without any information about the four-part framework that had been developed while carving it. The artist sat quietly with the boomerang for a long time and then painted the image of four spirits on it. This was interpreted by the authors as a “Something”, a sign that the knowledge was culturally rigorous and had been accessed in appropriate and respectful ways.



*Figure Two: Four Spirits Boomerang*

### **Relational Process**

When you see a rainbow, that arc you are seeing is just one facet of something much vaster. Imagine it as the edge of a dome that is invisible to your eye. But then that dome is just one part of a sphere, which is not hollow but spirals inwards and outwards in multiple

simultaneous dimensions. Even this does not stand alone – it is overlapped and intersected by an infinite number of other spiral/spheres, extending throughout creation. Navigating and co-creating this chaotic photo-fabric of creation involves holistic, relational processes that balance oneness with multiplicity, same with different.

Creation is sparked by the separation and overlap of opposite forces, a turnaround of spirit and material, skycamp and earth. This delicate but turbulent process is constantly in motion, and responds to our ways of relating to it. Our way of knowing and expressing this web of connectedness actually co-creates it – existence only continues to exist because we do this. This is our reason for being, our purpose as a custodial species. (Not to be confused with new-age or corporate culture ideas of the universe as a cosmic shopping mall controlled by individual positive thoughts). We maintain reality through culture – through story, ceremony, song and social systems or relationships (Cajete, 2000). There is a pattern to life and we have to see it, know it, live it, be it, increase it, correct damage done to it. But we do more than simply maintaining creation – we also have an obligation to increase complexity and connectedness (Martin, 2008). We have been given a unique spiritual makeup to help us fulfil this role.

When engaging with Indigenous relational processes, it may help to work with this cultural metaphor: picture yourself as having a spirit with four parts that can guide you in different stages of knowledge (Yunkaporta, 2019). These are your *big spirit*, your *ancestral spirit*, your *shadow spirit* and your *living spirit*. Your big spirit originates non-locally in sky camp, while your ancestral spirit belongs to a specific place in the land that is mirrored in sky country. Your shadow spirit is made of all your thoughts, attachments, ego and intent, while your living spirit is the energy that gives your body vitality. Big spirit, ancestral spirit, shadow spirit and living spirit can be aligned with the four elements of knowledge processes shown in figure one.

Upon your death, your big spirit travels straight to the sky camp and your ancestral spirit goes back to its place in the land, but your shadow can linger between the two worlds,

attracted by the locations, relations, sounds and images of the things it knows (which is why many of us do not say the name of deceased people or keep their photos and belongings out in the open). Your living spirit is a dynamic energy that comes from the world wherever you go, like river water fills but flows through a fish trap. This action can only occur through your connection to creation. Your living spirit is only as healthy as the land you are standing on and the community you are living in, so it is vital to maintain and care for country and understand your relationship with place and people. Your relational process in coming to Standpoint Theory is all about making clear what your relationships and obligations are to people and country (Murakami-Gold and Dunbar, 2005) – not just where you come from, but everywhere you go.

Your ancestral spirit and shadow spirit connect locally, but your big spirit and living spirit help you to connect non-locally, wherever you go on the paths and song lines and stories that go all over the world and are reflected in the stars. All of these aspects of spirit interact and overlap to form a being whose purpose is to maintain and enhance creation by increasing complexity and connectedness in both local and non-local domains. We are designed both to interact across cultures and to maintain our home cultures – if you only do one of these, you are neglecting half of your spirit and performing only half your role as a custodial being. Unfortunately, contemporary politicised identities often present us with a forced choice between one or the other in the way we interact with the world as Indigenous people (Marker, 2006). This undermines our purpose and place in the project of creation.

The antithesis of creation is simplicity. Entropy comes from the isolation, simplification and unification of systems that are by their nature interconnected, complex and diverse (Barnhardt and Kawagley, 2001). When human custodial paradigms are replaced by colonising methodologies, then the result is entropy. Complex, adaptive, diverse systems become basic, static monocultures which cannot be sustained. Knowledge is divided into arbitrary categories or subject areas and stored in silos, rather than interacting

in a dynamic system. Nature is divided from culture and studied, sorted, stored. This is an



unravelling of the pattern of creation and the living knowledge that inhabits every part of it.

In light of this, Aboriginal knowledge is becoming a matter of some importance globally. Our knowledge processes hold the key to solutions of future sustainability (Yunkaporta, 2019) – the restoration of complexity and connectedness to entropic socio-environmental landscapes. We have an obligation to engage with this restorative process, to legitimise the place of adaptive intellectual roles that have been in place for millennia. To do this you don't have to have expert anthropological knowledge of Indigenous culture – you only need to become relationally responsive in the way you work.

### **Intellectual Process**

Your intellectual process in relationally responsive standpoints involves engaging with and negotiating cultural metaphors that can express, structure and inspire thinking and learning processes.

Cultural metaphors are the tools we have been given to know and therefore sustain creation. The structured manipulation of words, images, actions and objects that carry additional layers of meaning is the way we co-create systems and events within the spiritual fabric of existence which is Dreaming (Yunkaporta, 2019). For example, a person working within the rainbow Dreaming metaphor described previously might manipulate light with a crystal or a shell to produce a rain event. Many cultural metaphors would be in play here to allow the rainmaker to navigate multiple interactive systems of sky, water, land and more.

Our metaphors work in a turnaround action at the overlap of spirit and material worlds, where the double-meanings of sounds, images, movements and objects earth-side create a reflected reaction sky-side. The consequent movement of spirit precipitates a reaction in the material world. This can occur along inherited ancestral pathways or through newly produced/found connections. It can also occur as an entropic event through the disconnection of these pathways by malicious intent (e.g. curses) or the creation of metaphors by individuals existing outside of an appropriate relational framework.

The recent advent of individualism in human cultures has produced a lot of clever people who operate outside of any cultural or community obligations, who do not attend to axiology (Law) and ontology (relations/existence) when they do their work. They create metaphors of entropy, rather than metaphors of relatedness. This situation has coincided with the recent emergence of print-based cultures, which are grounded in abstract metaphors that allow disconnection, as opposed to the tangible metaphors of oral cultures which demand connectedness (Frazer and Yunkaporta, 2019). For example, here in this text we can express the abstract metaphor “axiology, ontology, epistemology” without reference to any particular place, event, person or object. An equivalent oral-culture metaphor might be “root, stem, branch” (see similar in table), connected to a totemic relation with a sentient plant species situated in a place of custodial belonging.

Abstract metaphors allow people to proceed with the business of knowledge and practice in a straight line, without attending to Law and relations. Without examination and transformation, these individualistic practices can lead us along a straight path to isolation, simplification, separation, self-gratification. Our old stories warn us about this kind of behaviour.

New story (dividing narrative into “history” and “pre-history”) has recently been created in the interest of elevating individuals and elites, rather than in the interest of nurturing the communities, systems and relations that sustain creation (Smith, 2012). As narrative is one of the most powerful ways of using metaphor to influence creation, these new disconnected stories have had a devastating impact on existence. The project of mainstream academia to date has been to disseminate new narratives of human existence that serve the interests of those seeking control through simplicity (i.e. assimilation, cultural uniformity). We have an obligation to turn this situation around by asserting standpoints that re-centre diverse community narratives, economies, processes and voices (Dudgeon, 2008), reactivating cultural metaphors of connectedness.

In this stage of the process, you may incorporate different cultural activities,

expressions, images and practices to shape and guide the way you organise knowledge in your research practice, even in your literature review and data analysis. You may adapt the stages of a cultural process like weaving, or a land-based process like the cycle of seasons to inform the structure and spirit of your inquiry.

### **Operational Process**

Your methodology, the work of your feet as you begin to “walk your talk”, comes back full circle to spirit – to the values, the axiology and Law that limits and defines exactly what you can do with knowledge (Fredericks, 2007). This is nourished from your layers of ontology and epistemology (heart and mind) as you draw metaphors from the field to build your methodology (feet). This element is all about positioning, sharing and adapting practical metaphors in response to the other three elements, while remembering that a tree has many roots, and yours is just one of them. None of these elements can exist without constant interaction with community and country.

However, while this protocol may be clear in the Aboriginal world, things can get muddier in civilizing systems. The production of Aboriginal knowledge within contemporary organizations is dangerous and highly stressful, due to historical factors that must be faced and overcome (Shahjahan, 2005). The destructive impact that colonisation and globalisation is having on human existence must be acknowledged and dealt with before standpoints with integrity can be developed (Durie, 2005). The relationally responsive operator must endure a terrifying process of critical engagement with the colonising system, and worse, self-reflexivity exposing the roles that colonial discourses have played in the construction of the operator’s own cultural identity (Moreton-Robinson, 2013). This process is hell, and many don’t make it beyond the token level of basic “cultural awareness” or “cultural competence”.

The standard response then is to choose a side – assimilatory approaches that promote only western knowledge in the name of “closing the gap”, or progressive approaches that celebrate and include Aboriginal cultural items and role models (Nakata, 2007). Both of these ways are unproductive, simplistic and only serve to promote entropy.

Alternatively, a relationally responsive approach seeks dialogue, synergy and innovation in the respectful interaction of diverse systems. From a position of integrity, you need to negotiate pathways, metalanguages and shared understandings within local knowledge frameworks and protocols, and then police those choices. You must be consistent with the Indigenous methodology you are claiming – it is not free pass to avoid mastering academic disciplines (Nakata, 2007), but an extra layer of accountability in addition to institutional requirements. Sub-standard Indigenous research in this area diminishes respect for Indigenous Standpoint Theory in the academy (Foley, 2018).

Indigenous methodologies ensure that we acknowledge the fact that we are a part of the field that we are researching. Non-Indigenous methodologies, while acknowledging the uncertainty principle and observer effects, still position the researcher as a god-like and objective viewer hovering outside of the field and imposing interventions from above (Yunkaporta, 2019). Indigenous methodologies ground us in the ontological reality of our connectedness and belonging in the field, and our ethical obligations to every being within that system and the knowledge it holds. As such, Indigenous methodologies are participatory and never individual endeavours. We privilege Indigenous voices and ensure our people are active contributors rather than passive objects of study.

### **Navigating the field**

The field is fraught, contradictory, contested, dangerous (Nakata, 2007). But people and groups who rigorously negotiate this field can become immensely productive and innovative, as long as they confront the problematic issues of colonialism that stifle connectedness with local people and places. Colonisation is within and without; we carry elements of both resistance and compliance in our unavoidable interactions with the occupying culture and these need to be illuminated in our search for an Indigenous Standpoint (Moreton-Robinson, 2013). Those who avoid the undeniable reality of their colonial entanglements are inevitably imprisoned by them. At the same time, it is also true that those who focus on colonial power relations to the exclusion of all else can become

irretrievably disconnected from the world.

The key is to challenge and free yourself from colonial definitions of Aboriginality, and use your new understandings to decolonise your practice. Current definitions and assumptions position us as primitive or tribal cultures that are somehow unable to engage with the outside world without assimilating, and conventional approaches reproduce this mythology by limiting our engagement with global knowledge systems, through fear of losing authenticity. Relationally responsive pedagogies must engage with and lay claim to fields beyond the parochial definitions of Aboriginality that have recently been imposed by colonists. At the same time, Aboriginal intellectual traditions have always enfolded processes of inquiry, so it is not necessary to graft our methodologies onto western ways of doing – we can return to the source and build these things from our own traditions (Ahenakew, 2006).

Relationally responsive standpoints might not be limited to Aboriginal research; they have the potential of being applied to non-Aboriginal contexts as well. As asserted previously, Aboriginal knowledge can provide more than interest and entertainment. It can provide the systems, structures and solutions for resolving sustainability issues. This process can help all of us to find our role in restoring complexity and connectedness to the dynamic systems that make up human reality, to start the journey towards reclaiming our role as a custodial species.

The path of this journey can be found in the process outlined previously, as shown in figure one.

1. The first step of Respect is aligned with values and protocols of introduction, setting rules and boundaries. This is the work of your spirit, your gut.
2. The second step, Connect, is about establishing strong relationships and routines of exchange that are equal for all involved. Your way of being is your way of relating, because all things only exist in relationship to other things. This is the work of your heart.
3. The third step, Reflect, is about thinking as part of the group and collectively

establishing a shared body of knowledge to inform what you will do. This is the work of the head.

4. The final step, Direct, is about acting on that shared knowledge in ways that are negotiated by all. This is the work of the hands.

If you follow those four steps, always ensuring you do the first two at the start, then you will begin to work in a relationally responsive way. You will be responding to the relationships established through your respectfulness and connectedness. You will learn from these relationships and reflect on that learning. Then you can teach, inquire and direct projects, using what you have learned.

*Respect, Connect, Reflect, Direct* – in that order...

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