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2024

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Suggested citation:

Pierre, Danielle Nadine (2024) A Student's Viewpoint: Responsible Research is Relational. Development in Practice. ISSN 0961-4524 (Submitted) Available at https://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/5225/

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Article published as
Pierre, D. N. (2026). A student's viewpoint: responsible research is relational. Development in Practice, 36(1), 56–60. https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2024.2433604
Author's Original Manuscript

A Student's Viewpoint: Responsible Research is Relational

Development in Practice

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Disclosure Statement

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare. No funding was obtained to support this writing. Data sharing not applicable – no new data generated.

Biographical Note

Danielle Nadine Pierre (BA, PGcert, MDes(c.)) lives as a Black (genderqueer) Woman, in Toronto, Ontario, Canada and is born of mixed ancestry (Grenadian, Métis, and Polish). Danielle is a graduate of McMaster University and Humber College, working as a social services advocate to strengthen the higher education system in Ontario using participatory, data-driven strategies. Danielle is knowledgeable about information gathering and design, assessment, program evaluation, and socially oriented innovation. Danielle is applying these capabilities towards building capacity for assessing programmatic effectiveness of student affairs and services in the Division of Students at York University. At the same time, studying part-time at OCAD University in the Master of Design, Strategic Foresight and Innovation program. Danielle regularly volunteers to guide colleagues' professional development, leads communities of practice, and presents at conferences.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks and much appreciation to all my supporters, both personal and professional. My inspiration has been sown by Jananda Lima and Nadine Hare who

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guided my exploration of research methods for innovation. I give special acknowledgement to Margaret Kierylo, PhD, Matthew Harris, and Jeff Burrow for their review and feedback on initial drafts. Thank you to anyone reading my viewpoint—may it resonate with you and inspire your practice.

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Introduction

The significance of ethical considerations in development research, especially regarding inherent power imbalances and relationship dynamics, is well documented. Simply questioning what responsible practice looks like reveals an answer: to practice research responsibly means identifying leverage points that could rebalance the uneven relationships and power dynamics that are reproducing inequitable experiences. Any proliferation of ethical directives and frameworks demonstrates the centrality of this lesson—the very existence of ethical frameworks, policy guidelines, codes of professional practice, and the like suggests that we, as practitioners, are needing constant reminders of how to attend to our professional relationships.

Panelists speaking on ethics and integrity at the Development Studies Association 2023 conference on Crisis in the Anthropocene conclude "Whilst concepts like 'co-production' have gained rhetorical prominence, we think more is required to move decisively beyond modes of extractive research," (Ainslie and Nkobou Atenchong, 2023). The panel further asks how research practitioners might determine to whom they are responsible. Thinking more broadly one might ask: How might we integrate reflection on the ethics of our relations with those who contribute to our research into the research practice itself?

In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith uses Foucault's metaphors of the classifications (theories), framing (style), and rules of practice (methods) that are used to construct understanding from the archives of knowledge that hold stories about reality (1999). My current graduate studies are inviting me to name and explain the design-research methods and theories that make up my rules of practice. Here I am using rules of practice to refer to the ways I engage in and elicit good will and truth-telling for the purposes of constructing a legitimate research practice and an interpretation of the real world out of said research (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). My intents for sharing this viewpoint are two-fold:

1. To create a temporal anchor for the theories and principles that influence my work as a scholar-practitioner in service-design and participatory research; and

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2. To reflect on my practice and offer my expertise for other colleagues to learn from, thereby manifesting relationality and reflexivity in my work.

Through this viewpoint I begin to explore the discourses I wish to reflect on and enter conversation with as I become a design-scholar. This exploration connects my prior personal and professional experiences to the concepts that influence contemporary design-research. This writing is at once the practice of reflexivity as well as a demonstration of the value of and process for transforming one's practice.

Charting my Social-Location

Reflexivity is about acknowledging the assumptions and preconceptions one brings to the research process that shape its outcome—it is about examining how our own patterns of thought, behaviours and values affect the work that we do (Boscoe, 2015). "By thinking reflexively throughout the entire research process – by reflecting on ourselves and making the research process itself a point of analysis – we reduce the risk of being misled by our own experiences and interpretations," (Boscoe, 2015). This is critical because, as Kathie Irwin is cited as saying, "real power lies with those who design the tools," (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 38).

My social locations, no doubt, influence the tools I design and the perspectives I take. I wish to share the details that I think influence my professional work, including lived experience as a Black (genderqueer) Woman, born and raised in Southern Ontario, Canada to a Northern mother and Grenadian-immigrant father, each raised in separate and divergent contexts than I; a graduate of a Canadian university and a College of Applied Arts and Technology; classically-trained dancer, amateur athlete, and hobbyist; and designer of higher education policy, program, and research reviews and implementations.

Reflexivity is a foundational principle of ethnography that rejects the notion that sociological research can be unbiased; it suggests that reflection on and revelation of our bias as researchers is how we defer judgement of, observe, build empathy with, and understand our research participants (Hare and Lima, 2024b). It is already recognized as a tool for assessing one's professional practices among qualitative researchers. Unfortunately, from within the governing and educational institutions I am familiar,

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quantitative study that produces numeric data is over-valued for its ease of collection and senses of authority and objectivity. Living inside of marginalized identities is not an advantage to engaging in social change work in my context because the structures I work to change operate outside of my favour. Can it be considered success if I suspend my lived experience and rely on statistics, administrative data, Hansards, and other meeting transcripts to make dispassionate business cases for more socially oriented evaluation and monitoring exercises, accountability frameworks, and quality assurance programs?

As a researcher and policy advisor, I supressed reflexivity. As a designer, I am invited to use reflexivity to reintroduce my unique perspective to my analyses and recommendations. Rather than simply follow—while attempting to problematize—the narrow set of facts that support a particular argument or political stance, I am finding that design invites participation from practitioners and participants alike.

Working within Ethical Constraints

I come to be a student of service-design as a university administrator, policy advisor, data analyst, advocate, and humble researcher in a professional sense, and as an individual holding multiple academic credentials, hardened work-ethics earned by facing systemic oppression, and as such, imagination, and curiosity to match. So, prior to thinking about research methods that specifically facilitate innovation or design, my research experience has been constrained by highly rule-based environments. I have held myself to a minimum standard of ethical research. In practice, this has meant following the legislative, regulatory, and policy rules that I understand to be commonly agreed upon. This is how I find my own minimum standard in the higher education sector within which I work.

I primarily rely on the core principles underpinning the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans – TCPS 2 (2022)*: respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice (described in Table 1). TCPS2 is the official human research policy of the three federal research funding agencies in Canada and their funding recipients (2022). As such, I cascade the framework into my assessment, evaluation, and quality assurance work inside of and adjacent to potential funding recipients, usually post-secondary education institutions.

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Table 1: Interpretation of TCPS2 section B. article 1.1 Core Principles.

Core Principle	**Intent**
Respect for Persons	Maintenance of human research-participants' autonomy in every aspect of a research study. Practiced through free, informed, ongoing consent protocols.
Concern for Welfare	Protection of human research-participants and their data by minimising harm. Practiced by managing the physical and psychological risks to the participant while participating in the study.
Justice	Fair and equitable treatment of human research-participants while participating in the study.

I was introduced to the policy statement in its prior iterations when I gained a Post-Graduate Certificate to become a Research Analyst. While I have continually relied on and applied these principles to center the experience of the research-participant in my work, I have not always been met with the same enthusiasm and diligence as a colleague or even as a research-participant.

Learning from Relationality

In their January 12, 2024 lecture, Nadine Hare and Janada Lima cite Shawn Wilson's positioning of relationality as the guiding principle in Indigenous research paradigms and emphasis on the concept that "we could not be without being in relationship with everything that surrounds us and is within us," (2008). The lesson is that knowledge is relationships and connections formed with an environment and its actants (Wilson, 2008; Hare and Lima, 2024a). My lesson is about searching for emergence. It has been through Hare and Lima's teachings that I am learning that the principle of relationality means putting relationships at the centre of every research encounter be it with community or partner relations, with that which is human, non-human, living and, non-living.

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As outlined in Table 2, these concepts align well with my prior learning. Coming to relationality after having worked within ethical and legal constraints helped me to identify how I move in my research practice. This is to say that I have already interpreted the ethical frameworks and codes I have encountered as pursuing some type of relational accountability. I try to follow the rules that I think matter and find commonality between worldviews by attending to relationships.

Table 2: Alignment of principles for relational accountability and ethical research.

Principles for Relational Accountability	**Core Principles for Ethical Research**
Contextual	Justice
Respect, Reciprocity, Responsibility	Respect for Persons
Centering / Mediating	Concern for Welfare

The products of the research should be true to the voices of all participants and reflect a shared understanding of the topic by the researchers and participants (Hare and Lima, 2024a). To be true to their voices, the researchers should know who they are working with; this is the way that the researcher becomes a mediator between participants and the actant requesting or sponsoring the study.

Without the specific articulation of relational accountability as the practice by which the intents of the core principles are achieved, those who read the TCPS2 may not immediately understand the significance of the core principles. The principles answer the question: How do you treat those with whom you want to have a productive relationship?

Transforming Practice with Relationality

Too often the purposes and aims behind the research I have been tasked with have been extractive in nature—specifically when I am asked to use information for a different purpose than it was collected. When I am able, I spend time renegotiating the intent of data requests from my colleagues (seeking clarity on the intended use, the desired story to be told, or the risks to be mitigated). I spend this time because of an enduring commitment to ethical practice. Concern for welfare should seek to challenge

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deficit-thinking and dominant ideologies that negatively influence progress towards goals and social prosperity.

Relationality began to make a difference in my thinking when I was inspired by Renata Leitao's call to use desire rather than need as the compass for social change (2020). Leitao's (2020, 8) assertion that "Damage-centered research is embedded in Social Design methods under the name of empathy," and that damage-centred (read need-based) research limits observations to historical exploitation, domination, and colonisation resonates with my ethics. Furthermore, this provides a new lens through which to view the world from my social locations. Searching for desire means searching for potentialities and searching for prosperity. To engage in good, ethical practice, as I have come to learn, is about understanding the type of prosperity that participants want to experience, not identifying and meeting their basic needs. Desire is the difference between an accessible solution and a dignified solution.

Conclusion

What matters most to those requesting my analyses will always be the amount to which my findings help them to make real-world changes. However, as designer, I have the power to mediate worldviews between participants and other actants in ways that support and recognize my lived experiences. While I have typically used theoretical frameworks to style and bound my mediation, relationality provides an explanation for my drive to center participants and their struggles. Since I am the one asking the questions and driving the search for potential change—in rules, legislation, regulations, policy directives, procedures, and protocols—I am the one with the power to bring new knowledges together to create transformative understandings (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). This power may seem like a privilege for many, but I carry it as a responsibility.

To design dignifying social services and produce prosperity is to engage in good relationality via self-reflexivity. In this way I can explain and further encourage commitment to learning and practicing the ways that people recognize each other in research. The successful identification of the right change to make, at the right time, requires careful cultivation of membership-groups, constituencies, non-partisan and partisan advocacy organisations, and lobby groups. These groups' shared successes rests entirely in the relationships within and between themselves and the publics who

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use their services. A social program or social service, therefore, is successful when these relationships are well tended.

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