

How Relations Come to Matter: A Study of the Role of Relations for Deliberate Transformations in an Alaska Native Community

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Abstract

This dissertation is about how relations come to matter for deliberate transformations towards sustainability. More concretely, it is about transformative change in a community context and how certain relations and perceptions of relations help and hinder this work. The dissertation is situated within transformations research and anchored in human geography and Indigenous studies, and it takes a transdisciplinary approach to the study of sustainability transformations. It responds to the growing concern that while the need for transformative change is becoming increasingly evident, it is less clear how to move society towards sustainability in ways that are both equitable and just. Grounded in 'the relational turn' within human geography and related fields, the research takes a 'deep' relational approach to the study of relations for deliberate transformations, engaging with Indigenous and posthumanist ontologies that center on the potentials and responsibilities inherent in a world of relations. In the articulation of a 'deep' relationality, the research proposes a distinction between approaches that view relations as an important attribute in an ultimately dualistic system and those that view relations as forming the very foundation of reality, arguing that the latter creates a wider solution space for transformative change.

These metaphysical perspectives are grounded in a case study of the logics and perspectives that inform the deliberate engagement with transformative change in the Alaska Native community of Igiugig [Iggy-AH-gig] in southwestern Alaska. Using Q-methodology and qualitative interviews, the research focuses on perceptions of what drives transformative change in the community, and the importance of interpersonal relations and human-environment entanglements in this regard. Addressing issues of both theory and practice, the research further asks what a 'deep' relational approach adds to our understanding of how transformations can be led, decolonized and scaled. Through these inquiries, the research contributes to ongoing theoretical debates on social change and the possibilities for deliberate transformations toward sustainability and offers four insights that together highlight the epistemological-ontological-ethical implications of a relational understanding of transformations.

First and foremost, the research asserts that relations matter for enabling deliberate transformations toward sustainability. Especially relation to place, and the associated notion of belonging to place, is highlighted as an underappreciated relation crucial for enabling people to be the drivers of sustainability transformations in their unique locations. Secondly, the research shows that relations in and of themselves are not enough to ensure that transformations are equitable and just. It highlights the importance of a certain quality of relations for unleashing the full potential of transformations in research and practice and for enabling community transformations to support systems change. This quality, which informs both how relations are understood and performed, is characterized by a 'deep' relational

perception of and way of being in relation grounded in reciprocity and care, so-called 'right relations'. Thirdly, the research identifies persistent dualisms such as modern/traditional, individual/collective, local/global and subjective/objective as limiting the ability of modernist theories of change to account for and support sustainability transformations. Instead, grounded in a 'deep' relationality drawing on Indigenous relational ontologies and relational social science theories and philosophies, it advances a both/and stance of 'simultaneity'. The research finds that a 'deep' relationality is uniquely positioned to guide transformations research and practice in ways that account for the above insights (belonging, right relations and simultaneity) while paying careful attention to issues of justice and agency. Finally, the research points to the possibility and need for turning to 'deep' relational ontologies and perspectives, and to build bridges between ontologies and knowledge-systems to co-create knowledge that can inform both the theory and practice of deliberate transformation. Grounded in 'right relations', such bridge-building can be furthered by a certain flexibility of narratives and perspectives among actors involved in sustainability work. Importantly, bridge-building must be based on respecting differential worlding practices while acknowledging the entangled co-becoming of humans and nonhumans as inhabitants of planet Earth.

The insights from this research have important implications for the fields of adaptation, transformation and sustainability. Rather than only focusing on *what* needs changing, the above insights speak to *the manner* in which we must engage with transformative change to ensure just, equitable and enduring outcomes. A 'deep' relational paradigm implies that we come to matter in our attempts to understand and further transformative change. Equitable and just transformations in part depend on how we as sustainability researchers and practitioners show up and how we understand and honor our responsibilities within as well as outside the research context. Humanity is at a critical point at which we need to practice our ability to hold complexity; reflecting on and refining our understandings while simultaneously moving ahead with our engagements with change. Based on a 'deep' relational approach to deliberate transformations in Igiugig, Alaska, the dissertation supports this ongoing work.