ABSTRACT
The Relational Flow Frames have four components built on the relational accountability work of Shaun Wilson: relational emergence, relational flow, relational convergence, and relational continuity. Relational Flow Frames emerged through a study of the lived experiences of high school graduates from the Tłįchǫ community of Behchoko, Northwest Territories. An initial plan for purposive sampling evolved into a form of snowball sampling better described as relational sampling. Four relational research principles were defined and then later refined through research documenting a model of the Tłįchǫ Community Action Research Team. The Relational Flow Frames may be useful to other non-Aboriginal researchers working in northern communities.

Key words: Aboriginal, communities high school graduation, relational research, relational sampling, Tłįchǫ, Tłįchǫ CART

Data collection and analysis from a Western research paradigm generally involves breaking down understandings into parts to explore meanings; from an Aboriginal research paradigm the value is in the holistic understanding of the phenomenon (Barnhardt, 2008; Gould, 2008). Wilson (2008) described the analysis process as a holistic look at the data to view relationships between content in a

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manner that cannot be separated into pieces without destroying the essence. Wilson (2008, p. 120) presents the data analysis process as an analogy to creating a circular fishing net.

You could try to examine each of the knots in the net to see what holds it together, but it’s the strings between the knots that have to work in conjunction in order for the net to function. So any analysis must examine all of the relationships or strings between particular events or knots of data as a whole before it will make any sense.

Diverse worldviews mattered in a cross-cultural qualitative research study exploring the lived experiences of 11 high school graduates from the Tłįchǫ community of Behchokó. The purpose of this paper is to present the Relational Flow Frames (RFF) that emerged through research with Tłįchǫ high school graduates. The original research study is presented in detail in this journal (Hopkins, 2012, pp. 235–254).

**RELATIONAL SAMPLING**

The story of the RFF’s conception began with a population sampling challenge. Initially a purposive sampling technique was planned to identify potential study participants with information posters posted around the town of Behchokó. The posters yielded only one phone call of interest. The individual who phoned did not come to the scheduled meeting. After a week and some reflection, I decided to try another approach to share the research information posters. Facebook was a primary approach used to communicate and spread news in Behchokó. So, I contacted the Tłįchǫ Government to post the research information poster on their Facebook site. Only one e-mail referral resulted. Yet again, the recruitment approach was ineffective in bringing forward participants for the study.

The e-mail referral as a result of the Facebook posting did result in one interview, and yet at the core of this connection was a relationship of trust that dated back 7 years. The poster on Facebook was also not effective for the intended purpose. In my reflection journal I wrote,

> What originally seemed like the potential for lots of volunteering participants for my study has emerged into nothingness. One call, one email, one interview, and almost three weeks passed.

After a few weeks of waiting for results with the purposive sampling approaches, a more culturally appropriate way of researching in the Behchokó context unfolded. From a Western perspective, the new approach was best described as a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. From a Tłįchǫ perspective, the sampling method was relationship based and embedded in the everyday flow of individuals’ lifeworlds.

The revised participant-finding process began during my day-to-day activities in the community of Behchokó. I encountered one individual who I knew met the study criteria. I told him about the research I was conducting and asked if he would like to participate. He said, “Sure.” I asked, “When?” “How about now?” he responded.

After the interview was over, the participant mentioned that I should really hear the stories of two others, both of whom I had known for years. The data collection grew from the initial encounter in the community and was complete within 3 weeks. Initially I described the process as snowball sampling but there was a relational component situated in the Tłįchǫ context. Snowball sampling did not adequately capture how central my existing relationships were with the participants who shared their stories, thus I began describing it as relational sampling.

Changing the population sampling technique was a learning process that took time to evolve. Despite having written extensively about the need to respect the cultural ways of the context when conducting research, I had chosen an inappropriate purposive sampling technique, recruiting through research information posters, because it was a common and comfortable practice.

**THE RELATIONAL FLOW FRAMES**

The Relational Flow Frames build on the relational accountability work of Wilson’s (2008) from the perspective of a non-Aboriginal researcher. The essence of the Relational Flow Frames (Figure 1) emerged through the research with Tłįchǫ graduates and
were further refined when used in a separate study to document the Tłįchǫ CART model (see Hopkins, 2012, pp. 195–210). Relational emergence, flow, convergence, and continuity provide four frames for planning, conceptualizing, and reflecting on lived experiences of research in Aboriginal communities.

1. Relational emergence includes multiple points of entry into research related processes, including a relational sampling method.

2. Recognizing the inseparability of the everyday lifeworld from the researcher, the community where the research is taking place, and the research itself honours the sense of flow naturally embedded in authentic relationships.

3. The dynamic nature of relational systems that "live" interdependently can develop a momentum that has meaningful outcomes through relational convergence.

4. Relational continuity brings the RFF full circle by emphasizing that although the forms may change, authentic relationships will continue on after the research is done.

As a non-Aboriginal researcher, the usefulness of the RFF for me was the inner dialogue that emerged as I reflexively processed my own lived experiences as a researcher, person, and Behchokǫ community member and the various elements of the research study through this lens.

**Relational Emergence**

Relational sampling expanded to become a relational emergence frame encompassing multiple entry points into new aspects of the co-researching relationships. For example, each of the 11 interviews with Tłįchǫ high school graduates about stories of lived experiences created new lived experiences for the participant and myself. I recorded this reflection after my seventh interview:

[The interviewing] has been a very strength based process — every participant thus far expressed in one way or another how great it felt to share his or her stories. But, each story was embedded in broader stories of adversity. Resilience as a construct is situated and the situated piece involved stories of pain — some were heart breaking. I know I was supposed to stay as objective as possible and yet one cannot truly honor relational accountability without experiencing your own identity and humanness within the stories of others....

Engaging in the stories of others was part of the sense-making process, seeking to understand the experiences of others from the inside, while simultaneously sharing a lived experience of their expression. I quickly came to feel that, despite many stories of sadness, the interviews were validating celebrations of success. I watched the body language and voices of participants become confident and more light-hearted during each and every interview process. It felt as though there was something healing in the process of being vulnerable and feeling listened to with an open heart. I have no evidence to support this sense, beyond my own experiences hearing stories of deeply personal lived experiences from others.

I did my second interview today. [He] appeared so comfortable with me and seemed to believe that I was really interested in hearing about his experiences, his stories, and his perspectives so I could learn about Tłįchǫ resilience. What I expected to be 30–40 minutes was an hour and a half of telling stories and sharing experiences. And at the end of it as I was leaving, he said, “Wow. It’s like I feel so much lighter now!” Maybe my next study should be about the embodied experience of voicing a story that feels like it hasn’t yet been heard!
Relational Flow

Relational flow is the everyday lived experiences of authentic relationships interwoven within the research process. As part of the relational flow, I truly felt myself embodying the lived experiences of high school graduates. Describing the period of hearing stories as data collection seems oddly cold and simply not adequate to capture the true essence of the shared experience. Co-researching is perhaps a little more appropriate, yet does not capture the authentic nature of the experiences. In my journal I used the words vulnerability, empathy, resonance, and connection repeatedly. I was conscious of the quandary of a Western science model that considers this empathetic attunement inappropriate for empirical research. Yet, in contrast, this phase was crucial in relating the study’s purpose of deepening understandings of the lived experiences of Tłı̨chǫ high school graduates. I was not seeking objective accounts of what happened, but rather subjective stories of experiences and trying to understand these stories from the perspectives of the storyteller.

During the data collection phase of the study with Tłı̨chǫ graduates, interviews were usually embedded in natural, reciprocal social interactions — open, flowing, and conversational in nature.

I was also quite affected by what felt like incredible honesty and openness from most individuals during the phenomenological interviews. But on reflection, I realized that what I was labeling as honest and open was for the Tłı̨chǫ high school graduates somehow a different value expression or personal quality from my perceptions. They simply told stories.

I noted two exceptions to the open, flowing, conversational nature of the participant interviews.

What I noticed was how different [this interview] was for me. As it went on, I realized that the previous two interviews were deeper in a sense. The experiences shared by others were considerably less guarded than [her] narrative that at first seemed more surface level. I mostly engaged through listening in the last two interviews in which [participants] opened up completely and the emotions were so raw. Maybe the other participants felt safer with me. [This participant] only knew me through others.

Another example of relational flow occurred while visiting participants to get approval on interview transcripts, these visits naturally extending beyond the study-related task to be accomplished. For example, during the review of the transcript for accuracy, I helped Michael with a computer problem and hung out to watch hand games he had set up for a group of young people. I read Max’s poetry and gave him some guidance on how to move forward with getting it published and I listened to more of his stories that he wished to share. Another visit, I provided Monica with the passwords for an online career-planning resource. Each of these acts helped participants as a natural extension of caring relationships, providing examples of the relationship-based foundation of the research process.

Relational Convergence

Relational convergence as a frame scopes momentum — some form of synergistic growth where the whole is more than just the independent parts. Relational convergence is interdependence, the unexpected, the “uh huh” moment, or simply an outcome being met in relationally meaningful ways. The interpretive themes from the study with Tłı̨chǫ high school graduates were largely what other researchers were interested in because the method is more accepted in Western science. “What did I find?” questions were the focus. The process of interpretive meaning making gradually evolved from emergence into convergence.

Three giant concept maps, one for each research question, adorned the walls of my home for months. As I would pass these drawings and scribbles of thoughts each day, I would add new understandings to the diagrams drawn from literature, reflections, and my own lived experiences as a resident within the community and as part of the education system. Recognizing implications was a dynamic, iterative, sense-making process that involved a flow between embodiments of the data juxtaposed with a distanced role as external reflector. Gradually the implications of the research began to unveil.

The interpretive themes provided findings related to the study’s purpose and research questions and led to a Model of Dynamic Resilience for Tłı̨chǫ
learners (see Hopkins, 2012, pp. 235–254). Yet, relational convergence — the most meaningful changes, new understandings, and outcomes of this research from my perspective emerged because of the holistic explorations of lived experiences.

The interpretive themes were richer because they emerged after the holistic “breathing in” of each story. I remember listening deeply when I was with each person. Then, reliving the whole narrative again over and over in my head as I transcribed every word. I would go back and listen, record, reflect, listen, record. Throughout, there was this other stream of thought that continued, I became part of the stories.

I intentionally transcribed each interview personally and made every effort to do it within 48 hours. During this period the story was still very “alive.” This “aliveness” concept is interesting because it felt in part connected to memory and holding the stories in my mind until they were documented. Some Aboriginal cultures describe the documenting of stories as the death or end of that story. I interpreted this to mean that the story, once frozen in words, would not continue to grow and change. In my own experience, documenting the story led to partially disengaging from it while I moved on to the next story. This raised awareness left many lingering questions and implications worth exploring further. Significantly, it was within the “aliveness” of first hearing the story, then living with it for some days, that I felt the most relationally connected. Empathy, vulnerability, resonance, deep curiosity to understand more, all seemed to live in this undocumented and not yet “disengaged from” space.

The lived experiences of Tłįc high school graduates also converged on a personal level with my own stories and inner realities. Often the embodiment of the narratives led to lived experiences that felt profoundly personal. I remember needing to take considerable “quiet time” for myself after several of the interviews to process the deep emotions that were evoked. For example, the empathy I felt for Max still appears each time I think of his words. Hearing it holistically and in person cannot be adequately captured through selected quotes, but a few that still echo in my memory are:

I had this one experience where people cornered me when I was going home. They cornered me in the corner of a house, there were like four or five of them and they buried logs on top of me. I was completely buried in them. I’m still not over it to this day. (Max)

Elementary school was ... I hated elementary school because people pointed fingers and called me stuff I didn’t understand until I was a teenager. Like I had kids my age calling me faggot, homo, and I’m like, what are those words, I don’t know what they’re calling me. (Max)

You come here and you’re used to seeing a whole bunch of beautiful brown faces and then you go down there and it was hard to tell which ones were the Native ones. That’s what I was trying to look for. In my opinion, I needed to recharge my Indian battery. (Max)

Riley’s story evoked deep empathy but also resonated with my own lived experiences. Outwardly my childhood looked very different from Riley — my father was a lawyer and never broke any laws to my knowledge. I was never under the care of Social Services but on many levels I saw myself in her stories and felt my emotions in her words. My parents were married for over 40 years and yet I too was a high school drop out, went down wrong paths, grew up in an unhealthy home environment, felt often like I had only myself to rely on, and worked hard to get my life back on track. Her story left me in awe of how much she had overcome to graduate from high school.

My dad ended up getting incarcerated a couple of times, once when I was about 6, which was why we moved from community to community, then again when I was about 13. I was living in Whatì and going to school in Whatì and I just hated it. I was under social services and I had practically no say in anything and once my dad came home everything went back to normal. I knew I’d never let that happen again. (Riley)

It was hard having the whole community know my family business. I just wished people would mind their own business, they will come up to you and say like, “Hey where’s your dad?” and I’m like, “You already know so why are you asking?” I just ignored them, when I would see those people around town I’d just put on my headphones and ignore them. (Riley)
By the time I hit 17, I was making bad choices and the wrong kind of decisions. I dropped out a couple of times; I could have been done that year, and life was stressful. I was just a kid and didn’t know any better. Finally, I just thought that I don’t want to be like those people who just come to school for a month and then drop out again over and over. (Riley)

**Relational Continuity**

Authentic relationships continue beyond the research on some level. After seven years living in the community of Behchokö, I recently moved an hour away to the city of Yellowknife. This has affected my relational continuity in ways undoubtedly. We no longer live in the same community and that changes everything. Reflecting on shared community contexts is important for non-Aboriginal researchers working in Aboriginal communities. The research is only as meaningful as the authenticity of the relationships. Relational continuity does not necessarily mean sharing everyday experiences, although it can. In my case, I still feel very connected to the research participants through their stories. I follow along with their news and updates received in a variety of ways. I carry their stories with me in my work, research, and everyday life. One of the main incentives driving my desire to be a co-editor of this northern edition of *Pimatisiwin*, is to keep connected to Tłı̨chǫ people. I am very thankful for my years in Behchokö; my experience there has affected who I am as a person and how I see the world.

Another example of relational continuity provides me an opportunity to share 11 descriptive summaries of lived experiences of Tłı̨chǫ high school graduates. Sharing these stories was important to me on a personal level. I feel relationally accountable to the participants who shared their stories, and not just the interpretive meanings. Although this data could be explored through the relational convergence frame, this sharing is, from my perspective, part of my relational continuity frame.

**The Storied Experiences of 11 High School Graduates**

Data were collected through narratives and then analyzed in a two-phase process. Holistic descriptions of narratives were completed before moving on to inductive themes and interpretations of the meanings participants ascribed to phenomenon. The descriptive summaries are presented using pseudonyms. Each participant reviewed the original transcript for accuracy and the descriptive summary to approve inclusion in the study. Reviewing the descriptive summary was important for validating the data as well as for the analysis method. Participants were asked not only to review the summaries for accuracy but also to ensure the retelling of their stories resonating with their lived experiences (Van Manen, 1990). I have intentionally not presented any analysis of the descriptions. Each reader engages with each participant’s story summary without meanings and intentions being externally defined.

**Denise**

Denise loved learning and school from a very young age. She was confident in her intelligence and described schoolwork as “easy.” She was often late and missed lots of school but teachers left her alone because she always got her work done and she asked many questions if she missed time. Teachers who were “fun” but also had high expectations made a difference for her. She loved learning about history and about how people lived in the past. Art was one of her favourite subjects in school.

Throughout her school years, Denise had many friends and participated in sports and every activity available in the community. She particularly loved playing on sports teams because she got to travel “everywhere.” She had memories of her mother always welcoming people with family problems into their home.

Denise was the oldest sibling and found her family supportive until the relationship she started in junior high began to get unhealthy. Her personal relationships changed considerably as this unhealthy relationship became central in her life. By the time she left her “jealous” and “controlling” partner, they had two children. She credits free daycare in the school and being able to find her own home as contributing significantly to her ability to end the relationship, finish high school, and go on to a very healthy and happy career and life path.
I got into a relationship in high school and it started off good and then he started getting all jealous and everything and it stopped me from going to school. When I wanted to go to school, it was a problem so I just missed a few semesters. I would always do good, but then that would always get in the way. It went on for years … until last August. I remember having to fight to go to school. We had two kids together so from like 15 on I stopped going to school. I got pregnant at 16 and I couldn’t go to school because of that. Then after I had my daughter, I started going to school with her and I guess at that time it was okay, but then after she got bigger it started being a problem again. I guess maybe part of the problem was that I felt I had nowhere else to go so that’s why I stayed with him, but then when I figured out how to get into my own home I just told him point blank that I only had to stay with you because there was nowhere to take my kids but now that I have my own home I’m the boss and if I want you out, then you’ll be out. You can’t treat me like this anymore. I felt like I had the upper hand now. So then, he started slacking off and there was too much drinking. I didn’t approve of it and just got tired of it so I told him to leave and that was that. (Denise)

Hilary

Hilary spent her early years between Behchokö and a community outside of the Northwest Territories where her mother was going to school. She described these early years as “good.” Hilary explained she did not remember many details of her early school years. In junior high, she was placed in the academic program and found all the work except science “pretty easy.” Most of her friends were in the nonacademic stream, but they were “cool with [her] being there.”

In Grades 10 and 11, Hilary went away to school. This experience allowed her to feel independent and to get a sense of what college away from home would be like. Her mother still called every day, and she spent holidays and summers home in Behchokö. Grade 12 was one of her most difficult years; she “just wasn’t into it.” She is not sure if it was because she had worked “so hard” in Grades 10 and 11, but she regrets not having worked harder in Grade 12. It took her 2 years to finish and graduate, including the semester she took off in between Grades 11 and 12. During that last semester, she studied lots so that she would not have to return for upgrading. The hardest part was getting the grades I needed for college. Right after high school I applied to colleges and got accepted but I didn’t have the good marks to go into any of the programs I wanted to go into so I had to do upgrading at the college. It’s always about the marks! If I could go back in time, I would try really hard to get my marks up to 80s — they do really matter. I wish I had tried hard because then I’d already be in my program doing everything I wanted to do. (Hilary)

Ian

Ian fought norms and the imposed expectations of others from a very young age. A strong sense of identity and need to make his own decisions began in elementary school. He knew he was intelligent, and from a young age was told by family members that he was “special.” He felt his family was grooming him to be a leader, but he really wanted just to be himself.

Ian described his parents as very young when they had him and loving, but “traditional Tłı̨chǫ parents that don’t talk about a lot of stuff.” His grandparents, whom he lived with for the first 5 years of his life, taught him lots about traditional Tłı̨chǫ life and he felt connected to his heritage in a way that was meaningful for his life after high school. Good friends were a constant source of strength throughout Ian’s life.

In elementary school, Ian was often grouped with others — usually all girls — for more challenging work. In high school, he made a game out of never doing homework and coming late so he could be “under the radar.” In his elementary years, he had been “chubby.” Later he struggled with what he described as “suicidal tendencies” and felt he had no one he could talk to about how he was feel-
When he did graduate, he knew his marks were well below his capability but felt that had been his choice. Playing music, writing, and giving speeches were creative outlets that helped Ian to deal with his inner emotions in healthier ways. Ian finally decided to “buckle down” after high school because his girlfriend was pregnant and being a good dad was very important to him.

Being a Tłíc Youth, you go through some heavy things because of the disparity in the town; there is a vibe of unhealthiness. Even myself I had like suicidal tendencies. I would think about it but there wasn’t much support for that. I started thinking that maybe my experience was others’ experience too so I wrote a song about it. That really strengthened me — music and having a creative outlet. Music really helped even if it was just me in my room singing about how I felt. I think the suicidal tendencies just came from life and not knowing how to deal with how I was feeling. (Ian)

Jaclyn

Jaclyn was an exceptional student, learning to read in kindergarten and earning her high school diploma with top marks at 17 before going on to college. She had a book in her hand constantly from a young age and was thankful for the school library where she would check out stacks of books every weekend. Being the smartest one brought many challenges over the years, but after she was skipped ahead a grade to begin high school, making her the youngest student in any of her classes, she felt “ostracized” from her old friends and new class peers alike. She described her school years as “excruciating lonely.”

I was the youngest in the class again. I had just turned 17 when I was taking English 30. I started the semester with eight students in the class and I was the only one that finished — everyone else dropped out. (Jaclyn)

Jaclyn described her high school experiences as filled with people like her mother, aunt, the school principal, and several teachers who she felt had encouraged her and gone out of their way to support her learning path. She also described several teachers who did not have her best interests in mind, combined with a complete absence of “peer support,” as reasons why she knew she would not spend one moment more than her 3 years in high school. Jaclyn’s feeling of aloneness at school was compounded by her determination to take academic courses, even when they were not offered.

With her mother’s support, Jaclyn would advocate for herself and, thanks to certain teachers and a principal who believed in her, she was granted the right to take academic classes, even when they were not offered. Jaclyn was part of a class for attendance purposes but took courses largely on her own. An English teacher and a science teacher willingly offered her the programming and support she needed to complete the academic levels while still feeling connected to the rest of the class, but some teachers resented her and felt she was getting special treatment. Jaclyn explained that she had no fear of being different and going her own path; so this was the path she took, graduating high school and then going on to college and a successful career.

Kate

Kate described her schooling as being quite different from the kind experienced today because “there were wild periods and tame periods and [she] was from a tame period.” Her entire story is embedded in her relationships with others, friends as well as family and teachers. She described herself in many ways as being in the “middle,” with friends from many groups. She was more “artsy” and creative than “brainy,” but apart from struggles finishing work and getting assignments in on time, she managed to get through high school alongside her same-aged peers. Some people called her a “goodie-goodie,” but she embraced this intended criticism as a compliment and explained that partying really wasn’t her “thing”; she was the “mother hen type.”

Kate was an engaged member of the school community. She was a member of a highly active student council, on the Students Against Drunk
Driving (SADD) committee, and played on several sports teams. Her volleyball team included all her closest friends that she had grown up with, and in high school, they formed a study group, working together at each other’s houses on a regular basis.

I got through school with study groups; we had our volleyball team. Well we pretty much all grew up together. We lived within doors of each other or a few blocks away and we always helped each other, with like study groups. We’d get together and work. We couldn’t get anything done at the high school library because doorknobs were always there and goofing around, so we’d go to one of our friends’ houses when their parents were out to Bingo and do our study groups there. (Kate)

Kate’s family expected her to go to school every day and work hard, so she did. She knew her father had worked hard through residential school. She figured if he could be successful, she could do the same. She described her father’s family as “always lecturing” her lovingly, and she felt this had helped her stay focused throughout school.

The college experience in Alberta was challenging for Kate. She felt like one of the few “fully Aboriginal” people there and did not always feel welcomed by others. She needed to feel “down to earth” again and so she came home to Behchokö, found a job she enjoys, and feels she makes a difference in her community.

Max

Max’s first 13 years of life included living in a secure, somewhat secluded home with his family in Behchokö. He grew up “going in the bush” — the wooded areas that make up Tł ł ĺ č hǫ lands — with his dad and cooking with his mom and felt very protected when he was at home. School was another story. He described being called names he would not understand until many years later and being bullied continuously right through until high school. Once a group of boys, some of whom have since apologized, buried him under a pile of logs, all the while chanting “faggot” and “homo.” He explained that he never really “got over” that experience.

I had this one experience where people cornered me when I was going home. They cornered me in the corner of a house, there were like four or five of them and they buried logs on top of me. I was completely buried in them. I’m still not over it to this day. When I was bullied I just kept going, putting one foot in front of the other. If anyone said anything, I was like, “Yeah, whatever,” and just kept going. But I’ve had people who called me those names come and apologize to me. I’ve had people come up to me and say, “I’m so sorry for how I treated you in elementary.” Even to this day, I know who those people are but I chose to overlook it. (Max)

Academically, Max found school easy, so he would focus on his work and created a mental barricade to keep the “nightmare of elementary” out with responses like “whatever” to help him persevere when peers called him unkind names. Junior high brought many changes. His parents split up, and no one ever really talked to him about it. He calls these the “dark years.” He was placed in an academic program but felt like an outsider there too. Now everyone added “nerd” to the name calling.

Max went through a gothic phase, dressed in “Goth” style, and listened to death metal music. The “partying started at 13 or so.” He started with alcohol and marijuana. Shortly afterward, he was addicted to “serious” drugs. He went through a period of withdrawal to get clean before trying to detox for the first time at 16. In his teen years, Max lived some time in Yellowknife first with his dad, then for a year with a foster family. Keeping to himself and struggling to adapt to the “culture shock” of the new school was followed by a good period academically and socially before he began sabotaging his own success by “partying all night” with friends.

Max moved to another province with his dad again where he stayed for 17 months before taking off to be on his own. During this time, he described periods of feeling “lost in the shuffle” of the crowd, followed by friendships and good marks in school, once again followed by getting involved with the “bad kids.” Drugs, alcohol, and what he perceived as a very dangerous and risky lifestyle were all part of his teen years.

Max eventually started to understand the significance of the names he was called as a kid. He began to know and accept himself and grew confident in his understanding of his own sexual identity.
He described himself as “bi,” explaining that sometimes he felt like the “poster child for bisexuality” in Behchokö because he was the first to speak so openly about it.

At 21, Max graduated and said he felt so much relief to be done. He had goals of studying economic development because he wanted to come back to Behchokö; a place he felt was home despite all of the hardships. He dreamed of helping his community become self-sustaining. His future college bound goals are in his dreams for a good path in life but are tempered by the ever-present draw toward drugs and the associated lifestyle.

**Michael**

Michael is a confident, articulate storyteller with a strong sense of his own identity as a role model and advocate for Tłı̨chǫ youth. He believed working hard and looking toward the future are part of living a better life and creating a healthier community. He spent most of his first 2 years living on the land with his non-English-speaking Tłı̨chǫ grandparents. His mother was young when he was born and struggled in an abusive relationship with his biological dad and with alcoholism. Michael knew that she loved him.

When Michael was around 13, his mom got her life back on track and bought a house with his stepdad, giving Michael his first bedroom ever after years of sleeping alongside his grandparents, followed by years on a couch or mattress on the living room floor. He now considers his mom a role model. He respected her choice to go back to school and take the courses she needed to do a job that she felt was important. His stepdad also added to his life, although they “didn’t always see eye to eye”; he was a good provider and “put up” with Michael.

Despite a “largely absent” mother who was “fighting her own demons with alcohol” and a biological father he did not meet until he was 13, Michael felt he had relationships in his life that he could always depend on. His grandfather taught him about hard work, survival in the bush, and doing the right thing. He credits his grandfather with the core values he developed and tries to live today.

Friendships were also integral to Michael’s well being. He is an excellent public speaker, a role he has filled many times in his young life, yet arrived in kindergarten unable to understand more than a little English that he had picked up from television. He described his first kindergarten friend who helped him make a letter B as a friend for life and shared stories involving a group of what he described as 30 friends that can “always count on each other no matter what.”

Michael can barely read and write and was told in Grade 6 that he is dyslexic, which he used to feel embarrassed about but now compares to a “disease that you can’t help, just like diabetes.” Michael struggled through school and lost his way many times over the years, but everything changed when he discovered drumming in high school. The moment he held the drum in his hands, he knew he had talent and felt that everything would be different. This new identity brought confidence, even though he was still embarrassed about his reading and writing and struggled through high school with challenges compounded by heavy use of alcohol and drugs.

Michael wanted to finish high school, but he doubted it was possible. Encouragement from others and his growing role working with youth in the community pushed him to keep trying, and finally he got through with special supports for his reading disability. He continues to work full time supporting increased well being for youth in Behchokö and has a second job as a political representative. He talks of going into politics himself one day because he believes it is time for Tłı̨chǫ people to plan more for a healthy future than government is currently doing but feels he is not yet ready for the stress that will bring on his family.

Monica described her childhood as an easy one. Her parents were loving and supportive. Her home life was very structured, with her dad waking her up for school each morning. Daily responsibilities included chores and homework before she was allowed to go out with her friends. She also experienced “new
"traditional" practices in her upbringing that included being expected to stay home and take care of herself and clean every time she was menstruating.

What externally appeared to be a linear life-course with lots of supports and successes had many layers of complexity. This first became apparent as she described her sister — a young mother of six with a life story that is extremely different from Monica’s, despite her having grown up in the same home. Monica explained that her life was very different from that of her five older siblings because her parents were alcoholics. Her parents’ decision to quit drinking when she was born and many “other things” that Monica did not specify in detail contributed to her sense that her childhood was very different from her siblings.

Monica was bullied in Grades 3 and 4, but her problems were resolved quickly, and these same bullies became her lifelong friends through shared common interests such as playing volleyball and soccer. Monica was very clear on her high school graduation goal and followed a focused path from a young age to the moment she received her diploma. Monica completed high school at 17, passed all her courses, and enjoyed school. She mentioned struggling somewhat with math equations, but she still passed her classes and did so following an academic course track. After high school, Monica was unsure of her own career ambitions and of the career path she wanted to follow. Although she did complete a nursing access program and had a summer job she loved with the mines one year, she is not working or going to school right now. She does help her family and feels needed in Behchokö.

I got my first summer job and that was at the mine and that was a really great job. I was an environmental technologist’s assistant and I did soil and water samples. I was basically a scientist. Now I want to maybe be an environmental scientist.

(Monica)

Riley

Riley is a young adult whose stories revealed she recognizes that increasing the quality of her life is about making good choices, working hard, and using strategies and the opportunities available to her to meet her goals. She feels very connected to her Tłı̨chǫ ancestors and in awe of how they lived in the past. Yet, she described experiences of feeling quite disconnected from the community of Behchokö, where she has lived most of her life. Parents who divorced, a dad who spent time in and out of jail, and an unstable mother whom she described as often “unavailable to her” left Riley with a sense that she needed to be a mother to herself, so that is what she did.

Riley placed little blame on anyone except herself, describing mistakes as “bad choices” that seemed to always lead to what she described as a conscious decision to change something that was not working in her life. As she told her stories, at certain moments she laughed; at times she seemed to be trying to contain excitement about the good things that were happening in her life; and her eyes filled with tears several times as she painfully described some of the incredible hardships she has faced in her young life. Momentary glimpses of the vulnerability and hurt that she carried inside her were exposed through the experiences of growing up that she described.

Riley explained strategies she used to protect herself emotionally as she faced adversity in her social world, such as putting on her iPod and “tuning everyone out.” She felt unsafe relinquishing this when others were around and yet wanted to trust others. With the descriptions of a growing confidence in her own strengths and abilities, in moments she showed that she was developing her sense of her self-identity and goals about the kind of person she wants to be.

Riley also dealt with adversity directly, sharing one experience of telling people who she described as “gossipy” to “mind their own business,” demonstrating an assertiveness and ability to protect herself from the negative opinions and pressures of others. She expressed a sense of responsibility to give her siblings what she had not had, someone she could count on to always have her best interests and well-being in mind. Throughout her narrative, Riley described herself as following an individual path, embedded within a need to be a role model for younger siblings, and believing that education should be about helping those who need help and sharing expertise when you have it to share.
I guess my number one challenge would be peer pressure; like I said I made bad choices. I hung around the wrong crowd. But I decided that wasn’t going to be my life. When I was seeing people who were older than I was trying to go back to school I looked up to them. Just looked at my auntie, she was a perfect example. She was in her 30s going to her 40s and she went back to high school. Her and her kids were probably in the same class and she graduated. I thought if she can do all that and come back after so many years, do the work and finish, then I can do it before I’m 20 or 21. And I did. (Riley)

SHAWN

Shawn began his story by naming every teacher he had in elementary school and explaining that those years were the “bullying years.” He was bullied for being “fat.” His grandma was his “anchor” and would go to the school every time he came home crying after being picked on. He described himself as a “grandma’s boy” who associated mostly with relatives. He mentioned one friend he first made when he was 7 years old and still has today. They were both overweight and so were one of the little groups in elementary; they were teased but “didn’t care.”

The transition to junior high was exciting; the bus to school each day and the new school was a welcomed turning point. Bullying continued in the junior high school years but schoolwork was not hard; according to Shawn, “it was peanuts,” and he went every day. In Grade 9, he weighed 240–260 pounds and just decided to lose the weight. For a full year he took a diet supplement, drank lots of water, walked everywhere, and the weight came off. Six years later, he still maintains a healthy weight, reads nutrition labels, and takes care of himself.

High school brought many changes: different teachers for every subject, the possibility of having to repeat a failed class instead of just being pushed through, and the introduction of a smoking area that back then he perceived as “cool.” Shawn now thinks it is only because of the high school smoking area that he smokes today. He also explained that while smoking he connected with others and started to make more friends.

Shawn sailed through Grade 10, passing all his courses, and felt like the rest of high school would be “peanuts” for him. In Grade 11, he lost his grandmother to cancer and his world felt like it spun out of control. He discovered alcohol and spent about a year lost, grieving his grandmother, and failing school.

After watching all his friends pass him by and walk the stage for graduation day, he felt inspired and a little embarrassed. Shawn credited his friends’ support and messages to him such as “you’ve come this far, just get it done,” along with the opportunity to work part-time and save money as motivators that helped him. He graduated in 2009, feeling an enormous sense of relief and pride on that special day with all his family and the community watching.

The one person that never got to see me graduate was my grandma. I took such a hard fall for 1 whole year after seeing her suffering for 2 years with lung cancer. I just didn’t give a shit. I took it so hard because she was the one that raised me. As we speak today, it is 6 years today that she’s been gone. I couldn’t believe it, but a year later I was still a mess. Then I decided to take counseling. It really helped me. They told me not to think too much because thinking can bring a lot of stress, so I just let it go and then things started to turn around for me. It is like I know someday we will meet again, and it’s just life and the afterlife. (Shawn)

TOM

Tom’s high energy level characterized his entire interview. He told stories of both conventional and rather unanticipated strategies used to harness the benefits of this energy, while keeping the “wild child” side channelled into creative endeavours versus travelling paths that would easily “mess up your life.” Tom did not like elementary school; he was bored, restless, and resented “being controlled.” He created his own engaging experiences, cursing at teachers, drawing pictures that got him referred to a school counselor, and strategically using sarcasm to keep things “fun.” The tolerance for Tom’s antics in elementary disappeared when he attended junior high and received his first suspension after “cussing out” one of the teacher’s assistants during his first week of school. He described this moment as significant because he “started seeing the consequences for [his] actions.”
A school Tom attended in Yellowknife for one semester of Grade 6 expressed concern about hyperactivity. His behaviour suggested that he might have attention deficit disorder. Although never formally diagnosed, Tom considered this diagnosis a possibility and described his discovery of marijuana in junior high escalating to the point of “self-medicating” and being “high from Grade 10 to Grade 12.” Being high made school interesting and helped him deal with the workload and get “really involved in the stories” he was reading. He got high “behind closed doors” with trusted friends.

After watching all his closest friends graduate without him, Tom decided to quit marijuana because although it helped him focus, it also took away his motivation and “no matter how hard [he] studied, [he] would always forget everything.” He set his goal, quit getting high at school, and finished the courses he needed to graduate. He credited getting serious about graduating, having creative outlets and opportunities to express himself through music and art, and one “solid friend” who was not into alcohol and drugs as contributors to his success.

But I gave up pot because all my peers graduated before me and they all left me behind. And so the reason I gave up pot was that it really affected my memory. So no matter how much studying I did I would always just end up forgetting so the next year I just really focused down on doing the work. I gave up on marijuana, which I wouldn’t want to say I was addicted to but let’s just say we had a certain relationship — a bond. So I ended up giving up pot and everything worked out. I graduated that year. (Tom)

One “cool” teacher stood out for Tom as significantly affecting his life by introducing him to media and the world of technology and mentoring him along the way with lots of “good advice.” He also was thankful for an opportunity to work “fresh” out of high school. Although he had worked part time in the community from 18 on, he thought this chance led to many opened doors that he did not know would be there for him when he graduated.

**APPLYING THE RELATIONAL FLOW FRAMES**

An opportunity to explore the usefulness of the RFF emerged through research seeking to document the Tłı̨chǫ Community Action Research Team (CART) model (see Hopkins, 2012, pp. 191–206). Specifically, the study was to document the research-driven CART model through lived experiences of team members, their leaders, academic advisors, and partners. Conversational and semistructured interviews were

__Figure 2: Adapted from Hopkins (2012)___

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<tr>
<th><strong>Relational Emergence</strong></th>
<th><strong>Relational Flow</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• CART’s story of origin matters</td>
<td>• Purposeful work for CART members</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Healing Wind advisory created CART plan to address high STI rates in the region</td>
<td>• CART building relationships and trust in the community</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Research: CART kitchen table talks</td>
<td>• CART members’ commitment, view selves as a medium for KT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• CART as the “conversation starter”</td>
<td>• Issues to address emerge through relationships, research and reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Interventions: Flexibility, responsiveness, and adaptation to contextual realities</td>
<td>• Learning, listening, making decisions together</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Informed understandings of why “outsiders” Knowledge Translation haven’t worked</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Inseparability of CART work and lived experiences in community</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Relational Continuity</strong></th>
<th><strong>Relational Convergence</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>• Identity strengthening and resilience enhancing for CART members</td>
<td>• CART confidence building as researchers</td>
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<td>• Unanswered questions about leadership of CART. Tension between a goal of autonomy and responsibility, accountability and sustainability</td>
<td>• Research-based decision-making</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Belief in the need to build programs based on data and evaluate those programs</td>
<td>• Quantitative and qualitative research</td>
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<tr>
<td>• CART beginning to independently initiate research by collecting data from activities</td>
<td>• Spiraling training-process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Place-based “Tłı̨chǫ-ness” increasingly interwoven in work.</td>
<td>• Working interdepartmentally and with other organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Training needs to continue: both research-focused and Tłı̨chǫ-culture focused</td>
<td>• Anticipation of enduring ripple effects beyond focused areas of work</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Challenges with project based funding consume time for meaningful work</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Relational systems are the source of knowledge construction, meaningfulness, and change</td>
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used to collect data. Interpretive themes of findings as part of the data analysis were filtered through the RFF (see figure 2).

**CONCLUSION**

The RFF emerged through qualitative research in the Tłı̨chǫ community of Behchokö. A plan for purposive sampling while conducting research to deepen understanding of Tłı̨chǫ high school graduates evolved into a snowball form better described as “relational sampling.” Data collected through conversational interviews was a relationship-based experience of flow. Data analysis was a relational convergence of the researcher’s experiences and the lived experiences of study participants. Relational continuity, the fourth frame, captures the embedded nature of a research study within authentic relationships that endure in diverse ways.

The RFF evolved out of the inner dialogue of a non-Aboriginal researcher researching in an Aboriginal community. The four frames of the RFF — relational emergence, flow, convergence, and continuity provide a way of thinking about elements of lived experiences of relationships and a researcher’s relational accountability within a given cultural context. The interconnected components of the RFF flow into one another. Several examples presented in this paper under one of the frames could have just as easily been presented from a different angle under another frame. The openness of the RFF structure to adapt to different perspectives, contexts, and purposes was intentional. As a structure for capturing and extending thinking related to northern research, the RFF proved to be useful in two separate research studies in the Tłı̨chǫ region of the Northwest Territories. More research is needed to determine the usefulness of the RFF for other non-Aboriginal researchers and Aboriginal populations.

**REFERENCES**


Susan Hopkins’ (Ed.D) educational career path, like her research interests, span a diverse range of contexts and experiences. After four years teaching in Milan, Italy, she spent the next 8 years teaching in northern Aboriginal communities. She has been a school administrator, a curriculum developer, and an educational researcher. While living in the Tłı̨chǫ community of Behchokö, her studies at the masters level and doctoral levels in education sparked a passion for moving beyond exploring the research of others, to conducting her own studies. She is interested in relationship-based participatory research methods and the stories of others, most especially Aboriginal children, youth, and young adults from the Northwest Territories. She received a Circumpolar Health Research Student Award in 2009 and a Research Presentation Award from the University of Phoenix’s School of Advanced Studies in 2011. She has presented research at the America Educational Research Association and the 17th and 18th annual Qualitative Health Research (QHR) conferences.

susanhopkins68@gmail.com