

Non-Indigenous partner perspectives on Indigenous peoples' involvement in renewable energy: exploring reconciliation as relationships of accountability or status quo innocence?

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Abstract

Purpose – This research considers the potential for renewable energy partnerships to contribute to Canada's efforts to overcome its colonial past and present by developing an understanding of how non-Indigenous peoples working in the sector relate to their Indigenous partners.

Design/methodology/approach – This study is part of a larger research program focused on decolonization and reconciliation in the renewable energy sector. This exploratory research is framed by energy justice and decolonial reconciliation literatures relevant to the topic of Indigenous-led renewable energy. The authors used content and discourse analysis to identify themes arising from 10 semi-structured interviews with non-Indigenous corporate and governmental partners.

Findings – Interviewees' lack of prior exposure to Indigenous histories, cultures and acknowledgement of settler colonialism had a profound impact on their engagement with reconciliation frameworks. Partners' perspectives on what it means to partner with Indigenous peoples varied; most dismissed the need to further develop understandings of reconciliation and instead focused on increasing community capacity to allow Indigenous groups to participate in the renewable energy transition.

Research limitations/implications – In this study, the authors intentionally spoke with non-Indigenous peoples working in the renewable energy sector. Recruitment was a challenge and the sample is small. The authors encourage researchers to extend their questions to other organizations in the renewable energy sector, across industries and with Indigenous peoples given this is an under-researched field.



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Originality/value – This paper is an early look at the way non-Indigenous “partners” working in renewable energy understand and relate to topics of reconciliation, Indigenous rights and self-determination. It highlights potential barriers to reconciliation that are naïvely occurring at organizational and institutional levels, while anchored in colonial power structures.

Keywords Indigenous peoples, Renewable energy, Content analysis, Discourse analysis, Reconciliation, Settler moves to innocence, Settler colonialism, Canada

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

To address climate change and build clean energy economies, renewable energy projects are a necessary and defining characteristic of a low-carbon transition. In Canada and other settler colonial contexts, Indigenous peoples (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis in Canada), communities, organizations, and governments are leading, co-developing or otherwise becoming involved with such projects. The notion of renewable energy, with its low environmental impact, is said to align with Indigenous ways of knowing (Lowan-Trudeau, 2017; Planes as quoted by Kairos Canada, 2018). In a recent review of Indigenous renewable energy, Stefaneli *et al.* (2018) wrote that such developments may also provide pathways toward advancing Indigenous-settler reconciliation and re-establishing Indigenous self-sufficiency (see also Campney, 2019; Pembina Institute, 2018; Walker *et al.*, 2019). Yet when Crown-owned and corporate utilities regulate and control new energy generation, there is little space or ability for Indigenous peoples (including communities, corporations, individuals and governments) to build, own and control projects themselves. As a result, Indigenous peoples are more likely forced to form partnerships with non-Indigenous developers, governments and utilities for expediency or practicality.

It is within this context that we present a study exploring the relationships between non-Indigenous organizations and Indigenous peoples within the renewable energy sector of Canada. Such assertions that the sector may provide a vehicle for reconciliation and better nation-to-nation(s) relationships are not yet supported by empirical evidence – especially with regard to the relationships that influence the ongoing life and functioning of these types of organizations and the Indigenous peoples they affect (Love, 2019). To help address this gap, provide information for Indigenous communities, and guide governments, developers, and utilities to more meaningfully respond to Calls to Action towards reconciliation (TRC, 2015), we employed content and discourse analyses through in-depth interviews with non-Indigenous partners in renewable energy projects. We defined these “partners” [1] as representatives from non-Indigenous corporations, businesses and utilities who have collaborated or co-developed at least one renewable energy project with an Indigenous government or organization. Of the 43 unique partner organizations identified through a Lumos Energy (ICE, 2018) database, we were able to speak with representatives from nearly one-quarter ($n = 10$), which allowed us to access a certain depth of understanding (Legard *et al.*, 2003), while ensuring quality through several key markers in qualitative inquiry (Tracy, 2010).

Our goal here is to provide a snapshot in time – using interviews to examine the context and current-day practices of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships in Canada. Though we present comments of individuals, we recognize their statements reflect the larger (colonial) system we are in (i.e. we focus on systems rather than individual settlers; see Sylvestre *et al.*, 2019). Understanding the ways partnerships are formed, structured, and embodied is essential to evaluating the potential for renewable energy to contribute to Indigenous-led efforts to dismantle Canada’s colonial past and present and to engage with Indigenous Ways of Knowing for a sustainable future.

1.1 Truth and reconciliation in Canada

By nearly every measure of socio-economic and health status, First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples experience significantly disproportionate degrees of inequity than non-Indigenous

peoples in Canada (Greenwood *et al.*, 2018; Hajizadeh *et al.*, 2018). This was not always the case; in fact we can trace these contemporary inequities to early European encounters and an ongoing colonial process where Indigenous peoples have been systematically dispossessed of their lands and livelihoods, and subjugated by attempts to assimilate them into the colonial regime (Richmond and Cook, 2016). State sanctioned systems, like Indian Residential and Day Schools, sought to eradicate Indigenous practices, knowledges and identities (TRC, 2015). Forced relocation processes have also been salient in extractive natural resource development (McCreary and Turner, 2018; Sandlos and Keeling, 2016). These forms of capitalist economies have systematically ignored Indigenous legal and governance systems (Russell, 2011; Wuttunee, 2010) – leaving communities to struggle with long-lasting health and environmental problems.

Through global efforts to reclaim their Indigenous rights, the United Nations finally signed the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples (known as “UNDRIP”) in 2007. UNDRIP recognizes “respect for Indigenous knowledge, cultures and traditional practices contribute to sustainable and equitable development and proper management of the environment” and espouses “free, prior, and informed consent” for such development (UN, 2019, p. 4). Canada adopted the Declaration in 2016, and British Columbia became the first Canadian province that has enacted UNDRIP into its government legislation. Through the lens of UNDRIP, when led by and aligning with the views of Indigenous peoples, some have said that the “right” kind [2] of development can provide pathways toward improvements in health, socioeconomic conditions, preservation of traditional values, and greater self-determination (Anderson *et al.*, 2004; Corntassel, 2008).

According to a roadmap for reconciliation provided through the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) Final Report, every element of settler Canadian society – including health care, justice, media, governments and industry – has a role in reconciliation and building nation-to-nation(s) relationships (TRC, 2015). The TRC highlights that both governments and the corporate sector are important partners in reconciliation, which includes the renewable energy sector. Thus, this work is positioned within the wider goal of informing short and medium-term priority Calls to Actions (#43 and #92) identified by the TRC:

- (1) *Call #43:* We call upon federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments to fully adopt and implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples as the framework for reconciliation.
- (2) *Call #92:* We call upon the corporate sector in Canada to adopt the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples as a reconciliation framework and to apply its principles, norms and standards to corporate policy and core operational activities involving Indigenous peoples and their lands and resources.

Using these frameworks and a combination of conversations with Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples over the past three years through our program of research (A SHARED Future), and social scientific literatures (see Section 2), the primary questions we are concerned with in this paper are:

- (1) How do non-Indigenous partners’ experiences of formal and informal education concerning Indigenous peoples influence their work?
- (2) How do non-Indigenous partners understand and practice reconciliation?
- (3) How do non-Indigenous partners describe and define the partnerships they are in?

2. Scope and literature review

The TRC was formed as part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, the largest class action lawsuit in Canadian history (Bak *et al.*, 2017). The settlement mandated

that the TRC be established to officially witness the testimony of thousands of survivors that had been ignored for decades, and to educate Canadians about the long-term social impacts that Indian Residential Schools have had on Indigenous communities and Canadian society as a whole (TRC, 2015). It is worth noting that past efforts to develop a national vision of reconciliation have had little impact (e.g. the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal peoples; see NFR, 2016). Thus, the TRC Final Report was intended to be another reference point for Canadians entering the conversation with Indigenous peoples. The report's Commissioners advocated for a form of reconciliation in which "virtually every aspect of Canadian society would be reconsidered" (TRC, 2015, p. 6). Each of the 94 Calls to Action identified a Canadian institution or sector and an action they could take to redress the legacy of residential schools (TRC, 2015). Many Calls describe the need to work in collaboration with Indigenous organizations and to adopt UNDRIP as a reconciliation framework.

Because the contemporary trend in Canada has been to discuss reconciliation without outlining its intended meaning (Wylie, 2017), in this study – and our overall research program – we openly favour a model of reconciliation described by Walters (2008) as reconciliation as relationship (Walters, 2008). More specifically, we have applied a research framework of *Etuaptmunk* (Two-Eyed Seeing) (Bartlett *et al.*, 2012) throughout our program of research. By embracing *Etuaptmunk*, our team of Indigenous, non-Indigenous and mixed-ancestry authors accepted the challenge to consider multiple worldviews and expertise as we formed our research questions, interview guide, and while analysing interview data. Through regular team discussions that also included Indigenous leaders as co-investigators and collaborators in A SHARED Future, we clarified our preference for reconciliation as relationship to distinguish it from an alternative possibility, reconciliation as consistency (see Walters, 2008). We see the "consistency" alternative as being in-line with what has been described by others as [settler] moves to innocence: "strategies to remove involvement in and culpability for systems of domination" (Mawhinney, 1998, p. 17).

In our analysis, we sought to identify how non-Indigenous peoples (or settlers) may deploy strategies and tactics in attempts to ease their path to reconciliation or bypass it entirely. Understanding settler responses to Indigenous resistance and resurgence through such moves to innocence reveals how colonial structures seek to maintain control over the material conditions of colonization (Tuck and Yang, 2012). Settler moves can range from calls to "get over it" and "move on" and strategies to assimilate Indigenous peoples, to outright ignorance, denial or dismissal of colonial harm, or the use of cruel and violent stereotypes to evade accountability (Tuck and Yang, 2012). It is not surprising that settlers, whether wilfully or unintentionally, may deploy such moves when engaging in economic partnerships.

The progressive politics of renewable energy should not blind us to the fact that its development is still occurring within an ongoing colonial reality. Thus, we also situate our study in energy justice theory (Sovacool and Dworkin, 2015; Walker and Baxter, 2017) – while drawing from Tuck and Yang's (2012) "settler moves to innocence" to understand and analyse our data. Energy justice is the emerging idea that long-standing concepts of justice and equity should be applied to the entire energy landscape – production, consumption, policy and climate change (Jenkins *et al.*, 2016). In their review paper, MacArthur and Matthewman (2018) write about the "dual energy justice challenge" of addressing climate change (via renewable energy) but doing so in a way that does not further disenfranchise Indigenous peoples (see also MacArthur *et al.*, 2020). For example, set in Batchewana First Nation (Ontario, Canada) Smith and Scott (2018) question the often-idyllic way renewable energy is portrayed – as an energy source without injustice – when it is set within "the parameters of dominant settler-state economic and legal frameworks" (p. 2).

2.1 Indigenous peoples' involvement in renewable energy in Canada

Scholarship concerning Indigenous peoples' engagement in renewable energy in Canada has grown over the past decade (see [Campbell, 2011](#); [Krupa et al., 2012a, b](#); [Krupa et al., 2015](#); [Mercer et al., 2020](#); [Ozog, 2012](#); [Rezaei and Dowlatabadi, 2016](#); [Schultz, 2017](#); [Smith and Scott, 2018](#); [Stefanelli et al., 2018](#); [Walker et al., 2019](#)). This literature points to the idea that Indigenous peoples may be well-positioned and motivated to play an important role in a renewable energy transition (see also [Henderson, 2013](#)). Indigenous communities are said to be moving forward with development to help increase energy autonomy (see also [Lawrence, 2014](#); [Fields-Lefkovic, 2012](#); [Schultz, 2017](#)) – creating independent revenue that can fight the impacts of colonization ([Fitzgerald, 2018](#)), and assist in self-determination ([Helin, 2014](#); [Karanasios and Parker, 2018](#)). However, there are also clear risks of engaging in the wrong kind of renewable energy development (e.g. large-scale hydro projects like Site C in British Columbia; see also [Walker et al., 2019](#)). Building energy projects without regard for how such development impacts local Indigenous histories and ways of life can create new sacrifice zones (see [Cole and Foster, 2001](#); [Lerner, 2010](#); [Scott and Smith, 2016](#)) that can simply recast stories of injustice ([Bickerstaff et al., 2013](#); [Hudson and Vodden, 2020](#); [Murphy and Smith, 2013](#)).

In a report by the Shareholder Association for Research and Education ([SHARE, 2017](#)), public disclosures from Toronto Stock Exchange-listed “renewable energy and clean technology” companies were scrutinized for quality of Indigenous relations and commitments to Call to Action #92. They found “disclosure was poor across the board. . . [with only] 3 of the 19 companies [providing] employment and contracting information, while 4 discussed community investments and initiatives” (p. 17). The SHARE report provides important insights regarding two aspects of Call to Action #92, but the analysis did not include analysis of employees' Indigenous awareness, education, and intercultural competency.

While the aforementioned literature helps us to understand some general trends, there is a lack of scholarship associated with our study's three research questions (RQs).

2.2 RQ#1: formal and informal education about Indigenous peoples

Research has shown that a purposefully designed lack of exposure to any (or inaccurate) histories of settler colonialism and structural racism against Indigenous peoples has created generations of ignorant Canadians. Such attitudes can play out in private and public spaces to increase fear, uphold settler-privilege, and reinforce colonial ways of thinking ([Godlewska et al., 2013](#); [Pratt and Danyluk, 2017](#); [Regan, 2010](#); [Schaeffli and Godlewska, 2014](#)). [Godlewska et al. \(2017\)](#) write that while education is not the only source of such ignorance, the system perpetuates this kind of thinking. This ignorance is amplified through “omissions and significant silences, nationalist self-congratulation, apology, problematic placement, the continuance of colonialist narratives and relegation of [Indigenous] peoples to primitive place/time” ([Godlewska et al., 2010](#), p. 436). To address this and dismantle constructs of colonialism, more recent research has advocated for sweeping changes across Canadian educational institutions ([Battiste, 2016](#); [LeBlanc, 2012](#); [Madden, 2015](#)) – particularly through service-learning programs ([Pratt and Danyluk, 2017](#)) and field-schools ([Castleden et al., 2013](#)).

Following the TRC's five-year process and findings, various institutional efforts have been made to increase awareness and create space for Indigenous peoples in historically settler institutions. For example, efforts have been made to “Indigenize” post-secondary campuses and curricula ([Gaudry and Lorenz, 2018](#)). However, it is also clear that changing systems of education to be more inclusive is not enough to disrupt the systems that were created to systematically dismantle Indigenous knowledge systems and forms of autonomous self-governance. That is, we must acknowledge the violent past behind our denial of Indigenous histories and settler colonialism in education.

2.3 RQ#2: *Thinking about and practicing reconciliation*

At the global scale UNDRIP is a form of reconciliation; the Declaration “emphasizes the rights of Indigenous peoples to live in dignity, to maintain and strengthen their own institutions, cultures and traditions and to pursue their self-determined development” (UN, 2019, p. 1). A main mechanism by which this should occur is the right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), which requires state governments to obtain consent when making decisions that will affect Indigenous peoples and their territories.

Particularly relevant to both the Canadian context, we focus on the Final Report of the TRC and Call to Action #43 (governments) and Call to Action #92 (corporate sector). In addition, the conclusion of the TRC summary report (2015, pp. 305–306) states that:

“First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples today want to manage their own lives. In terms of the economy, that means participating in it on their own terms. They want to be part of the decision-making process. They want their communities to benefit if large-scale economic projects come into their territories.” Within this context, it seems crucial to identify ways that settler partners may undermine the tenets of these goals by practicing, for example, (well-treaded) moves to innocence.

2.4 RQ#3: *defining renewable energy partnerships*

There is a small but useful set of studies that explore non-Indigenous partners define partnerships with Indigenous peoples. This includes a study by Bullock and Zurba (2017) about the way partnerships are framed within biomass energy in Canada. The authors note that conventional (western) framing of economic development as a corporate revenue generator is still salient, while emerging concepts more important to Indigenous communities – like social responsibility, community leadership and local decision-making – are gaining traction. As a result, groups are coming together to create new kinds of collaborations. In a more recent, but tangential area of research, Bullock *et al.* (2019) have published research that suggests nine distinct “categories of engagement” in natural resource management (p. 85). Their work also focused on the different levels of capacity identified by Indigenous peoples, which are both instrumental to the types of partnerships that can be attained in the short term, and can be built-up over the longer term.

Campney (2019), who looks to characterize participation and the structure of Indigenous clean energy projects in Canada, began her work with the assumption that projects which meet the threshold for community energy (see also Baxter *et al.*, 2020; Creamer *et al.*, 2019) may provide the best vehicles for reconciliation. Determining exact project structures proved difficult, yet most were deemed partnerships between Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous corporations, with a small number ($n = 6$) that are fully Indigenous government owned, and one cooperative. While Campney advocates for the benefits of community (Indigenous) owned clean energy, she notes that because Indigenous communities are still embedded within settler colonialism (e.g. First Nations regulated by the Indian Act to varying degrees), “it is unclear how much community support or community participation/control a given nation has...even when fully Indigenous-owned” (p. 55). If within this context there is indeed a lack of local control, then projects may be “a perpetuation of colonialism and patriarchy” (p. 56; see also Hira, 2020). We attempt to answer one of Campney’s (2019) calls for future research, which asks for greater understanding of Indigenous ownership in renewable energy.

3. Methodology

This study is part of a larger program of research entitled [Achieving Strength, Health, and Autonomy through Renewable Energy Development for the Future (A SHARED Future);

<http://asharedfuture.ca/>], which is examining renewable energy development as a possible vehicle for reconciliation across Canada. As a diverse team of Indigenous and settler scholars – from academia, communities, non-governmental organizations, and government agencies – we orient our team on Gaudry and Lorenz' (2018) three-part “Canadian Academy spectrum” as working in a *decolonial Indigenization* space, where we seek to “overhaul the academy to fundamentally reorient knowledge production based on balanced power relations” (p. 226). As mentioned above, our research program integrates *Etuaptmumk* (Bartlett *et al.*, 2012) throughout [name removed for review]. In practice, this means we have designed a program that reflects the lessons shared with us by Indigenous knowledge holders and Allies who have been engaging in co-learning journeys for decades.

Following Bartlett *et al.* (2012), we have: willing and knowledgeable collaborators and advisors from within research institutions and Indigenous communities across Canada and internationally; designed team gatherings that encourage us to weave back and forth between worldviews; considered science in an inclusive way; and generally accepted and engaged with the tensions that are inherent in co-learning journeys involving multiple ontologies and epistemologies. Within our research program, we have collaboratively developed Terms of Reference that reflect our principles and focus on healing relationships and reconciliation between knowledge systems. The establishment of a governance structure, with 50% (or more) Indigenous individuals in decision-making roles, and based on the principles of *Etuaptmumk* created conditions that led to:

- (1) support for this research project to learn about the perspectives of non-Indigenous partners,
- (2) development of research questions and creation of an interview guide that drew attention to UNDRIP and the TRC Calls to Action,
- (3) collaboratively interpreting our findings (see 3.2 below) in ways that recognized diverse perspectives including western and Indigenous forms of knowledge,
- (4) sharing participant responses and our interpretations of them with a wider range of program collaborators (see acknowledgements), and
- (5) critically discussing the implications of the findings with program collaborators which created opportunities to clarify and refine the themes highlighted here.

3.1 Data collection

In this exploratory study, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a judgement sample [3,4] (as in Marshall, 1996) of non-Indigenous partners of renewable energy projects that involved Indigenous communities. Recruitment was generated from company and utility names available from a report by Lumos Clean Energy (ICE, 2018). In the report, involvement was defined across eight categories: “Indigenous ownership; memorandum of understanding with economic benefits; royalty agreements; evidence of Indigenous financing; revenue sharing agreements; lease agreements; Impact Benefit Agreements (IBAs); and/or partnership agreements” (p. 7). From this database, we identified and compiled a list of 43 unique companies/utilities.

Our research protocol received clearance from Queen’s University. From there, prospective participants were contacted by email beginning in April 2018 using this publicly available information. Initial contacts chosen included those associated with management positions (when available), Indigenous relations departments (when available), and/or general information emails.

After seven months of emails and phone calling, interviews with six participants had been completed. We decided to reach out again to the remaining 37 organizations from November

to December 2018. In the four months following, we were able to complete four more interviews ($n = 10$ total). We received one “bounce-back” email from a large corporation’s Aboriginal Relations department. It read, “this email is periodically monitored”. We did not hear back. In four other instances, respondents from corporations noted they needed to receive approval from senior management. We did not hear back and assume approvals were not granted. An iterative approach to the analysis of data was undertaken as each interview took place. After 10 interviews, we agreed that we were hearing the same perspectives, experiences and key themes, and thus had reached data or thematic saturation (see [Guest et al., 2006](#); [Hennink et al., 2017](#)).

The 10 interviews lasted between 45 min and 1 h 45 min. Half of the participants ($n = 5$) were working as a corporate developer, one was a representative of a non-Indigenous municipal government (see [Community] developer), three worked for provincial/territorial utilities, and one participant worked as an executive in a project management company. Most (7/10) were male and ages ranged from approximately 26 to 60 (see [Table 1](#)). In order to best accommodate schedules, all conversations took place over the phone. In all cases, voluntary consent was given after reading through a Letter of Information about the study. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Through the use of pseudonyms and full transcript reviews (i.e. to remove identifying information), participant confidentiality and anonymity was sought – but not guaranteed.

3.2 Data analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using content and discourse analyses, based on an inductive approach inspired by grounded theory ([Charmaz and Belgrave, 2012](#)) with guidance from reconciliation frameworks and the relevant literature above. Transcripts were uploaded to qualitative data organizing software NVivo 12 and analysis involved line-by-line content and discourse coding to support the practice of “elaborate story telling” ([Sotiriasdou et al., 2014](#), p. 229).

Content analysis was completed first, which allowed us to uncover the frequency of themes within the dataset ([Morgan, 1993](#); [Schreier, 2014](#)). The primary goals here were to organize the data and “[consider] the tone, interpretation, and context of content” ([Sovacool, 2014](#), p. 2). Next, we read through some of the most prevalent themes – as well as those that were less frequent but well-connected to the literature and/or research objectives – and used a critical discourse analysis framework ([Fairclough and Wodak, 1997](#); [Gee, 2004](#)). Under the assumption that discourse is a social practice ([Fairclough and Wodak, 1997](#), p. 357), this was done for two reasons: (1) to better understand constructivist power relations ([Philips and Hardy, 2002](#)) and (2) to uncover how the words and behaviour of participants may follow from larger, deeper, and/or hidden causes ([Bechtel and Richardson, 1993](#)). In addition to

NAME	Type of participant (province)	Approx. Age, Gender
“Michelle”	Developer (ON)	35, Female
“John”	Developer (AB)	60, Male
“Andrew”	Developer (NS)	43, Male
“Evelyn”	Developer (ON)	28, Female
“Ross”	Developer (BC)	36, Male
“Matthew”	[Community] Developer	55, Male
“Peter”	Provincial/Territorial Utility	45, Male
“Kevin”	Provincial/Territorial Utility	50, Male
“Janelle”	Provincial/Territorial Utility	43, Female
“Chris”	Project management (BC)	37, Male

Table 1.
List of participants
(names are
pseudonyms)

analysis conducted within NVivo, throughout the course of the study there were three instances of team-based analysis that would take place prior to and during [program removed] meetings. This type of practice is said to increase intercoder reliability, “a measure of agreement among multiple coders for how they apply codes to text data” (Kurasaki, 2000, p. 179). This also kept the study grounded in an *Etuaptmumk* approach by engaging in collaborative social co-analysis (Sanders and Cuneo, 2010).

Responding to a call from Baxter and Eyles (1997) to explain “why particular voices are heard and others silenced” (p. 508), in our findings below we selected quotes to represent those most poignant to the research context and/or representative of the overall sample of participants. This aligns with two of Tracy’s (2010) eight “Big-Tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research (i.e. resonance and meaningful coherence).

4. Findings

We begin here with the participants’ understanding of their own formal and informal education related to Indigenous peoples and issues of settler colonialism. We then share participants’ thoughts on reconciliation frameworks. Lastly, we discuss the findings related to what participants define as partnership in renewable energy.

4.1 *Settler (un)learning about Indigenous peoples’ histories and contemporary colonial realities*

Among participants, there was self-admittedly little knowledge of settler colonialism, Indigenous cultures and/or contemporary lived experience with Indigenous peoples before entering the workforce. Their explanations reflect the extent to which Indigenous peoples were simplistically presented as “creatures of the past” (as noted by participant “Ross”) or socially inconsequential in the public education system in Canada. As children and young adults, this structure (and others) silenced the truth of Canada’s historical and ongoing oppressive relationship with Indigenous peoples. Participants’ quotes presented below further reflect the need for unlearning the popular media myths, misconceptions, stereotypes, and tropes about Indigenous peoples in Canada. For example, when asked about his understanding of Indigenous peoples before his career began, “Ross” cites only negative perceptions, which were typical across participants.

“Ross”: Frankly not much. I was brought up and learned in school that Indians were creatures of the past. No mention of how they lived now. The only ones I would rarely meet would be taking the bus to downtown Calgary, and you avoided them.

Similarly, Andrew spoke to his previous ignorance while acknowledging that despite his recent efforts, “there’s [still] so much to learn”.

“Andrew”: I’d say pre-2012 I had zero exposure and knowledge to First Nations. I’ve learned a bit but there’s so much to learn, it’s mind boggling. All these different communities, different languages. . . different histories, different stories.

When asked about more specific educational memories, “Evelyn” and “Janelle” discussed their lack of understanding regarding Indigenous peoples’ histories.

“Evelyn”: Really limited to be honest. I grew up in a really small community. . . And so, I do not know, it wasn’t a lot really. No exposure or discussion about it.

“Janelle”: My understanding of First Nations was very limited when I came here and part of that was growing up in [this province/territory]. There was. . . the [Indigenous Nation] and what I knew about them is that they lived on the reserves. There wasn’t a lot taught about, I wasn’t very clear about the residential schools until I moved to Toronto [after university].

For most people we spoke with, unlearning did not really begin until their adult/working years. Whether at university or at work, five of those interviewed recalled participating in some kind of formal education program that centred on or involved Indigenous-settler relations, settler colonialism, and Indigenous peoples' worldviews. One example comes from "Janelle" whose eyes were opened during what she called mandatory 'Aboriginal training' at work.

"Janelle": When I started. . . I had some Aboriginal training to understand Aboriginal culture and sensitivity and the history, and it was incredibly eye opening. It was when you got into the conversation about Residential Schools and the impact they had had on the reservation system and how Aboriginal communities feel and how they view the world and the environment and their beliefs and culture. So, it was incredible, this whole other rich culture that was very sad and on some levels in terms of what happened to their culture, but also enriching.

While Janelle felt enriched, she referred to sadness about cultural loss rather than recognizing the colonial violence of the reserve and residential school systems. Outside of formalized or official training programs, participants described informal situations that also "unsettled" their preconceived notions. For example, "John" recalled when his beliefs about Indigenous peoples first began to change as a young adult.

"John": I remember my last year of university in BC and I stayed in a residence and the kids in the next room. One of them was from Saskatchewan, [name]. . . He was from a reserve down there, I remember talking to him about it, quizzing him about it, I thought it was very cool. And he sat me down and said 'no it's not cool. You have no idea what a reserve is like. Let me tell you about it. And I was spooked.

For "John", his first impressions were to see the reserve experience as "cool" without seeing the oppressive structural inequity it created. In another story of unlearning first-hand, "Janelle" told of a recent visit to a First Nation community in western Canada.

"Janelle": I visited a community to go talk about solar [energy]. They had a death in the community the day before we got there. And they're like 'we do not have running water here and just had a death in the community. And what we really need is clean running water and better lighting because people are falling victim to violence. Because it's so dark on our reserve, places are no longer safe'. Imagine how stupid we feel when we're like 'oh, let's install solar panels'. And I think that comes back sometimes to the paternalistic role of the white man or the settlers.

Meanwhile "Kevin" described learning about the Indian Act from a First Nations leader he met through work.

"Kevin": [This leader] used the example of, 'just imagine what would happen today if you woke up tomorrow and [the] Harbour was full of vessels, war vessels that we did not know'. . . and who effectively came in and took control of our land, 'put us in small reserves, you know, took our children'. . . I just, you know, that example of putting yourself in that position and trying to empathize with the history. . . it certainly helps to start to appreciate why we hear the concerns we hear and the frustration and everything else.

The themes of formal and informal education in this section describe a variety of unsettling situations that non-Indigenous people recalled to describe their past and present understanding, and to an extent – unlearning – about Indigenous-settler relationships. We also want to highlight an important aspect of their narrative, in which Indigenous peoples are taking on the role of teachers re-educating non-Indigenous people about unequal power relations that are perpetuated in contemporary stereotypes.

4.2 Reconciliation efforts

Primary questions posed at the outset of this study centred on whether or not renewable energy is – or even should be – a vehicle for reconciliation efforts. Thus, we asked

interviewees how frameworks, like the UNDRIP's FPIC and the TRC's Calls to Action were being implemented. Their responses indicated that they were aware of these frameworks and there was a range of organizational responses to them. Many of these responses build on the themes from the previous section that prioritize the need to create more opportunities at work where employees can learn about Indigenous cultures and histories, and while not explicitly stated as such, the contemporary realities of settler colonialism.

The most common initial response amongst participants, as demonstrated by "Ross" and "Michelle", indicate their organizations have been practicing these principles long before the UNDRIP or the TRC.

"Ross": We've been practicing that [UNDRIP] for over 10 years in this industry, I do not know that anything has changed there.

"Michelle": I think a lot of what's included with UNDRIP and TRC is built into [COMPANY NAME]'s mandate. Just this idea of free and informed prior consent, that's what we're all about, so yeah it's easy to say 'yeah we already do that' – we absolutely need to still be recognizing that and learning more and doing more. [But] I think we're on the right path.

Yet when asked for tangible examples of how the TRC or UNDRIP affects their company's daily operations (i.e. meetings, corporate mission statements) most participants could not identify any.

"Evelyn": I would not say [we discuss the TRC or UNDRIP] in a formal setting. Sometimes we discuss it between a few of us in the office. But this is an area I'm passionate about so I'm trying to bring in those Calls to Action to the company

"Kevin": I do not think so, not yet, it's uh, you know it's not something we talk about a lot out here in [our province/territory], um at least in my environment, it's something I'm actually working on as we speak. . .

Only two participants we spoke with seemed to have a more nuanced understanding of the TRC and referred to part three (education) of the TRC Call to Action #92 aimed at corporate Canada. "John" and "Chris" explained that their organizations had developed in-house resources to provide staff with more access to learning about Indigenous peoples' perspectives, the upstream determinants of Indigenous peoples' health (i.e. colonialism and racism), and Indigenous ways of being.

"John": The third part of the Call to Action [#92] is about education for management and staff. We actually have in our intranet, the internal library; we have little snippets, not quite online courses about Indigenous peoples. I'm actually preparing to do a luncheon for international Indigenous people's Day to bring everybody up to speed on some of the latest things. My goal on this is given where the part of town our office is in. There's quite a few homeless people and a certain percentage of them are Indigenous. To see those people on the street and have an understanding of the generations of residential schools, that led that person to be there.

"Chris": The other recommendation within that is our education piece at an executive level if I remember correctly in this company all employees have a copy of the [TRC] recommendation and we have just a regular library of books of First Nations histories.

Thus, while there were some efforts to increase awareness of Indigenous histories, most participants made clear that their business-as-usual approach would meet their criteria of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. There was no explicit mention that these education materials would specifically address settler colonial structures or decolonizing settler mentalities of supremacy. Indeed, formal policy guidance like UNDRIP and the TRC were sometimes seen as impediments to business-as-usual.

Ross: I'd say at this point in time [UNDRIP and the TRC] have not affected how we do business. Whether or not that's the case in two years or five years, it's hard to predict. . . Even if there is a large success in delivering UNDRIP or TRC can make significant headway, I do not know that I can envision a situation where that significantly impacts how we go about business.

This quote shows an enfolding of reconciliation in business as a strategy of continued erasure and assimilation, one that neglects Indigenous ways of being and doing things differently from the settler colonial norm. Perhaps even more dramatically, we see that "Janelle" does not connect the business of energy with reconciliation or UNDRIP:

Janelle: The work that I'm involved in does not [relate to UNDRIP or the TRC] because it's about energy and when we need energy. So, it does not matter about UNDRIP or reconciliation. That does not drive the work that I'm doing. It's separate from that.

When asked about commitments to reconciliation, UNDRIP, the TRC, and even this much broader idea of corporate social responsibility, "John" and "Kevin" mentioned that those terms are not often used in their business, but they instead live them through their actions.

John: Recommendations in the TRC are mostly common sense, about being nice and living with your neighbours. If you just buy into that, you should be fine. I do not care if you're mining, logging, renewables. If you really mean that, really live it, then you have much better chances of things working out.

Kevin: I think the business is still focused primarily on, you know, what drives consultation, partnership, that type of stuff, um you know, proactive engagement, relationship building that all, that's part of how we've operated for quite a while and continue to do it.

According to two participants, one of the reasons organizations may be avoiding formal conversations of reconciliation is government mandates. "Evelyn" and "Peter" both described how provincial/territorial guidelines and positions affect their work.

Evelyn: I am aware of that [FPIC] sentiment and we're familiar with the [provincial/territorial] government duty to consult and that's what guides a lot of regulations. But you have to follow the process of [provincial/territorial government] so we know that and that guides our work. So, we consult as soon as possible whenever we work on any projects and let the conversations go from there.

Peter: We try to remain as far as possible [away from] land claims rights issues that we do not even have a position regarding the UN Declaration of Indigenous Rights. . . [being] a Crown corporation being so much involved with the government, so much involved with the First Nations. We would not go further than what the Crown is obligated to do.

The perspectives presented in this section demonstrate that *yes*, these organizational representatives have an awareness of the expectations of government and industry that have been provided by public policy statements – albeit superficial. Yet they also seem to indicate that organizational practices overall are unlikely to change as a result of these public calls for reform.

4.3 Definition of a partnership

Lastly, we asked participants to describe their partnerships with Indigenous peoples. We used the term partnership, which we now realize reflected our own biases towards the kind of relations we attempt to enact in our own research program (i.e. co-governance and co-learning across multiple knowledge systems that embraces the principles of *Etuaptmunk*). Indeed, some participant responses showed clear resistance to labelling their relationships in this way. For many, like "John", we would need to prompt this discussion by what *we* were considering to be the wide range of business relationships.

Interviewer: For example, are IBAs [Impact Benefit Agreements] partnership? Are equity ownership strategies, are those true partnerships? How would you define a partnership?

John: We actually consider all of these relationships some type of partnership. Often that's what the nation wants. We've been talking with [First Nation]. . . The last thing they want is equity, they consider that way too risky. They want cash flow.

Others we spoke to, like "Evelyn", strongly advocated for some kind of Indigenous ownership in renewable energy projects.

Evelyn: I think it's really important that [Indigenous communities] either own their projects or part of their projects. . . It's important that they're engaged and that they own those projects. . . I know a lot of companies do Impact Benefit Agreements. . . That's just sort of 'we still want to own that whole project and reap the benefits from it, here's something we can settle with you'. Partnerships, splitting the ownership of the project, working together, that's the way to go.

Other participants noted how IBAs and similar payments may be the only option for Indigenous governments and their community members to be involved and benefit, citing a lack of community capacity and financial capital to be owners or co-owners:

Peter: I'm not convinced that ownership and equity sharing is the solution to all matters. . . I think good partnerships can be done through various types of agreements, depending on the project, depending on the promoter, depending on the First Nation.

Janelle: The capacity within First Nations is very diverse . . . [name] First Nation is another very strong one. They have their processes; they can clearly articulate what they need and they're at the table. And again I find my opinion that some of the other First Nations that may be smaller or less organized or less sophisticated, they do not know what to ask for, they're late coming to the table or they do not come to the table at all and they're overlooked or they're left out.

For these participants, partnership included a wider range of understanding than our team held. For them, partnership could mean a cash settlement to the Indigenous community so the government or industry could exploit a particular renewable resource, to full Indigenous ownership with the industry playing a supporting role. The idea that some Indigenous governments and communities are "left out" because they are worse off than others in terms of socioeconomic status and health – has caused what "Andrew" calls a "perverse" pattern of weakness.

Andrew: Those First Nations have a much easier time getting grant money than the First Nations that actually would be a lot weaker, so it's kind of perverse. You know, so a very strong First Nation, they can get money from the federal government.

It is from within those communities with more capacity that "John" refers to young people with a "big chip on their shoulder[s]". He describes how young Indigenous peoples' recognition of our shared history can make things both easier and more challenging.

John: Some of those up-and-coming young individuals [in communities], some have a big chip on their shoulder. And not surprisingly. Maybe they've been listening to their grandparents about residential schools or the band missed out something because the Indian agents sold out on the land with a gold mine on it. Knowledge is power and it can leave a bitter taste in your mouth. [As a developer] It's both easier and more challenging with more knowledge and capacity.

Though he is explaining that "knowledge is power", his statement ties the three topics of education, reconciliation, and partnership together. For us it also suggests something more unsettling. Although non-Indigenous partners are aware of history and systemic injustice, for many non-Indigenous peoples like "John", it is ultimately a problem that lies with the Indigenous communities themselves. As the self-perceived "more sophisticated partner" in the relationship, they can continue to run business-as-usual.

5. Discussion

Through interviews with whom we call non-Indigenous partners across Canada, this research is one of the first scholarly contributions towards uncovering the most common approaches taken to Indigenous-non-Indigenous collaboration in the country's renewable energy sector. By employing *Etuaptmunk*, our team of Indigenous, non-Indigenous, and mixed ancestry authors and collaborators were able to co-develop research questions and interpret findings while honouring multiple ways of knowing.

One of the most glaring, but not surprising, findings was an overly simplified view of systemic inequality. We see it reflected in low levels of awareness of Indigenous histories and settler colonialism, and in dismissive attitudes towards important international policy issues like the TRC, FPIC and the UNDRIP. Participants' stories of [admitted] ignorance of Indigenous peoples at an early age continues to inform their relationships with Indigenous perspectives, cultures and contemporary concerns about how settler colonialism is embedded in government and industry. This reinforces the fact that this is a problem of national concern, as tokenistic forms of representation and assimilation are presented as meaningful ways forward (Godlewska *et al.*, 2017; Regan, 2010).

Our work also adds more nuance to the SHARE (2017) report; with findings that indicate all three components of Call to Action #92 are being ignored in renewable energy. We see this ignorance in two ways. First, while the people we spoke with self-selected for participation and often saw themselves as their company's Indigenous issues "champion", they concurrently engaged in settler moves to innocence (e.g. silencing, non-naming, and using policies to deflect responsibility). Second, because self-selection for research has been found to be based on interest in a topic (Khazaal *et al.*, 2014), it is fair to say that ignorance, disquiet, or distress about our topic may have played a role in who declined (or ignored) our invitation to participate.

In terms of the value of post-educational experiences, there were some indications of challenges to settler privilege (Pratt and Danyluk, 2017) through "eyes being opened" to the reality of life in Indigenous communities. This was most memorably evidenced by "Janelle", when she told us how "stupid" she felt coming to talk about solar panels in the midst of a community crisis. While there seemed to be value in these personal reflections, without deeper and more consistent practices of structural reflexivity (which some individuals may be doing), it will remain difficult for non-Indigenous "partners" to centre Indigenous needs, goals, and experiences in the renewable energy sector.

Most participants showed a misunderstanding of some of the most important reconciliation frameworks in Canada and/or disregarded their value altogether. The UNDRIP and the Calls to Action #43 and #92 were often said to be an unnecessary burden. Their work, stressing more general ideas of consultation, collaboration and mutual respect, were seen as going "far enough". In the case of provincial/territorial mandates, participants (developers and utilities) spoke of purposefully avoiding the TRC and the UNDRIP so as to not question the position of government. Feeling as though they are restricted by, and unable to institutionalize, such clear mandates makes it very evident that settler colonialism is a powerful force (Campney, 2019). Our findings also echo those of a study that describes 85% of the Canadian corporate sector as disengaged from reconciliation discourses (Blackman, 2017).

Being content with status-quo approaches of consultation seemed to have been propelled by the fact that renewable energy is clean. Projects like wind and solar farms were seen as being "enough" to pass for fair, equitable, and/or sustainable development. We hope to further sound the alarm made by Smith and Scott (2018) and others (e.g. Cole and Foster, 2001; Lerner, 2010) regarding new kinds of injustice created by renewable energy. We must appreciate the dual energy justice challenge (MacArthur and Matthewman, 2018; MacArthur *et al.*, 2020) and continue to consider whether increases in renewable energy projects will also address reconciliation efforts (Bickerstaff *et al.*, 2013). Our research demonstrates that they

are unlikely to go very far if they are set within the same arrangement of colonial practices which expect Indigenous communities to change and adopt more “sophisticated” business practices.

How participants defined what should (and should not) be an Indigenous-non-Indigenous partnership in renewable energy was important. Though participants were diverse and shaped by their company’s focus (Bullock and Zurba, 2017), there was a general agreement that one-off or otherwise insignificant payments – like IBAs – were problematic (as in Hitch and Fidler, 2007). Most stated that genuine partnerships and the benefits that come with them can only be realized through significant or majority ownership structures (see also Campney, 2019). Of course, this view was complicated by perceived and actual varied levels of community capacity. Especially in the short-term, it may be that some Indigenous peoples are only able to invest a small amount in a project – or perhaps none at all. In such cases, non-Indigenous partners can still consider applying reconciliation frameworks that might result in First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities controlling development on their territory. Improving these partnerships will likely involve finding common ground by co-determining project objectives (Pembina Institute, 2018). New approaches are said to be increasing in the bioenergy sphere (Bullock and Zurba, 2017), though we need true partnership-based approaches across all forms of the renewable energy enterprise.

Finally, we recognize contradictory responses were presented across and within individual responses. For example, at one point “John” referred to the recommendations in the TRC as “mostly common sense” and also described young leaders as having a “big chip on their shoulder[s]” in relation to centuries of broken promises, resource and socio-cultural extraction, underfunding, and continued mistreatment from colonial institutions. However, if his company was committed to developing reconciled relationships, non-Indigenous partners might instead ask how young Indigenous leaders experience current-day Indigenous-settler relations in Canada. If reconciliation really was common sense, they might see acts of resurgence and resistance as opportunities for economic change, not as roadblocks for status quo settler-capitalism.

5.1 Limitations and future research

The limitations of this study can provide avenues for future research. First, we acknowledge that our research only – and purposefully – sought to speak with non-Indigenous peoples in renewable energy. From our position as scholars, we have the ability to access influential elites as insiders who work with an intimate awareness of Indigenous perspectives, albeit modestly successful in recruiting to this exploratory study. We can leverage our power to share these findings with Indigenous peoples throughout our networks. Recognizing many will have experienced these settler moves to innocence on a regular basis – from all sectors – we can support their resurgence by providing evidence that confirms and deconstructs what their encounters look like in renewable energy development. Yet it does not discount the need for a corresponding study that asks similar questions of Indigenous peoples concerning reconciliation and partnerships working in the renewable energy sector.

We also ponder how our own propensity towards a specific understanding of reconciliation may have influenced the questions asked. We could have moved away from the Calls to Action and UNDRIP to ask more questions about how systematic racism, and more specifically Canada’s ongoing colonial history, is impacting Indigenous governments’ and communities’ ability to return to self-determining autonomy. We could have asked how jurisdictional and policy issues have impacted community ownership and Indigenous sovereignty initiatives. Or we might have framed the questions differently by talking about engagement as a spectrum of inclusion or indigenization (Gaudry and Lorenz, 2018) rather than partnership. Related to this idea of inclusion, in the political ecology of colonization, we could have examined how even

“well-meaning attempts” to include Indigenous peoples may be serving to reinforce existing power structures (as in [Medby, 2019](#), p. 1276). Such alternative approaches may have elicited responses that were more embedded in the experiences of planning and development processes. Future research could explore these possibilities.

Finally, though we posed questions concerning settler colonialism, these were often secondary or follow-ups to general, perhaps comfortable questions, about participants’ educational and professional journeys. Learning about Indigenous histories and cultures is not the same as settlers doing the work of ‘unlearning’ to confront the violent nature of settler colonialism and settler complicity in this structure. Indeed, doing so would present a shortcut to settler innocence. As such, we recommend a deeper commitment to critical questions moving forward.

Some critics may question the value of our research given our small sample size. However, there are a limited number of companies and utilities in this space, and most participants entered this research knowing they may not have answers to some difficult questions. Those wishing to recruit higher numbers of participants in future research may wish to seek multiple participants from the same organizations or conduct an online survey to guarantee anonymity. Still with a sample of 10, we achieved data saturation, and our study allowed us to access rich and detailed analysis ([Crouch and McKenzie, 2006](#); [Legard et al., 2003](#)).

6. Conclusion

Nearly six years have passed since the publication of the TRC’s Final Report and Calls to Action and the UNDRIP receiving full embrace by Canada, yet it seems little progress has been made in the renewable energy sector. Shaped by settler colonialism, the participants we spoke with sometimes saw the need for reconciliation efforts, but these almost always stopped short of real change in their wider business or utility practices. Perhaps more federal legislation or instituted penalties, guided by Indigenous governments (think UNDRIP and FPIC) for non-Indigenous partners who do not abide by Calls to Action #43 and #92, are needed.

We echo the many calls for change in public education curricula across Canada, where the difficult, but important stories of settler colonialism are only now being integrated into curricula. However, even as education systems begin to change, there must also be a focus on corporate and post-secondary education and professional development programs. Given that educational programming and real-life experiences with Indigenous communities seemed to influence the non-Indigenous partners we spoke with, there appears to be a tremendous opportunity to encourage, or mandate, such training and learning in more comprehensive and ongoing ways. That said, these actions are not enough and do not justify or defend against ongoing ignorance, settler moves to innocence, unsettling (white) privilege, or inaction; nor does it ensure the dismantling of structural anti-Indigenous racism and colonialism.

As one participant told us, “[First Nations] want to be financially sovereign and governmentally sovereign, but they also know that as long as they depend on [utilities] for power, [utilities have] got them by the balls.” In other words, utilities are actively trying to resist movements toward community-level energy independence and sovereignty in order to retain power. Using the recent example of Wet’suwet’en Nation and their defence of land rights in the face of a natural gas pipeline, there is a clear movement toward returning energy sovereignty to Indigenous Nations within the context of the fossil fuel industry of Canada. Such movements in renewable energy, however, seem to escape such a storyline. We hope the findings of this study contribute to changing the narrative of renewable energy development processes as being more or less immune from the problems of our shared colonial state, and to help promote ‘good’ partnerships in the near future.

Notes

1. What becomes clear during our analysis is that “partner” is a contested, complicated term; it does not mean “equal” in terms of decision-making, as one might think with respect to partnerships where benefits and losses are shared.
2. [Corn tassel \(2008\)](#) describes the “right” kind of development as that which is based on Indigenous values and he then introduces a concept of “sustainable self-determination” (p. 105).
3. We use “sample” in the qualitative tradition (see [Marshall, 1996](#)) and do not claim to advance generalizability of the findings, but rather an “improved understanding of complex human issues” (p. 524; see also [Baxter and Eyles, 1997](#)).
4. A judgement sample is a group actively recruited to answer research questions and is based largely on an intellectual rather than demographic strategy ([Marshall, 1996](#)).

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