



Conceptualizing Indigenous self-determination as a value involves a deep desire to restructure relations of politics in ways that allow upholding individual integrity, in part defined as bodily integrity and body sovereignty, and in part expressed through processes of gaining an understanding of who you are as an individual and what your commitments are in relation to others.

Part 1:

Indigenous Self-Determination: A Shared Value

By Rauna Kuokkanen

In this four-part article series, Research Professor **Rauna Kuokkanen** shares the key findings of her research that has been published as the book *Restructuring Relations: Indigenous Self-Determination, Governance and Gender* (Oxford University Press, 2019). For her comparative study, she interviewed over 70 Indigenous individuals from Sápmi, Greenland and Canada, the majority of whom were women. She wishes to share her findings as a means to increase awareness and empower Indigenous Peoples across the globe.

Self-determination is a right in which international law belongs to peoples. It is not a right vested in states. Since the 1970s, many Indigenous Peoples in the world have advanced an interpretation that differs from states' understanding of self-determination. While states view self-determination as a right to independence and the formation of new states, Indigenous Peoples stress that nation-state is only one way of implementing self-determination. "We want to control our own lives, not an independent state" is a common way of explaining Indigenous Peoples' political ambitions with regard to self-determination. Most Indigenous Peoples seek to practice self-determination through broad, internal political autonomy, which promotes prospects of remaining and living as distinct peoples and allows people to advance their own societal structures and traditions.

A Right and a Shared Value

In Indigenous politics, self-determination usually means a collective right of a people to decide

on their own affairs and to govern certain territories. The applicability of this right to Indigenous Peoples has been specifically confirmed in the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, or UNDRIP. The collective right to self-determination is very important for Indigenous Peoples, most of whom lack the ability to make decisions over their own affairs at the collective level.

Yet it is too limiting to consider self-determination *only* as a right in relation to the state. Self-determination for Indigenous Peoples consists of many other relations. Self-determination goes beyond state-based rights frameworks to include relationships with their lands or with one another, for example. Self-determination also has an individual dimension.

When asked about the meaning of self-determination, Indigenous women I talked to discussed values informing their understanding: relationality, the importance of land and freedom from oppression. They talked about individual and personal integrity,

as well as the integrity of traditional territories. An essential feature of personal integrity is bodily integrity, or freedom from violence and harm. When we expand the definition of self-determination beyond the rights framework, it turns into a shared value considered necessary for individual and collective well-being.

Collective and Individual Self-Determination: Two Sides of the Same Coin

Indigenous Peoples commonly discuss collective self-determination and prospects of being in control of their future, without which they do not survive as distinct Peoples. But self-determination also has another dimension, personal autonomy. Many consider individual self-determination as a precondition for collective self-determination. If a person is not self-determining at the individual level, they do not have the capacity or ability to participate in advancing collective self-determination in their community. Without an understanding of the significance of this relationality—that everyone is related and everyone is needed as part of a whole—it is difficult to take responsibility for the collective well-being.

In Indigenous politics, the question of individual self-determination has sometimes been challenged and considered unnecessary. Individual self-determination has, however, historically been highly valued among many Indigenous Peoples. In some cases, personal autonomy was so extensive that missionaries considered it an obstacle to colonization.

In Indigenous worldviews, personal autonomy stresses the principle of responsibility: the ability of a person to take responsibility for themselves and other living beings in the world. Part of this is to take responsibility, both individually and collectively, for the existing violence in Indigenous communities. Many Indigenous women pointed out that experiencing



Coquitlam, BC, Canada - May 29, 2021: Local indigenous elder plays their drum at the “Water is Life” demonstration in opposition of the TMX pipeline

violence or living in violent circumstances radically compromises an individual’s ability to function as full members of their communities and that losing individuals to violence undermines the collective effort of Indigenous self-determination. As one woman expressed it, “Self-governance, land claims and treaties are meaningless if our families are beaten up and bruised and unhealthy. What kind of nation-building is that? We need to look at our own health and the violence in the communities in order to go anywhere.”

Individual integrity also takes the form of responsibility and concern for the next generation. Some Indigenous women discussed the challenge of raising self-determining children who, once grown up, would assume and act upon their responsibilities toward their relations and who would be able and willing to do their share for “the big political self-determination.” Others reflected their individual responsibility in actively contributing to a better world in which the next generation will grow up, as well as the role of family members in carefully choosing what values and teachings to transmit to future generations.

Many Indigenous women held that implementation and exercise of *collective* political self-determination are premised on respecting and upholding the bodily integrity of all members of a society. To make this

a reality requires including non-violence as a key norm in Indigenous self-determination. The role of Indigenous men in creating new norms of non-violence is critical.

Indigenous Peoples’ *individual* self-determination is relational. This means that a person becomes who they are through relationships with others, both human and other-than-human beings. Individual self-determination emerges from intergenerational relationships, as well as a person’s obligations toward their family, community and society. Without individual self-determination, there is no future for Indigenous communities or nations, and thus no basis for collective self-determination.

Conceptualizing Indigenous self-determination as a value involves a deep desire to restructure relations of politics in ways that allow upholding individual integrity, in part defined as bodily integrity and body sovereignty, and in part expressed through processes of gaining an understanding of who you are as an individual and what your commitments are in relation to others. ✕

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