Indigenous Self-Determination: From the Politics of Recognition to Restructuring Relations
Rauna Kuokkanen, University of Toronto
Rauna.kuokkanen@utoronto.ca

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In 1978, 14 Sami women occupied the prime minister Gro Harlem Bruntlandt’s office in Oslo, Norway, as part of broader, ongoing demonstrations, to object the government’s plan to build a dam in the Alta River and flood a major reindeer calving area and an adjacent Sami community of Máze in the heart of the Sami region. The prime minister met with the Sami women but left the meeting after half an hour. With their demands unmet, the women refused to leave the prime minister’s office and the next morning, the police had to carry the Sami women out.

34 years later, in November 2012, four Indigenous women from Western Canada got together and decided to do something about the federal government’s tabled Bill C-45, the omnibus budget implementation bill with wide-ranging effects on Indigenous and environmental issues. What started as a series of grassroots "teach-ins" organized by the four women in Saskatchewan snowballed into organized protests and rallies across the entire country. In less than two months, the Idle No More movement founded to raise awareness of Indigenous issues gained a serious following and significant media attention through rallies, teach-ins and social media.

In February 2015, just a couple of months ago, two Sami young musicians and sisters, Maxida and Mimi Märak, staged a small but powerful demonstration in Jokkmokk at the front of Alice Bah Kuhnke, the Minister of Culture and Democracy, responsible also for the Sami affairs in Sweden. In the demo, Maxida cut her sister’s hair while Mimi read aloud to the Minister the Sami Manifesto consisting of nine points which focus on the importance of the land and the dependence of human beings of the well-being of the land.

These are only few examples of the meaning and practice of self-determination for Indigenous women. In my talk, titled “Indigenous Self-Determination: From the
Politics of Recognition to Restructuring Relations” I’m going to consider some of the ways in which Indigenous women discuss self-determination. My talk draws on work in progress (which in the near future will be a book), based on research and fieldwork in the past four years with the Inuit in Greenland, Sami in the Nordic countries and Indigenous peoples in three regions of Canada. As part of my research project called Gendering self-determination, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada, I have conducted nearly 100 interviews, mostly with women ranging from grassroots to leading politicians with an objective to find answers to two broad questions: how the processes of gendering have hindered (1) the inclusion of women's perceptions on self-determination in self-governance arrangements and institutions, and (2) addressing violence against Indigenous women. With regard to the first point, I have asked questions such as: What does self-determination mean to Indigenous women? How are the different levels of individual and collective self-determination conceptualized, articulated, and negotiated by these women? With regard to the second point, I have focused on following questions: how can self-determination, as a concept and practice, be made to address the sometimes disproportionate levels of violence against Indigenous women? What kind of self-governance arrangements and structures need to be in place in order to effectively address the problem of gendered violence and protect Indigenous women from violence in their communities? In this work, violence is broadly understood consisting of physical, interpersonal violence but also structural, institutional, spiritual, and cultural forms.

For the past few years, Indigenous feminists particularly in the US and Canada have been mounting radical critiques of Indigenous self-government and the nation-state. This can be seen in the Idle No More, but also lesser-known initiatives and grassroots activism such as Women’s Water Walk, No More Silence and many others (Bedard 2008; D’Arcangelis and Huntley 2012; Woons 2013; Barker 2014; Kino-nda-niimi Collective 2014). Besides posing a compelling challenge to the status quo and the male dominated power structures, these criticisms differ from the global Indigenous political discourse by arguing for another kind of self-determination than that of promoted in forums such as the United Nations. Rather than limiting the discourse to recognition (political recognition and the recognition of rights), self-determination called for by many Indigenous women aims at fundamentally restructuring relations in society, mainstream and Indigenous alike.
Elsewhere such as in Greenland and the Nordic countries, Indigenous women are making great inroads in taking control of Indigenous political institutions and reconstructing previously male dominated political institutions.

My main argument is that Indigenous women define and articulate self-determination as an act of restructuring relationships rather than a call for a recognition of rights. These relationships take various forms and exist at different levels. Even those who refer to the state recognition articulate it in terms of the need to restructure the relations ranging from personal to structural (for example, relations of negotiation, ownership, property, law and so on). For example, many indigenous women emphasize the way in which individual and collective self-determination are inseparably linked, yet this dimension is often overlooked in Indigenous politics. I argue that Indigenous women put forward a compelling notion of self-determination in which the colonial politics of recognition is replaced by a conception of restructuring relations.

As we know, Indigenous self-determination has become, in the past three decades, an increasingly studied and discussed topic. In the realm of international Indigenous politics, the collective right of Indigenous peoples to self-determination is considered a fundamental principle that allows the exercise of all other rights. In the words of long-time Sami politician Lars Anders Baer, “The aim of our advocacy for our right of self-determination has nothing to do with the creation of western style nation-states. … We are only trying to get greater control over our lives and future” (Baer 2000: 230).

Under international law, the right to self-determination guarantees a people to freely determine their political status and pursue their economic, social and cultural development. This right is now also affirmed with regard to Indigenous peoples in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). The implementation of this right would mean Indigenous peoples’ decision-making of their own affairs, practicing their own laws, customs and land tenure systems through their institutions and in accordance to their practices and traditions. In sum, the quest for affirmation of the Indigenous peoples’ right to self-determination is a quest for justice and equal standing with other peoples. Under international law, all peoples have the right to self-determination and as the global Indigenous caucus has maintained for decades, Indigenous peoples cannot be excluded from this right.
In contrast, Indigenous women commonly discuss self-determination entirely outside the discourse of rights. Many Indigenous women prefer to define and discuss self-determination in terms of values they hold important rather than in terms of rights. Self-determination is something Indigenous women consider fundamental to their individual and collective well-being and future. So what I argue is that for Indigenous women, self-determination is a core value that restructures relations. Defining it as a fundamental value does not necessarily require the rejection of the discourse of rights which, no doubt, has its place in promoting justice in Indigenous communities.

Obviously, there are similarities between the political discourse and the way in which Indigenous women discuss self-determination. Notably, for instance, land is central for both discourses but whereas the political discourse revolves around the language of rights, Indigenous women tend to discuss it as a fundamental value constituted by relationships and responsibilities. The land itself is a relation, and some women stress the importance of being a good relative to all living beings. The land is also a source for relations of spirituality. Land as a relation gives rise to responsibilities which take individual and collective forms and are often gender specific: women are considered to possess particular responsibilities for protecting the land and water for their children and future generations.

Defining self-determination as a core value restructuring relations does not mean that all Indigenous women discuss and understand self-determination in the same way. The value manifests itself in a variety of ways in different contexts and on different levels. It is shaped in particular by specific geopolitical contexts and informed by specific histories, and cultures. In this talk, rather than delving into these specific geopolitical differences, however, I’m going to focus on some of the conceptual similarities that can be drawn from the different contexts.

In the political discourse, Indigenous self-determination is often discussed in terms of a relationship between Indigenous peoples and states which could be characterized simultaneously as colonial and post-colonial: Colonial because Indigenous peoples appear still dependent on the recognition of their “colonial masters” – to use the terminology by Fanon and echo recent criticism of the colonial “politics of recognition” (Coulthard 2014) and post-colonial as an aspiration toward and a claim for (greater)
equality with the states which is expected (and assumed) to follow the recognition of the right to self-determination.

The international Indigenous political and legal discourse has long revolved around the state recognition of Indigenous rights, particularly the right to self-determination. This focus has been so extensive and exclusive of other aspects of this right that Indigenous self-determination has become constructed only or mostly in terms of its relationship with the state. This is inadequate since it focuses only on the hegemonic colonial relations with the state and obscures and disregards other, more fundamental relations that constitute Indigenous self-determination. It is also inadequate because, as argued by Dene political scientist Glen Coulthard, the current “politics of recognition” does not restructure the colonial relations between the state and Indigenous peoples but amounts only to reconciliation and accommodation of Indigenous peoples’ claims within existing state hegemony which allows the dispossession to continue. While Coulthard’s analysis pertains to the Canadian context, I think it has also merit in the context of discussing Indigenous self-determination more broadly.

The international Indigenous political and legal discourse has also focused almost exclusively on the rights aspects of Indigenous self-determination. While rights have always been shaped by relationships, as feminist legal scholar (and if I may add, my colleague at the UofT) Jennifer Nedelsky notes, the problem has been that the rights discourse effectively conceals and ignores relationships. Nedelsky distinguishes the terms “right” and “value.” Value, for Nedelsky, implies “any of the big abstractions used to articulate what a given society sees as essential to humanity or to the good life for its members.” Rights, in her definition, are “a particular institutional and rhetorical means of expressing, contesting and implementing [these] values” (Nedelsky 2011: 242). These values range from equality, dignity, security, autonomy and bodily integrity to adequate material resources, individual and/or collective spiritual expression and respect for the earth. Nedelsky also acknowledges that different societies may understand these and other values differently and that “they can conflict with one another in practical implementation” (Nedelsky 2011: 242).

The way in which Indigenous women discuss and understand self-determination removes it from the hegemony of state relations and the politics of recognition to a
transformative process of restructuring relations. For most Indigenous women self-determination is about relations to others: family, community, place, land and other living beings, and, as one woman put it, about the responsibility of being “a good relative” in these various relationships. “Being a good relative” does not imply that there are no tensions or disequilibrium in those relationships but rather, as Indigenous feminist author and educator Lee Maracle puts it, that “you determine yourself within your relations, making connections with all living beings.” Fundamentally, the relational definition of self-determination means that “we aren’t self-determinate outside those relations.” A conception of self-determination as restructuring relations is informed by a profoundly relational concept of self (rather than a separative self). Relational self for Indigenous women means that the individual dimension is crucial but it cannot be separated from the community.

Several Indigenous women include the individual dimension in their definition of self-determination. Some talk about it as a responsibility and role of an individual in relation to a collective: the clan, community and nation. Such an understanding of individual self-determination is different from conventional liberal feminist values of individual self-determination, choice and autonomy because the individual is always considered to exist in relation to others. In this context, for Haisla woman in BC, Jacquie Green, self-determination means “coming to know your own history as your own identity … an understanding and coming to know the history of a people, the location to place, understanding cultural knowledge, cultural ceremonies, and how those have been a form of governance, how those have been a form of leadership, how those protocols that we do in ceremony was actually our policies and procedures.”

Related to the individual dimension, a number of Indigenous women from all three regions discussed self-determination in terms of ‘being determined.’ Mariia Simonsen, Greenlander who teaches journalism at Ilissimatusarfik (the University of Greenland) includes the individual dimension in her definition of self-determination and discusses the concept through two rights movements, that of women and nationhood:

Self-determination. I was a part of this movement, this women’s movement, from my, the old days. We lived the years that was very crucial to self-determination, women’s self-determination in Scandinavia. But we had our, apart from that, our
struggle for self-determination as a nation. So these two matters have been following each other all the time. And … we often discussed what is the most important, women’s self-determination, or our determination as a people? … I think women are very determined, Greenlandic women are very determined. We were at least in our generation.

Simonsen’s understanding of self-determination arises from the context and era of civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Self-determination is a core value for both women and the Greenlandic Inuit although in different ways, hence the question which is more important. For her, the two related struggles for self-determination are informed by one another but more importantly, determination is a quality that characterizes Greenlandic women. The sentiment of determination was shared by a number of others.

For Anishnabek woman Jeannette Corbiere Lavell in Ontario, the word ‘self-determination’ connotes above all the determination of women in their traditional roles and responsibilities of leadership and decision-making but also of everyday life. The revival and reclaiming of Indigenous women’s political and other roles, authority and leadership is perhaps the most explicit example of self-determination as restructuring relations. Diane Redsky from Shoal Lake First Nation in Ontario defines self-determination as reclaiming women’s traditional roles and responsibilities in decision-making and leadership in the community. She has been part of numerous initiatives herself, including one with grandmothers who are saying “enough is enough” and reclaiming their roles with regard to the well-being and protection of children from violence and abuse.

Corbiere Lavell was among the first to question the current state of relations and expressed her desire to restructure and transform them by taking the government to court in the early 1970s. In her case, Corbiere Lavell argued that the Indian Act violated Canada’s Bill of Rights and its prohibition against discrimination on the basis of sex. Without going into too much detail, before the amendments to the Indian Act in 1985, all First Nations women who married non-First Nations men lost their Indian “status” under the Indian Act, enacted in 1876. Without “status” a woman would lose all rights and benefits commonly associated with membership in a federally recognized Indian community, including the rights to reside on reserve and receive housing there. Corbiere
Lavell’s suing the government represents an example of self-determination in which the individual determination is shaped and informed by broader social relations. Referring to it ironically “my own dilemma with the government and the Indian Act,” she relates how she was able to take on the legal challenge because she was brought up to think that “if there was anything that I wanted to do and I believed in it” it was worth pursuing. However, she did not make the decision without speaking to her family first: “I didn't just go ahead and do it on my own. But I said this is what I would like to do.” Most of her family supported her, including her parents. Also the chief was supportive of her case although many of the men in her community were not.

Corbiere Lavell’s discussion demonstrates how self-determination understood as individual determination is not the same as the individual autonomy conceived by traditional liberal theory although those opposing her case against gender discrimination – including organizations like National Indian Brotherhood – presented it as such (and argued it goes squarely against Indigenous collective self-determination). The way in which she discusses self-determination and individual determination is deeply embedded in social relations.

Nedelsky’s consideration of a relational conception of autonomy sheds light to the notion of self-determination as individual determination embedded in social relations. She argues that by rejecting the equation of autonomy with independence, relational autonomy recognizes that “every person is in significant part constituted by her interactions by others” (Nedelsky 2011: 122). Drawing on Nedelsky’s work, Cree feminist legal scholar Val Napoleon argues that individuals “need to be recognized as agents in the fullest sense of that term … and to be self-governing in a relational way.” She elaborates: “I’m not talking about atomistic individuals. We’re never separate from the background from which we understand the world.”

Yet relationships can be both a source of autonomy and a radical restriction to it. Thus, the relational approach does not focus on relationships in order to automatically validate them or to argue for their preservation but in order to be able to distinguish between structures of relations that are oppressive and those that are supportive and fostering. Oppressive relations are far from unknown for Indigenous women, and not surprisingly, many define self-determination as freedom from coercion and violence. This
means freedom from all levels of aggression (which inevitably are interconnected), ranging from structural, systemic inequality embedded in laws and policies to physical, sexual and psychological abuse and torture, including the apprehension and removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities.

For several Sami women, self-determination personally means the will and responsibility of teaching their children the Sami language and identity in a Sami environment, including working towards ensuring the existence of Sami daycare, schools and books for children. Related, others saw it as the individual ability to decide what language to learn and to speak and what values to possess. Some Sami women discussed the personal significance of self-determination in terms of taking responsibility either for one’s own actions (both good and bad) as they affect other people around her, or as one Greenlandic woman put it, taking responsibility for being a role model for young women and teach them leadership in a such way that enables to put an end to the prevailing ethos of colonial dependence on the government.

Further, the way in which many Indigenous women talk about the personal significance of self-determination corresponds Nedelsky’s discussion of autonomy as “finding one’s own law.” She recognizes the complex nature of the concept of autonomy and how many theorists critical of its ties to classical liberal thought as independence and rational agency devoid of connection have rejected the term. She holds, however, that autonomy is such an important value for feminism and other transformative projects that we need to reconceptualize rather than dismiss it altogether. The complexity and significance of the term, she argues, is embedded in the literal meaning of autonomy as “governed by one’s own law.” In other words, “[t]o become autonomous is to come to be able find and live in accordance with one’s own law.” Becoming (instead of being) autonomous emphasizes the process of developing the capability for finding one’s own law, and “finding” draws attention to the fact that instead of individuals making or choosing their own law, it is “shaped by the society in which one lives and the relationships that are a part of one’s life.”

What does all of this mean in practice? When discussing Indigenous women and self-determination, there is a common assumption about a fundamental conflict between the individual and collective self-determination. Indigenous women bringing forward
their conceptions of self-determination have often been considered divisive and disruptive particularly by Indigenous male leadership. The common argument has been that dismissively constructed “women’s issues” need to be put on the back burner to be addressed “later,” once collective self-determination has been achieved. Issues of concern for Indigenous women have been commonly constructed as an opposition to self-determination and women’s concerns have not been part of Indigenous self-government institutions. Indigenous women, however, have for some time now, argued that such an approach will merely replicate colonial and patriarchal political structures and ideologies (Monture-Angus 1995; Eikjok 2000; Mihesuah 2003; Green 2004; Kuokkanen 2004; Smith 2005; Green 2007; Denetdale 2008). The crux of the problem, as the women in the project insist, the categorical separation of issues into “women’s issues” and “self-determination issues.” As long as the segregation occurs, adding more women into the self-government institutions will not change the gender power relations that ultimately is stacked against not only Indigenous women but as Indigenous women argue, the very implementation process of self-determination and Indigenous governance.

Indigenous women involved in the project have made it very clear that an interrogation squaring in on gender specifically not only needs to urgently happen but that an understanding of gender must be incorporated into self-government discourses so that we can move beyond the counterproductive politics of separating priorities put forward by Indigenous women from governance issues. As Indigenous women in this project attest and as I have argued, the “women’s issues” are not merely about gender equality but they are, fundamentally, as much governance issues as any other matters. Thus, for Indigenous women, the only tension between individual and collective self-determination exists in the tendency to disregard the grassroots and day-to-day self-determination endeavours and accomplishments while focusing on political statements and the discourse of rights. Instead, the two dimensions inform and constitute one another in several fundamental ways in a manner that makes it difficult to discuss – or conceive – one without the other.

In conclusion, Indigenous women define and discuss self-determination in ways often radically different from the dominant political and legal discourse of Indigenous self-determination. They emphasize how we cannot talk about Indigenous self-
determination without starting from the individual. However, this individual is not atomistic agent of independence but always embedded in social relations. Indigenous self-determination is, therefore, fundamentally about seeing ourselves in relation to others in a way that does not subsume the individual in the collective or idealize all relationships as positive. Indigenous women know well how relations can also be extremely oppressive, whether structural or social, collective or individual.

As a core value that restructures relations, self-determination moves beyond the state-centric relationship embedded in the discourse of the recognition of Indigenous rights. However, I do not argue, nor Indigenous women who participated in my research suggest that we do away with rights – although some participants are highly critical of the rights talk. The reality is that “[r]ights” are a powerful rhetorical tool in struggles for justice all around the world” (Nedelsky 2011: 232), including Indigenous peoples. Conceptualized as “finding one’s law,” Indigenous self-determination is the process of finding and developing one’s values and demands in relation to others – to other individuals, families, other communities, to the state and to its law, policies and institutions.

Works cited:


