Engagement for Life's Sake: Reflections on Partnering and Partnership with Rural Tribal Nations☆

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ABSTRACT   In this paper, we reflect on our collective experiences engaging with Anishinaabe Tribal Nations in the Great Lakes region to support Tribal sovereignty in decision-making for food, energy, and water (FEW) systems. In these diverse experiences, we find common lessons. The first set of lessons contributes new empirical knowledge regarding the challenges and opportunities that rural Great Lakes Tribal Nations navigate for enacting sovereignty in decision-making. Our experiences illustrate that while Tribal Nations benefit from a broad and deep commitment to sovereignty and many cultural strengths, they are often challenged by shortages in administrative capacity; technical support; and embeddedness in economic, socio-cultural, and institutional dynamics that must be further negotiated for Tribes to enact the sovereignty to which they are inherently (and legally) entitled. Productive partnerships struggle when university partners fail to acknowledge these realities. The second set of lessons addresses the potential for, and challenges of, effective engagement processes. We find that engagement with university professionals is often mismatched with the priorities and needs of Tribal Nations. Effective engagement with Tribal Nations requires practical knowledge, applied assistance, and grounded, genuine relationships; these requirements often run counter to the institutional structures and priorities imposed by universities, federal funding agencies, and student recruitment. These findings, associated with both empirical knowledge and lessons on process, highlight shared insights on formidable barriers to effective engagement. Based on our firsthand experience working with rural Tribal Nations on FEW decision-making, we share these reflections with particular focus on lessons learned for professionals who engage, or hope to engage, with Tribal Nations in rural settings and offer opportunities to transform engagement processes to better support the immediate, practical needs of rural Tribal Nations.

Introduction

From its earliest inception, rural sociology as a field of study has emphasized its role in supporting community wellbeing through applied research that addresses the dominant features of rural life (Galphin 1936; Newby 1983); others have long argued that rural sociologists tended to ignore the original inhabitants of rural

lands, pursuing research agendas through approaches that contributed disenfranchisement and marginalization of Tribal Nations (Geisler 2013). Yet despite a long history of ignoring the original inhabitants of the lands and places being studied by rural sociologists in North America, there has been increasing recognition that Indigenous communities are vital to any sociological understanding of rural life. In this paper, we consider how rural sociologists can engage with Tribal Nations in ethical, reciprocal ways to provide opportunities aligned with the aspirations of the field and clear benefit to Indigenous communities. These lessons support a theorizing of rural life in ways that can directly contribute to serving the wellbeing of rural communities, specifically Tribal Nations located within rural North American contexts. In seeking to engage with Tribal Nations and Indigenous communities, rural sociologists can draw on a long history of prioritizing applied research with practical benefits for community partners (Goldstein, Paprocki, and Osborne 2019) and emphasize becoming learners to support "engagement for life's sake" through Indigenous research partnerships.

These reflections are based on multiple multi-year projects, both funded and unfunded, centered on engagement with Tribal Nations focused on issues of language, land, energy, water, food, and health. As we share below, one author has worked directly for a Tribal Nation on these issues as well as being involved in academic research with Tribes, while the other authors of this paper have worked across disciplinary backgrounds in academic contexts. Our reflections suggest that rural sociologists can better serve Tribal Nations through engagement by focusing on the practical, applied, and grounded experiences and needs of Tribal partners. While understanding Tribal values and cultures is certainly important (LaDuke 1999; Whyte 2018), it is equally important to recognize Tribes as sovereign governments, working in pursuit of practical solutions to Tribal needs. We argue that engagement with Tribal nations can be reimagined by focusing on "education for life's sake" (Cajete 1994), which requires focusing academic relationships with Tribal Nations on providing grounded, action-oriented engagement. This reimagining has the potential to transform undergraduate and graduate student training, funding and institutional review board processes, and the very nature of rural sociology as a field and institution. This reimagining is aligned with the foundation of rural sociology as a scientific discipline intended to address the needs of rural communities and is especially important given that many rural sociologists live in and work in educational institutions located on Indigenous lands (Goldstein et al. 2019). Education for life's sake can inform engagement for life's sake; this engagement has the potential to enhance rural sociology's ability to support Tribal sovereignty and wellbeing in rural communities.

Rural Sociology and Indigenous Scholarship

Although others have directly called for incorporation of diverse rural communities in rural sociological research (Snipp 1996), rural sociology as a field of study has struggled to recognize the diversity of rural communities (Tieken and Wright 2021). Rural sociologists have recognized the ongoing issues of poverty facing Tribal Nation communities in rural areas and the continued challenge of finding impactful

solutions to Tribal poverty (Mauer 2016; Ward 2011). Rural sociologists have recently turned to environmental justice as a means of recognizing community diversity in rural areas, the power differentials that shape decision-making, and the injustices that result (Bray 2020; Mauer 2020; Shriver and Webb 2009; Strube, Thiede, and Auch 2021). In this paper, we discuss how the approaches to engagement and the methods of research used by rural sociologists are also an issue of equity and justice, which must be informed by understanding the harms of past practices (Deloria 1969) while actively working to restore right relations for the lands and life of these pre-constitutionally sovereign nations.

A growing body of scholarship centers the myriad of good practices with/by/as Indigenous community engagement in research and education and for other collaborative purposes (Shaw, Gagnon, and Ravindran 2022). This involves transitioning from extractive and transaction-based relations to more equitable engagements linked to the efforts of Indigenous peoples and practices of self-determination, and Indigenous peoples are increasingly reclaiming autonomy and asserting sovereignty through research and education to ensure an inclusion of Indigenous voices and priorities (see Shaw et al. 2022). As part of these efforts, Indigenous knowledge systems and sciences, which are rooted in relationships with lands and expressed via Indigenous languages, are coming to the forefront of engagement between Universities and Indigenous communities. Academic researchers in rural sociology and beyond can reposition ourselves as the learners and enter research partnerships that support applied, practical opportunities to enhance Tribal sovereignty through "engagement for life's sake," centering engagement that prioritizes practical wisdom that can translate to meaningful impacts for Tribal community wellbeing.

One specific consideration involves the role of language in shaping engagement relationships (Gagnon et al. 2022), recognizing that Indigenous languages are intertwined with grounded relationships to lands, some of which are now often considered part of rural North America. Many Indigenous scholars articulate Indigenous knowledge as an everyday practice that seeks to sustain life. In *Look to the Mountain* (1994:42, 45), Tewa scholar Gregory Cajete specifies the primary purpose for Indigenous education is "for life's sake," which is understood as having similar meanings to Indigenous metaphors such as 'seeking life,' 'becoming complete,' 'of good heart, of good thought,' 'the good life,' 'remembering to remember,' and numerous others. Indigenous peoples practice 'education' in specific relation to place; however, Cajete explains that common tenets can be drawn from the diversity of relationships with lands within Tribal Nations contexts. Because Indigenous realities do not separate the natural, spiritual, and philosophical worlds, Indigenous teaching and learning processes encompass the Indigenous reality as one world (Cajete 1994:44–45):

> [Indigenous] [s]pirituality evolves from exploring and coming to know and experience the nature of the living energy moving in each of us, through us, and around us. … What is called education today was, for American Indians, a journey for learning to be fully human. Learning about the nature of the spirit in relationship to community and the environment was considered central to

> learning the Full meaning of life. … Finally, people must constantly be aware of their weakness and strive to become wise in the ways that they live their lives.

From this perspective, attaining knowledge is not the end goal; the aim is to apply knowledge as the "tools for learning and experiencing" for a lifetime (44). Sustained thought is demonstrated everyday through sustained practice and can also be understood as a continuity built and strengthened across generations.

Another illustrative example comes from Drs Martin Reinhardt and Traci Maday in *Interdisciplinary Manual for American Indian Inclusion* (2005:7): "[F]rom an Anishinaabe Ojibway perspective on education, Mother Earth is the original and primary teacher and classroom." They explain that the English word "education" is most closely related to the Ojibwa term "kinomaage," which literally translates to "the Earth, it shows us the way." Anishinaabemowin is a verb-based language, which Dr. Margaret Noodin (2019:232) emphasizes in explaining that *(a)kinomaage* is the root verb for both teaching and learning in Anishinaabemowin. Noodin points us to teacher and author Basil Johnston, who translates kinomaage as "the earth's teachings in all directions" (2010:11). Clearly, the languages and practices of the Anishinaabe are Earth-centered. Kinomaage is education in practice, teaching and learning, for life's sake. Education for life's sake, looking to Earth for teaching and learning, and insights from Indigenous knowledges and languages is traditional practice and wisdom, and moreover, informs everyday contemporary practice and wisdom of/for many Indigenous peoples in the present day.

We argue that this perspective on learning, as a continuous process of wisdom achieved through relations with the Earth and applied through practice for the sake of engaging in right relations with the Earth, can inform how we approach engagement with Tribal Nations within rural sociological scholarship and beyond. This Indigenous wisdom aligns with some of the earliest aspirations of rural sociology as a field that would improve the quality of rural life, but requires that we shift attention to the applied, practical ways that rural sociologists can serve Tribal Nations through engagement. As we describe, there are important lessons to be gained from shifting our attention to the practical lessons and practical opportunities to engage through scholarship, and these lessons suggest ways that we can attend to very applied and grounded needs through engagement.

We argue that the reflections offered here are particularly salient for rural sociologists. This is because rural sociology as a field has long aimed to provide practical understandings that can improve wellbeing for rural communities, a goal clearly aligned with the idea of "engagement for life's sake." At the same time, rural sociology as a field and the land-grant institutions in which many rural sociology programs are located have arguably ignored and at times even harmed the Indigenous communities and Tribal Nations that are the original inhabitants of the land where most land-grant institutions now reside. To better align itself with its foundational mission and intellectual aims, rural sociology can provide the institutional space to reimagine education, training, and engagement in ways that can directly support Indigenous sovereignty.

Author Positionality

Based on our own experiences, we reflect on how rural sociology as a field of research and education is uniquely positioned to contribute to a form of engagement that emphasizes education for life's sake, a practical engagement with the world and the needs of the communities we work with and serve in our work. In this article, we write from our individual positions as humans, community members, and scholars.

[Author #1] is a descendent of settler-colonizers working in a Social Sciences department within a University located on ceded Tribal lands originally inhabited by members of an Ojibwe tribe of Anishinaabeg peoples. Her experience is based on engaging with this Tribe through funded research projects that aim to address Tribal priorities for renewable energy transition decisions that enhance Tribal sovereignty. Through this work, she is positioned as a learner of Tribal knowledge, values, and governance, and she has experienced firsthand the limits of traditional disciplinary training and academic structures for effective relationship building and engagement.

[Author #2] is a naturalized U.S. citizen and Korean adoptee, who lives and works within the ancestral and contemporary homelands of the Anishinaabe Ojibwa. Her experiences with Great Lakes Tribal Nations began in her graduate studies and has continued in her current position as an early career assistant professor in human dimensions, and natural resources and environmental policy. In partnership with Indigenous communities and funded by external sponsors, this research seeks to protect rights and responsibilities associated with treaty resources particularly focused on food sovereignty and water relations. As part of these responsibilities, she supports and guides University-Indigenous community research partnerships aiming to prioritize the protection and restoration of land and life in the Great Lakes region.

[Author #3] is a dual citizen (US/Canada) who has worked among the Anishinaabe on both sides of the international border (Ojibwe/Chippewa, Odawa, Potawatomi, and Metis) for 35 years, including significant time as the Environmental Director for a populous Chippewa tribal government, defending tribal sovereignty over the air, lands, and waters of both trust land and treaty-ceded territory where rights are retained. In serving on national committees and advisory boards, she has influenced revisions to federal environmental and energy policy in Indian country. She is now completing her dissertation, Energy Justice for the Anishnabek, Kina Gwaya Naasaab Daa Dibendaan Waasmowin, dealing with tribes and First Nations participation in decision-making around fossil and renewable energy infrastructure.

Through her mother, [Author #4] is first-generation descendant of the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community Lake Superior Band of Ojibwe and is also actively connected to her Finnish-American heritage. She works in a Writing and Rhetoric department in a land-grant University located on the ceded ancestral, traditional, and contemporary lands of the Anishinaabeg. Her experiences with Great Lakes Tribal Nations come from her lived experiences growing up in her ancestral homelands, and as an Anishinaabekwe whose mother culturally reconnected with the tribe in the author's youth. Additionally, as an academic, she has come to know her Tribe through a somewhat different and

more complicated lens, bringing her environmental and social justice commitments to bear on funded research projects that aim to address both language revitalization and renewable energy transition decisions.

It is important for us to note that we all have experience engaging with Tribal Nations with a shared history, culture, and common language, Anishinaabemowin and its many related dialects. We recognize that Indigenous languages and lifeways are deeply embedded within Tribal landscapes; Indigenous languages constitute socio-ecologies of the lands (Basso 1996; Cajete 1994; Noodin 2019). Thus, the reflections we share here are grounded in our experiences working within cultures and governance structures shaped by the language of Anishinaabe and the landscape of the upper Great Lakes region of North America, and as such, should not be considered universalizing for all Indigenous communities in all places. This reflection suggests an important opportunity for further learning in rural sociology, regarding the diversity of Tribal Nation needs and priorities in engagement. Yet we also contend that despite cultural differences that cannot be ignored, the shared status as sovereign nations who continue to experience the ongoing impacts of colonial displacement and all the physical, symbolic, and institutional violence that entails means that our reflections on shaping engagement to serve the practical needs of sovereign governments can inform how rural sociologists work with Indigenous communities across diverse contexts.

Author Experiences

Our shared experiences as researchers center on engagement with Anishinaabe Tribal Nations focused on food, energy, water, and relationships with the land, particularly around health, sovereignty, decision-making, and community wellbeing. Our work has involved both funded and unfunded projects as well as one author's professional work for a Tribe. All our work has been based in positioning ourselves as learners within our relationships with Tribes as well as focusing on ways that our academic work can be in service of Tribal priorities. We describe some of our projects here to provide context for the reflections that follow.

The Michigan Community and Anishinaabe Rural Energy Sovereignty [MICARES] project (Award #1934346) aimed to advance renewable energy (RE) transitions in Michigan by explicitly centering Tribal Nations and Indigenous ways of knowing as priorities to inform improved decision-making. This project examined Tribal preferences for RE adoption (Lee et al. 2023) but also argued that Indigenous ontologies (understandings of what is real in the world) can inform decision-making about RE transitions that moves beyond contention over siting to consider relationships with the land and among humans and more-than-human communities (Bessette et al. 2022; Schaefer et al. 2021; Schelly et al. 2020, 2021a, 2021b). The challenges faced by this project are presented below as opportunities to reflect on how to improve engagement with Tribal Nations communities. All four authors were engaged in this NSF funded project.

The "Bridging Knowledge Systems and Expertise for Understanding the Dynamics of a Contaminated Tribal Landscape System" project (NSF Award #2009258) is built on research foundations and partnerships that have focused on fish, risk, and health

relations for more than a decade. This work explores the dynamic ways that toxic contamination, accumulated in the region's waters and fish, serves to both disrupt and revitalize socio-ecological relations for the Anishinaabe Ojibwa and the more-than-human communities within the Great Lakes region (Gagnon 2016; Gagnon, Gorman, and Norman 2017; Gagnon and Ravindran 2023; Perlinger et al. 2018; Shaw et al. 2022). Below, we will share insights on some challenges experienced as part of these efforts.

The Less Commonly Taught and Indigenous Language Partnership (Mellon Award #1808-06086) includes a significant Anishinaabemowin, the language of the Anishinaabe, portion that funds projects related to Anishinaabemowin directly from Tribal communities, groups that have a strong connection to an Indigenous community, and academic language programs throughout North America. A key piece of the project is to funnel University and grant-funded research dollars directly into the hands and control of Indigenous communities themselves. [Author 4] is on the Wewaawiindamojig (Advisory Circle). While the project is limited in some ways by funding constraints, it does model one way of doing research that shifts agency from the University to the community themselves.

[Author #3] has experience working within Tribal government as well as with The Midwest Tribal Energy Resources Association (MTERA), which is a group of energy professionals in tribal governments working to help meet capacity and technical needs of tribes that are exploring and developing energy projects on tribal lands. Each member tribe contributes expertise for the benefit of the other members. [Author #3] can access these tribal energy professionals for research and aims to support these professionals in their work through development of materials that tap into and synthesize the experiences of the group of tribal energy professionals. [Author #3] is also engaged in a project examining the justice implications of energy developments on Anishinaabe lands through a capabilities approach.

The development of each of these projects can be grounded in the insights from rural sociology regarding rural relationships to place and issues of justice impacting post-industrial rural communities to address the practical needs of Tribal partners. In the section below, we present insights as findings regarding what we have learned in our work and how to engage with Indigenous communities through education for life's sake. We use the word "we" for insights that we share collectively, and we use personal names [redacted for confidentiality in peer review] for insights linked to specific projects associated with specific authors. We integrate insights from our own work with insights from academic scholarship to indicate how these reflections align with previous work involving Tribal engagement in rural communities with important implications for rural sociologists.

Insights

The insights that we share in this paper are organized around three themes. First, we consider the strengths and challenges for empirical research with rural Indigenous communities, based on aspects of Tribal Nations governance as sovereign entities with a unique position within U.S. territory. Their strengths highlight opportunities, while the challenges associated with administrative capacity suggest

one potential role for university partners who wish to engage with Tribal Nations through research and education. Second, we consider the misalignment in the needs and structures that shape engagement processes and relationships between researchers and Tribal partners. Third, we reflect on the essential role of Tribal government structure and Tribal sovereignty in how researchers learn about, learn from, and work with Tribal Nations in rural spaces. In our discussion, we consider what these insights mean particularly for rural sociologists, many of whom work at land-grant institutions located on Tribal land, who we argue have an obligation to engage with Tribal communities in ways that respect Tribal sovereignty and that pursue education for life's sake.

Strengths and Challenges for Empirical Research with Rural Indigenous Communities

In the Tribal contexts we have experience engaging, specifically on issues related to land and life in relation to food, energy, and water systems decision-making, Tribal communities have a very long history of seeking to live in the right relationship with the earth systems that support human flourishing. This is an incredible strength for those who seek to engage with decision-making processes to support responsible, sustainable, and equitable relationships within food, energy, and water systems. In our experience, Tribal Nations partners share broad and deep commitments to this kind of work, and so researchers do not need to spend time "educating the public" (and other ineffective approaches to environmental education, see Heberlein 2012) on why humans should consider the impact of their decision-making for food, energy, and water systems.

A second strength for engagement with Tribal communities, and a key element of the insights we aim to share here, is that Tribal Nations in rural contexts largely operate as sovereign nations with varying levels of decision-making power over what happens on Tribal lands. This sovereignty has been hard fought over centuries and continues to experience challenges, obstacles, and burdensome limits. Yet nonetheless, rural Tribal Nations (particularly, again, in the Great Lakes regions where we have experience with this work) can make decisions that can be implemented directly on Tribal lands. This provides incredible opportunities for impactful research engagement that can translate to direct impacts.

Furthermore, the cultural values described in the first paragraph here (recognizing that Tribal communities in the Great Lakes region have long standing and shared understandings about the value of living in right relationship with the land through responsible stewardship of food, energy, water systems) are integrated into the government structures and systems that exist to enact Tribal sovereignty. This is an essential insight for those who aim to work with Tribal Nations in rural contexts to support decision-making for food, energy, water systems. As we describe below, aiming to understand the culture, worldviews, and belief systems of Tribal communities with whom we hope to engage is not enough; researchers must also understand the government structures and processes of Tribes as sovereign entities, must respect and work within that sovereignty, and must recognize that Indigenous ontologies (Schelly et al. 2021a) play a role in shaping Indigenous governments, educational priorities, and systems of engagement that

diverge from the colonialist structures that dominate U.S. institutions. Understanding these systems of government, education, and decision-making are key to respectful research engagement with rural Tribal Nations.

While we can reflect on the strengths of Tribal communities to shape opportunities for engagement, we must also consider the challenges outside agencies face when failing to acknowledge the practical realities of Tribal Nations. In our own partnerships with Tribal Nations, we have participated in cultural awareness training both on the giving and receiving end. These trainings tend to focus on cultural differences between settler-colonial worldviews and Tribal worldviews, covering topics such as spirituality, relationships with the natural world, the value of oral traditions, the importance of clans and kinship, and ways of showing respect. And yet, what we have all encountered is that one of the biggest challenges working between settler communities and Tribal Nations is a lack of understanding around the challenges of administrative capacity. While some research works to address capacity issues when working with Tribal Nations (Chino and DeBruyn 2006; Jernigan, Jacob, and Styne 2015; Segev et al. 2021), those conversations focus on large-scale leadership and technical capacity. There is limited research that calls attention to more practical considerations around capacity, such as the ways personnel changes within tribal programs impact program goals and communication flows (Chino 2012) and the impacts of varying agency timelines and tribal resources and organization processes (Dockry, Gutterman, and Davenport 2018).

One essential yet very practical aspect of the administrative capacity burden facing Tribal Nations is related to staff capacity. Due to funding constraints, tribal departments must take on a wide range of responsibilities, often with a single individual covering multiple, diverse areas. [Author #3], for example, was at one point responsible for all matters related to air quality (indoor and ambient), brownfields, land contaminants, fish consumption advisories, beach closures, wetland mapping and mitigation, NEPA reviews, pesticide safety and policy, integrated pest management, invasive species, nuclear wastes, renewable energy, climate change mitigation efforts, food contaminants, lead toxicity, and more, for nine housing sites, five casinos, and seven health clinics across seven counties. Even now, with programs under the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, and others, each of those programs is one person. One illness or accident removes capacity in an entire federal program area for a tribal government. As an author team, we have experience working on energy transitions issues in partnership with a Tribal government without any staff tasked with energy planning; thus, all engagement work required volunteer efforts because an administrative capacity limit in professional staff domains of expertise and responsibility. In a new project, [Author #1] was unable to build a formal partnership with a Tribal partner due to misalignment between funding deadlines and Tribal administrative deadlines; although the project was designed to address a priority identified by Tribal staff, the lack of administrative capacity and misalignment of timelines among federal agencies, universities, and Tribal governments prevented formal (and thus equitably compensated) partnership.

Interestingly, the most useful document we have come across is a 2009 training from the State of Michigan, based on the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) "Working Effectively With Tribal Governments" 2003 online training. Along

with addressing cultural competency, the document also addresses the political environment in which the tribal governments operate, offering such practical advice as "learn the time frames in which decision-making bodies operate, such as the frequency of council meetings" (46). Like Chino's (2012) findings, the document also calls attention to the ways that "like other governmental bodies, [tribes] experience changing priorities with changing administrations" (47). They are sovereign nations with their own bureaucracies, timelines, and procedures, and these are often operating within a context where administrative capacity is limited. These are important lessons for rural sociologists who may seek to engage, and they provide key insights into opportunities for scholars to work in service of Tribal needs.

The challenges of administrative capacity are directly tied to the position of Tribal Nations as embedded in settler-colonial economic, socio-cultural, and institutional dynamics that must be negotiated for Tribes to enact the sovereignty to which they are inherently (and legally) entitled. As mandated by the Indian Reorganization Act (1936), Tribal Nations in the US were required to establish governments that the US federal government would recognize as legitimate in order to be granted recognition (for more on the politics of recognition, see Coulthard 2014 and Simpson 2014); the forms of governance and decision-making that some Indigenous communities had successfully used for centuries (seasonal leadership, for example) were not accepted and assimilation was forced as a precursor of recognition. This means that the most familiar forms of government, from the perspective of a rural sociologist from a settler colonizer background, may be the most forced and misaligned for the Tribal communities themselves. Recognizing this history, and how it has resulted in a wide range of Tribal governments with enormous variability in the capacities they can leverage, is essential for ethical engagement for life's sake.

Research partnerships often fail to meaningfully acknowledge the realities of sovereignty and administrative burden, yet these challenges both provide opportunities for researchers to meaningfully contribute to Tribal Nations wellbeing through research. To fully respect Tribal sovereignty means recognizing that Tribal communities involve both shared values and sovereign government. The goals of government go beyond research and understanding to active decision-making and doing - so how can scholars and practitioners help support the doing of Tribal Nations? We argue this requires reframing our work as involving education for life's sake.

Engagement and Misalignment between Needs and Structures

Some important insights for engaging with/by/as research partnerships (Shaw et al. 2022) is to recognize the fundamental mismatch between Tribal Nations and research goals. The institutional structures we/they are a part of determine the who, what, when, and how of everyday practices and thus need to be understood. Otherwise, how do we know if we are doing justice and practicing equitable, inclusive, and respectful engagement with each other? Tribal Nation institutions are government institutions structured to govern, serve, and protect the people within that Nation and community. Academic institutions are structured to educate, research,

and serve societal needs at large. These structures are designed to be accountable and responsible to sets of different parties.

Tribal Nation institutional goals address community building, and commonly, researcher institutional goals are closely tied to career building. In other words, Tribal Nations are focused on long term governance priorities, which can also require addressing practical, everyday needs. However, researchers and academic institutions are often focused on short-term priorities including funding opportunities and/or research proposals (i.e., external sponsors and/or graduate student research), particularly those that can lead to the academic products that propel careers and institutional prestige. The expertise and skill set needed for good governance and good research are not the same, and many times, additional training may be needed for researchers to engage with governments, as well as government staff to partner as researchers. Some of this training may be formal, such as that focused on human subjects research ethics. Some of the learning may not be accessible through formal training, and instead requires engaging in community events and opportunities and learning from community partners so that things like government projects and priorities, government budget calendars, and seasonally occurring significant events can be learned through engagement prior to any research activity. Recognizing the stark mismatch between goals, processes, and needed expertise and skills is not only a necessary first step but also a continuous consideration as part of the negotiation and re-negotiation within engagement partnerships.

Different goals, expertise, and skill sets do not necessarily translate into incommensurable partnerships; rather, they can provide opportunities to build and strengthen engagement practices and address diverse goals (Ermine 2007). Such work does not just happen but instead requires intentional, and ongoing, efforts (see Shaw et al. 2022). To envision shared opportunities is to acknowledge the ways that Tribal Nations and academic institutions need each other. We have found it necessary to first, reflect on the ways one's research interests and practices prioritize Indigenous Land and life (see Liboiron 2021 for more information on 'Land'). Identifying and understanding these connections need to be a deliberate exercise, and one that researchers must make evident for themselves and others. Although not intuitive for every researcher, it is possible to imagine and learn about the ways academic and scientific tools, methods, and resources can support priorities that center on Land and life protection, restoration, and/or the revitalization with/by/as Tribal Nations. Part of this identification and understanding can happen by reading about Tribal Nations and engagement with Indigenous communities, but much of this learning must occur by entering into relationships with communities through events, service, volunteering, and consistently showing up for partners to listen to their needs. This can also be built into the design of project management and evaluation, to ensure that everyone is given space to identify how the project is meeting their needs and where projects are falling short, in an intentional effort to flatten project team hierarchies that often end up determining priorities.

In our collective experiences, we have come to know that as researchers, we are obligated to center the dual priority of Tribal Nations, as a sovereign government

and as a distinct cultural entity. We also learned to recognize that government leadership and cultural leadership are often different people within a community. What is acceptable and appropriate culturally, and what is feasible and functional within the governance structure, are equally important considerations. As a sovereign government, Tribal Nations are more than stakeholders but are rights holders, sustaining inherent rights to govern themselves, and as such, can determine the priorities and decisions related to how to govern. The contemporary governance structures, and priorities and decisions, are often informed by distinct cultural beliefs, values, and practices of the people. Additionally, Tribal Nations often share governance authority with other governance entities such as municipal, state, and federal institutions.

Governments of Tribal Nations govern. This means that a Tribal Nation government may include an executive body and/or council, a judicial system and law enforcement, various departments, boards, and/or committees (e.g., education, health, environment), as well as advisory groups (and sometimes, a College). It is important to know the governance structure in order to understand who, where, when, and how particular decisions are made and not made. Engagement requires knowledge of administrative calendars. For example, governments conduct annual budget reviews, and knowing when these reviews take place may be important to research budgets, and equally salient, may impact the level of commitment by government partners and thus the level of expectations by researchers. As a government, it is also important to realize that Tribal Nation governments have their own leadership election schedules and terms, and the results, as for most Nations, can shift priorities either slightly or substantially.

Other structural knowledge to keep in mind may seem obvious but even so, we believe are noteworthy given our experiences of learning, and stumbling, along the way. To begin, Tribal leadership commonly has scheduled weekly meetings; it is a good idea to know when and how these take place as well as how to get on their agenda to share more about research agendas when/if the time comes. We have experienced firsthand how challenging it can be to know how to initiate new engaged partnerships or how to share knowledge being generated through a research partnership; the important lesson we have learned is to ask partners to decide when and where engagement happens and to be prepared to be flexible when it comes to joining meetings, sharing information, or waiting for opportunities to engage. However, prior to thinking about leadership, researchers often need to connect with the various departments, boards, and/or committees government staff first. Therefore, depending on the committee(s) relevant to your research, you may need to identify when and how often government committees meet, which may be outside of regular work hours. Finally, if you are partnering with a department, we advise you to know their exact office hours; we say this because [Author #2], for example, has mistakenly scheduled a meeting from 4 to 5 when their office closes at 4:30. These inner workings of a day-to-day government structure and process can shape how researchers engage in respectful, equitable relations with Tribal Nation partners.

Although we have articulated researchers centering a dual priority, Tribal Nations as sovereign governments and as distinct cultural entities, the duality is

for explanatory purposes only. Tribal Nations are governments, and at the same time, are sovereign, self-determined cultural entities for life's sake. This means that in addition to the government structure, there is also a community calendar of harvesting seasons and other cultural and/or ceremonial events (some of which are open to the public, i.e., researchers). Thus, a researcher's practical knowledge includes government structures, schedules, and hours; it also includes subsistence harvesting seasons (many of which are protected rights by treaties), cultural events/calendars, and ceremonial practices that may disrupt researcher processes with little to no notice. Engagement for life's sake centers governance and self-determination, while simultaneously revitalizing cultural identity in everyday practice.

Governance, Self-Determination, Revitalization of Cultural Identity and Practices

There are some specific and unique challenges involved in respecting Tribal sovereignty in ways that can promote education for life's sake as university researchers. One specific challenge involves the processes of approval for human subject research through university institutional review boards (IRBs). IRBs strictly delineate human subject participants (who provide data) and research team members (who have access to data), but these lines can often become blurred in Tribal Nations engagement, especially when a research team aims to respect Tribal sovereignty through implementation of data sovereignty. Another challenge involves the kinds of training available for researchers, which often focuses on understanding Tribal culture without an emphasis on Tribal government. There are specific ways researchers can engage with Tribes to ensure Tribal sovereignty is respected (Gagnon et al. 2017). Researchers need to educate themselves on the dynamic scholarship of Indigenous data sovereignty (see Kukutai and Taylor 2016, and Walter et al. 2020, for more). Additionally, most academic universities subscribe to research training courses and certifications provided by an external entity. We propose that such research training be available for Tribal Nation partners. Not only does this empower Tribal Nation research partners, but also strengthens the knowledge and capacity of tribal government staff to assert decision-making authority with current and future researchers. Tribal Nations often also have their own Institutional Review Board or other identified entity tasked with reviewing and approving any research that occurs on Tribal lands and/or with Tribal members. These processes can slow the pace of research but must absolutely be respected to enter into equitable engagement processes with sovereign Indigenous partners. Regardless of the level of institutional formality, data sovereignty can be prioritized, but this may require additional time to work through IRB processes that are designed for research projects in which research subjects are not research partners, which is often the case for Indigenous research partnerships.

Other challenges to be navigated involve funding agencies and priorities for student recruitment, mentoring, and education. Funding agencies often have shorter term priorities than Tribal Nations, and researchers are often responding to funding opportunities and then focusing on work organized around a short-term timeframe. Researchers are often unable to support funded project work that focuses on project implementation because it does not translate directly into research products

recognized by university systems of recognition and reward. Student recruitment often focuses on identifying students who can succeed with research work, and educational processes often focus on gaining abstract rather than practical knowledge. What we have seen in our work is that Tribal Nations often need support with very practical, grounded activities but students and researchers often do not have the experience or skills needed to assist with these needs. Projects that involve Tribal Nations would benefit from student recruitment processes that prioritize practical experiences and skill sets that can address Tribal Needs.

Discussion

Others have emphasized the importance of centering local knowledges in rural sociological research and partnerships (Kloppenburg 1991). As we have described, rural sociology is uniquely positioned to pursue engagement for life's sake, given its intellectual foundations as a field that aims to provide applied and practical knowledge for rural communities and its institutional obligation to support the sovereignty of communities that have long been erased or harmed by the organizational homes to many rural sociologists. In this section, we offer reflections on how to translate these reflections into action.

Drawing on Strengths, Addressing Challenges for Indigenous Community Research Partnerships

Tribal sovereignty can be supported when researchers work to better understand the strengths and challenges of Indigenous partners and develop research opportunities that can address both. The Tribal Nations with which we have worked have enormous strengths when it comes to land stewardship, engagement of members with knowledge co-production to pursue right relations with the land, and a very clear awareness of priorities and needs for members. Challenges associated with administrative capacity can be addressed through research project engagement, if projects are designed for equitable partnerships that address real community needs. We have worked on projects that successfully provided administrative support to compile existing data, give very practical support for installation or project implementation, or identify future opportunities; this work can often leverage student engagement as long as both students and their supervisors prioritize long term relationships and addressing practical needs.

Researchers who aim to utilize engagement for life's sake can also work to understand the variations in administrative capacity, both within and across Tribal Nations. For example, work with one Tribal partner has been limited by their lack of administrative capacity in energy planning and management. This Tribe has a strong Natural Resources Department that manages environmental monitoring and enforcement, but no one on staff tasked with addressing energy. In contrast, Tribes that have a long history of energy extractivism have a much larger administrative capacity for engagement with energy transitions research. Further, Tribal administrative capacity is limited by structural constraints, such as the inability to collect property tax on reservation lands and limitations in accessing public financing or other state or federal economic opportunities. Researchers must aim

to enter into relations with Tribal Nations as learners, and spend time learning about the gaps in their capacities and how research teams can ethically navigate or address them.

Addressing Misalignment between Needs and Structures

Others have highlighted the importance of inclusive authorship practices for Indigenous partners (Sarna-Wojcicki et al. 2017); these are key lessons that can be further extended by equitable partnerships that respect the sovereignty of Tribal Nations as government entities aiming to address practical needs and structuring research partnerships to pursue education for life's sake (in ways that can address these practical priorities). Engagement for life's sake requires that scholars shift their relationship to funding and scholarship to focus on long term relationships and practical needs as well as changing student recruitment and training to value applied and practical skills and ensure cultural competency as well as respect for the practical inner workings of Tribal sovereignty.

Building ethical engagement partnerships may require that researchers actively participate in Tribal Nations community events and engage with Tribal governments informally and in supportive roles to better understand needs, how projects are prioritized, what kinds of funding opportunities are most valuable, and how to engage with Indigenous communities. It may also require slowing the pace involved in pursuing research funds and may also require changing the kind of training, education, and research requirements we use to evaluate potential student assistants or their progress to degree completion. For example, if a Tribal partner wants help with installing a system, finding and pursuing a funding opportunity, or taking an inventory of existing Tribal capacities, students should be given the opportunity to provide this support in ways that do not derail their educational progress, which may require shifting how academics think about scholarly contributions.

We think it is important to acknowledge that many of the features of Tribal Nations governments in terms of lacking administrative capacity, credentialed expertise, or the time or financial means to pursue longer term planning and larger project opportunities may seem familiar to those who have experience working with rural municipal governments. There are also lessons regarding respect for cultural difference and diversity that may also carry over from the experiences of rural sociologists. However, it is absolutely essential to engage with Tribal Nations in ways that respect the very clear differences in their histories, experiences, and contemporary context. Tribal Nations have experienced centuries of genocide, cultural erasure, and forced assimilation to even become recognized, despite the fact that they were operating as sovereign governments prior to European contact and thus should be respected as pre-constitutionally sovereign. Tribal Nations must continually reinforce and renegotiate their sovereignty in order to protect the food, energy, and water systems with which they have been in right relation for centuries. Further, while many underserved and minoritized groups seek justice through assimilative recognition, Tribal Nations seek the opposite, aiming to push back on politics of erasure through a reverse assimilation that demands sovereignty

(Wilkinson 2005). While there are corollaries that can inform the learning and engaging done by rural sociologists, the differences also warrant full respect and awareness, lest we make light of the very real lived experiences of those we aim to serve through Indigenous partnerships.

Governance, Self-Determination, Revitalization

We want to acknowledge that when it comes to Tribal cultural values, we absolutely cannot homogenize. Tribal Nations across the U.S. are incredibly diverse in their worldviews, beliefs, cultures, and priorities. Similarly, Tribal communities vary greatly in the resources available to them, including administrative capacity. Nonetheless, there is a key lesson from our experiences and insights that can be applied to Tribal Nations in rural contexts throughout the U.S. Recognizing and respecting their position as sovereign governments and structuring engagement around the specific and particular workings and doings of these governments can improve engagement processes and outcomes, emphasizing the goal of engagement as education for life's sake, or learning so that we can improve practical outcomes associated with wellbeing and knowledge of how to live a quality life.

Our contribution to research on Indigenous communities and rural issues is to emphasize practical engagement, recognition of the sovereignty of Tribal governments, and development of engagement relationships that focus on addressing grounded needs and realities. In reflecting on our shared experiences, we argue that the emphasis on understanding Indigenous cultures and engaging in cultural competency to prepare for engagement with Tribal Nations can have a negative impact on engagement, because it can have the unintended effect of romanticizing Indigenous identities in stagnant 'ancient' conceptualizations. Instead, we argue that researchers must support dynamic understandings of Tribal Nations that move from the past to the present in order to work in equitable collegial relationships (as in, as colleagues) with contemporary Tribal Nations partners. Engagement for life's sake requires acknowledging the past and cultural worldviews while also living in the present and working with sovereign governments to prepare for the future, as well as recognizing that the past is informing the present for Tribal governments (Whyte 2018). This will also require shedding romanticized notions of Indigenous communities and attending to the actual conditions of their government operations, which include conflict, struggle, and legacies from past harms that are typical in any bureaucratic organizations and that require sensitivity and understanding for equitable and beneficial research partnerships.

Engagement for life's sake requires asking, specifically, whose life is centered in engagement priorities. It requires emphasizing the practical elements of livelihoods that are impacted by food, energy, and water systems authorities and decision-making by Tribal Nations and other governance entities. This is analogous to the foundational goal of sociology as a field of study, outlined by C. Wright Mills ([1959]2000), to understand the relationship between individual troubles and social issues. We believe this to be a responsibility of all researchers, to shift research engagement and relationships to address the practical needs of communities. This is a particularly important realization for rural sociologists working with, or desire to partner with, Tribal Nations, as rural sociologists are often working within institutions located

on Tribal lands (Lee and Ahtone 2020). Beyond a research study, how might Tribal Nations need to apply, practice. and/or share research insights within their communities? What kind of products might support Tribal Nations as sovereign governments and contribute to the restoration, protection, and revitalization of Indigenous Land and life? These, we assert, are the questions worthy of exploring at the forefront of rural sociology and beyond.

Conclusion

Our collective experiences engaging with Anishinaabe Tribal Nations in the Great Lakes region to support Tribal sovereignty have taught us the importance of engagement for life's sake. Engagement with Tribal Nations can help support their long-standing commitment to living in right relations with rural lands as well as supporting Tribal sovereignty. Researchers must learn to work within the context of administrative capacity and technical support shortages, and can structure their work to help support administrative, technical, and practical needs.

Researchers can also benefit from remembering that Tribal Nations are embedded in economic, socio-cultural, and institutional dynamics that must be continually negotiated for Tribes to enact the sovereignty to which they are inherently (and legally) entitled. Centering cultural competency when working with Indigenous communities has the potential to lock Tribal Nations into an idealized past; scholars have a responsibility to engage in cultural learning as well as learning about the very applied, lived, and ever-evolving experiences of Tribal Nations seeking to enact their sovereignty over decision-making in rural places. Effective engagement with Tribal Nations requires practical knowledge, applied assistance, and grounded, genuine relationships; these requirements often run counter to the institutional structures and priorities imposed by universities, federal funding agencies, and student recruitment.

Engagement for life's sake has the potential to inform how the field of rural sociology approaches research in partnership with Tribal Nations as well as contributing new theoretical insights into research partnerships with Indigenous communities. If we scholars can reimagine how we approach research and student training, we will have new opportunities to consider when and how Tribal sovereignty is challenged, contested, or enabled, and how this sovereignty can support decision-making to improve wellbeing for rural communities. Tribal sovereignty involves relationships with Land and life that can provide new learning for rural sociology as a field. These lessons and opportunities are aligned with the foundational aspirations of rural sociology as a field working in service of rural communities; these communities, lest we forget, are located on lands with which Tribal peoples have been in relation for millennia. From this practical approach to right relations through education (and engagement) for life's sake, we have much yet to learn.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data are available in previous publications and by request to the authors.

Ethics Statement

The research described here was approved by the relevant Institutional Review Boards.

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