


The Relational Method: How Community Organizing Can Reshape University Research

Amanda Tattersall and Marc Stears

Crises of confidence in the relationship between academic research and broader society has led to an explosion in interest in community-led research methods, such as codesign, community-engaged research, and participatory action research. These methods are intended as a way of reconnecting scholarship and society during a period of intense polarization, but they remain far from mainstream. This reflection considers whether community organizing, and in particular the kind of approach initiated by Saul Alinsky that borrowed from a scholarly method at the University of Chicago in the 1920s and is now practiced in more than 99 cities around the world, can offer a practical guide for scholars keen to resolve this challenge. It outlines three elements of what is labeled the “relational method” that build on the philosophical and practical tools of community organizing: relationality, power, and uncertainty. It suggests that the principles and practices of the relational method can not only strengthen community-led research practice, but, if we take a lead from community organizing and recognize the importance of the relationship between the practice of social change and the institutions that seek to produce it, it can also help us to more clearly see how the diffusion of community-led research can align with the broader goal of creating more community-engaged universities.

Keywords: community organizing, community-engaged research, codesign, coproduction, university culture

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There has been an explosion of interest in the last few years in the proper relationship between political impact, social action, and university research in political science and more broadly. In 2018, the leading science journal *Nature* issued an editorial arguing that the best research is produced when researchers and communities work together (*Nature* 2018). In an increasingly polarized political world, the *Nature* editors insisted, academics of all kinds need to move on from their own narrow interests and technical specialisms and build engaged, socially impactful knowledge that is responsive to community need. Such an aim, they further contended, requires researchers to prioritize new methods and new working practices, including learning how to build knowledge through deep and sustainable partnerships with communities beyond the academy.

The importance of these ideas is at its most profound in areas related to politics. Growing anxieties about the detachment of academic pursuits from real-life political controversies (W. Brown 2023), the increasing threat to academic practice from the intensifying “culture wars” (Boutillier 2014; Chen and Vanclay 2022), and leading political scientists’ new efforts to understand how coalitions of social actors interact with the state (Ahlquist and Levi 2014) have intensified the desire to explore strategies

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beyond conventional academic practice. This has led some within political science to seek new ways of connecting scholarly activity to broader publics, challenging conventional methods in areas ranging from political theory (Allen 2004; Stears 2021) to comparative politics and the empirical study of social movements (Han 2024) as they do so. Although there are many different approaches here, all center on the desire to narrow the gap between the academic study of politics and politics as conducted in real life. This notion has been further enhanced by the growing crisis on campuses themselves, on everything from the war in Gaza, to ongoing threats to research funding and conventional academic practice by the Trump administration, to the employment practices of most leading universities (Grant 2021; Post et al. 2016).

In response to these stresses, many universities have sought to renew their “civic mission.” They have often done so by creating new specialized units to “translate” university research findings into recommendations of direct benefit to daily life, whether through public policy, clinical and educational practice, or spin-off economic endeavors. They have also established new efforts to “engage” the broader community in university activities, with outreach efforts including public events, science and social science weeks, advisory councils, and various philanthropic activities in the community (Dobbs et al. 2021; Wethington and Dunifon 2012).

This desire for university researchers to create deeper partnerships with community members from outside academia is, in our view, an attractive and important goal, but there remains much confusion about precisely how it is to be achieved or what it involves in a practical sense. The general terminology of community-led research, community engagement, codesign, and coproduction is used to label all manner of activities, processes, and research methods across universities, the public service, corporate consultation, and civil society practice. Precise meanings are provided within particular disciplines, but, ironically, they rarely travel across the boundaries that divide scholars in some areas of expertise from those in others, let alone to the broader community itself. This not only creates confusion but potentially reinforces skepticism, with some seeing these efforts as little more than cosmetic attempts to rebrand existing university practices rather than proper efforts to grapple with real challenges (Saltmarsh, Hartley, and Clayton 2009).

Here, we suggest that one tradition of political thought and practice that could provide a guiding philosophy to these new efforts within universities is community organizing in the Saul Alinsky tradition, which has a long and detailed connection to university life. Indeed, the origins of this kind of organizing directly built on the sociological research practices at the University of Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s. Yet this relationship is often overlooked, with organizing—better known as a civil society practice—

beyond the academy associated with the work of groups like Saul Alinsky’s Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). Over 80 years, the IAF has developed the idea and practice of community organizing at a scale that has brought people together in collective action and has had vast real-world impact, helping communities across the world—and especially across the US—to transform their own fortunes and in the process develop a complex, detailed account of how power works.

Community organizing is well placed to be reappropriated by universities as a research method and practice that could give real shape to the efforts in political science and beyond. We call this method *the relational method*. After exploring the histories of community-led research and community organizing, we seek to provide a practical guide to this approach for scholars in political science, drawing out its key conceptual features and everyday scholarly practices. We conclude by exploring the challenges and opportunities that the relational method presents to modern university culture, arguing that while its approach is countercultural, the method itself not only offers insights for the practice of community-led research but also comes with a track record for making political change that has the potential to transform conventional academic practice.

Community-Led Research: Intention, Form, and a New Agenda

A wide variety of different approaches to research and policy making currently sit under the umbrella of community-led research, including codesign, coproduction, minipublics, community-engaged research, and citizen science. While varied in their research processes, community-led research shares a stated commitment (if not always apparent in practice) to engaging affected communities as partners in the research process, working with communities to develop research questions and undertake data collection and analysis, as well as coauthoring and delivering research impact (Dobbs et al. 2021). In doing so, community-led research strategies challenge conventional epistemological and methodological approaches to knowing that privilege objectivity and critical distance, with a more relational and dialogical form of knowledge creation that argues for knowledge production with communities (Hale 2008b).

Indeed, community-led research methods have tended to evolve with communities. One of the most commonly used terms, “codesign,” is often rooted in developments of the 1960s and 1970s, including the innovations of the Mississippi Freedom Schools during the civil rights struggle in the US (Polletta 2002; Stears 2010), and in Scandinavian participatory design, which evolved out of the work of trade union movements that pushed for the democratization of workplaces (Björgvinsson, Ehn, and Hillgren 2012). Human-centered design thinkers coined the term “codesign,” where the prefix “co” refers to the importance of collaboration or connection (Blomkamp

2018, 731). Design thinking has become a widely used practitioner tool, including in politics and policy making, popularized by global design companies and by university initiatives like the Stanford Design Lab. Today, the end-user-led approach of design thinking seeks to harness replicable methods and powerful workshop tools that enable groups to challenge and generate collective mindsets and make shared near-future plans (Bell et al. 2023; Blomkamp 2018; Sanders and Stappers 2014). While not all “user-engaged” codesign is community led (Moll et al. 2020), it is increasingly used in many disciplines, such as health policy and research, to build sustained, cocreated research with communities, such as health service consumers and people with lived experience.

If we go beyond codesign itself though, it is evident that the idea of coproducing knowledge with communities has a broader history. At the beginning of the nineteenth century in the US, experimentation with early sociological methods such as case studies soon evolved into more sustained community-led urban ethnographic research practices in what became known as the Chicago school of pragmatism (Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe 2010). After World War II, distinct collaborative research practices associated with Freire ([1968] 1972) and Lewin (1946) began to tailor research methods focused on collaboration led by participants, now described as participatory action research (Wallerstein and Duran 2017). Critical theorists have been engaging with this approach since the 1980s, recognizing the distinctive experiences of gender and race, the impact of researcher positionality, and how action research work needed to better acknowledge and contest structural forms of power like patriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism (Frisby et al. 2005). Like codesign, participation action research has spread across a variety of disciplines from geography to medicine (Darroch and Giles 2014). In a similar vein, activist research scholarship, grounded theory, action research, and publicly engaged scholarship have all sought to build new knowledge through relationships and dialogue with communities (Hale 2008a; Post et al. 2016; Stringer and Aragón [1996] 2021).

There is a growing recognition that community-engaged research has a place in political science, with the diffusion of this practice standing on the shoulders of this multidisciplinary experimentation (Beaulieu, Breton, and Brousselle 2018; Davis 2023; Dobbs et al. 2021). Political scientists have recognized the importance of coproducing knowledge with communities beyond the university, especially when working with more marginalized populations, while also recognizing the difficulties of this practice (Bullock and Hess 2021; Dobbs et al. 2021; Reyna, Chaffin, and Burbridge 2024). The American Political Science Association itself has recently begun to offer training in community-engaged methods through the Institute for Civically Engaged Research, hoping to share

and exchange the methodological skills and knowledge needed for good practice and also to reframe the way that universities tend to see community engagement—shifting their viewpoint so that they not only value it normatively as form of service, but also as a core skill for effective research practice and public scholarship (Peters and Alter 2010).

As extensive as these different approaches to community-led research are, they share at least two challenges. First, although Arnstein (1969) provides a clear “ladder of participation” that powerfully differentiates between community engagement that is profound and that which is merely cosmetic, in practice university-based community-led research groups have not developed any clear consensus on the specific practices and principles that are required for deep community engagement. This may be because, as Han, Baggetta, and Oser (2024) identify in relation to the practice of community organizing, it is only possible to account for the qualities, successes, and limits of any approach by unpacking its particular practices, processes, and conceptual priorities, and that work has been lacking.

Second, community-led research has barely scratched the surface of many departments of political science. No serious political science journal prioritizes research conducted in this way, and, as with other disciplines, too often community-led researchers are left trying to respond to the constraints of rigid and inappropriate university processes, grant proposals, employment processes, and research agreements, which continue to prioritize conventional academic practices (Peters and Alter 2010; Saltmarsh, Hartley, and Clayton 2009). While serving as president of the Social Science Research Council, Craig Calhoun (2008) observed these restrictions, arguing that most established social science departments continue to present knowledge as fundamentally detached and objective, privileging scholarship that is contained within existing academic agendas and career structures and operating inside institutions that value knowledge through hierarchy, ranking, and prestige. Community-led researchers have often asked whether it is possible to challenge these conventions and improve the institutional context for community-led research (Hale 2008b). We believe community organizing’s track record of combining significant political and institutional change with broad-based community engagement has the potential to offer community-led researchers a clear guide for changing these practices and challenging such conventions. It is for these reasons that we have turned to community organizing and the work pioneered by Saul Alinsky, the IAF, and similar organizing traditions.

We are, of course, far from the first community-led researchers to identify community organizing as an inspiration for community-led research. Leading design thinker Henry Sanoff (2000) identified the value of Alinsky’s method of interest-based negotiation in contrast to

mainstream “consensus” approaches in workshop design. The public work model developed by Harry Boyte (2004) and others at the University of Minnesota’s Center for Democracy and Citizenship uses community organizing’s pragmatic, relational focus on public action as a way of reorienting research questions into questions of citizen action (Doherty, Mendenhall, and Berge 2009). Political philosopher Romand Coles (2016) collaborated with a team of researchers and undergraduate students at Northern Arizona University to apply community organizing as a pragmatic, democratic teaching tool. Similarly, the political philosopher Danielle Allen (2004; 2023) has championed the integration of community organizing methods into her multidisciplinary research teams over a career spent at Chicago, Princeton, and Harvard Universities, and has written extensively of her findings. We draw on all this work below.

Community Organizing’s Relational Method for Community-Led Research

Studying the US origins of community organizing is an appealing approach to community-led research because of its curious history. Since its creation over 80 years ago, the IAF has produced a widespread civic pedagogy for policy and community change. It is important to note that community organizing as a people-power strategy is bigger than the work pioneered by Saul Alinsky, and even within the “Alinsky tradition,” community organizing has developed distinctive pedagogies through US networks like Faith in Action, Gamaliel, and the Direct Action and Research Training Center while also being adapted by global IAF networks across Europe, the United Kingdom, and Oceania.¹ While diverse, what defines these practices as “community organizing” is their method of working with organizations, an emphasis on the need for community members to lead the process of social change, and the cultivation of relationships across diverse constituencies, institutions, and interests (Tattersall and Iveson, *forthcoming*).

When it comes to the IAF, the commonly told origin story of US community organizing begins with Saul Alinsky’s building of community organizations in urban industrial areas like Back of the Yards in Chicago. He described his insights in books that remain some of the most widely read texts on community-based change (Alinsky 1971; [1946] 1989). After Alinsky’s death in 1972, Ed Chambers developed the IAF into a sustainable, global organization with at least 99 affiliates around the world (Tattersall and Iveson 2023). What is taught as “community organizing” by the IAF draws from a range of different civic traditions including theology, philosophy, and union action (Bretherton 2010). But what is less known is how the formation of community organizing borrowed heavily from a research method pioneered at a university.

Before Alinsky became an organizer, he was a PhD student involved with the Chicago school of pragmatism. In the 1920s and 1930s, Alinsky studied sociology at the University of Chicago with Robert Park and Ernest Burgess (Bretherton 2010, 25–26). Park and Burgess built on the Chicago school’s emerging, experimental sociological ethnography, which centered on direct observation and fieldwork. Taking their lead from Georg Simmel’s proposition that knowledge is produced through an interactive relationship between people, they pioneered an unorthodox research method that sought to build knowledge out of particular lived urban social relations, a practice outlined in their thousand-page “green bible,” *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (Park and Burgess 1921; see also Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe 2010; Tomasi [1998] 2019).

The Chicago school introduced Alinsky to a series of ideas that became foundational concepts in IAF community organizing. Like the IAF, Park and Burgess adopted an associational approach to democracy, focusing on how groups and organizations mediate space for democratic life. They argued that the form of and relationships between institutions and organizations were critical to understanding social interaction between individuals (Park and Burgess 1921, 722, 842). This approach was taken up by Alinsky ([1946] 1989), who adopted a strategic focus on local institutions when building neighborhood coalitions like the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council. Park and Burgess’s work is also evident in Alinsky’s appropriation of some of their language. Take Alinsky’s (1971, 116) catchphrase, “All change means disorganization of the old and organization of the new,” and compare it to Park and Burgess’s (1921, 55) claim, made decades earlier, that “all social changes are preceded by a certain degree of social and individual disorganization ... followed ... by a movement of reorganization.” Park and Burgess (1921, 456) argued that individual engagement is most effective when it focuses on a person’s interests, which the IAF turned into an approach centered on a person’s self-interest (Alinsky 1971, 53; Chambers 2003, 74, 76). Similarly Alinsky’s celebrated emphasis on pragmatism and negotiation and his critique of ideology has its roots in the Chicago school’s philosophy of pragmatism and the guiding work of John Dewey (Bretherton 2015, 26). Preceding the IAF’s concern for place and cities was Park and Burgess’s (1921, 724) focus on local studies, which argued that “a penetrating analysis of the social structure of a community must quite naturally be based upon studies of human geography” (Chambers 2003; Wills 2012).

In translating this ethnography into organizing, Alinsky also drew on practices that centered on relationships. In the 1930s, through the University of Chicago, Alinsky worked with sociologist Clifford Shaw to become a leading researcher on organized crime. He later credited that work for teaching him about the importance of personal

relationships, and how “asking, not telling, and deep listening were essential to his research” (quoted in Sanders 1970, 22). Reciprocal, exploratory relationship building was central to the Chicago school, where social psychology grounded an approach to community inquiry that sought to build meaningful, subjective connection focused on social experience, described as symbolic interactionism (Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe 2010). Relationships between the researcher and the researched sought to model the principles of an “I, me, thou” connection, as first articulated by the theologian Martin Buber ([1923] 2003) and adapted by Chicago scholars such as George Herbert Mead ([1934] 1967). Alinsky, however, recognized that relational practice needed to be held in tension with an analysis of power, arguing that “a personal relationship cannot substitute for a power relationship” (quoted in Sanders 1970, 23).

The community organizing tradition evolved significantly after Alinsky, but many of these early ethnographic practices remained. Following Alinsky’s death the IAF experienced its own “disorganization and reorganization” through the leadership of Ed Chambers, which recommitted the network to relationship building. As noted above, community organizing in modern terms is more extensive than Alinsky’s initial method, and while all organizing strategies share a focus on organizations, leadership development, and diverse relationship building, they do not necessarily share the more specific conceptual or pedagogical approaches used by Alinsky or the IAF. In the US there are not only numerous national Alinsky-style organizing networks, but organizing strategies are also used in distinctive ways by the labor, antiracist, and immigrant rights movements (McAlevey 2016; Sen 2003; Tattersall and Iveson 2023). Ongoing experimentation with organizing strategy and how it might relate to other people-power strategies, such as running for office

and mobilizing, has been bolstered by philanthropic investment, such as from the Freedom Together Foundation and the Democracy and Power Innovation Fund. US organizing innovations have at times led to changes to Alinsky-style organizing in places like Australia and the UK in particular, where there has been active experimentation with organizing, especially as it relates to working with difference and understanding power (Tattersall 2024).

Until now, academic interest in community organizing has largely focused on organizing’s approach to social action and political change (Bolton 2017; Chambers 2003; Gecan 2004; Graf 2020; Ivereigh 2010; Tattersall 2015). We argue, however, that this established civic practice can return to the university and shift scholarly practices in turn.

Three Principles of the Relational Method

To fully appreciate how awareness of community organizing could shape the conduct of research in political science and other disciplines, it is vital to unpack the concepts that sit at its heart. These are relationality, power, and uncertainty. These principles provide clear and concrete guides to practice for community organizers, who in the IAF tradition are trained and mentored relentlessly in them. We believe they can provide a similar role for scholars too.

Our suggestion is not, of course, that these concepts and the practical scholarly approaches that they spawn *replace* conventional scholarly approaches. Rather, we argue that they provide crucial *additions* to the scholarly armory, opening new possibilities for academics engaged in political science research, especially for those who wish to work in partnership with communities beyond academia (see table 1 for an overview of the differences between conventional and relational academic practices). Community organizing uses the term “agitation” to describe this kind of provocation, placing value on how different ideas or

Table 1
Conventional Academic Practice versus Relational Method

	Conventional academic practice	Agitations from community organizing
What is knowledge?	Detached from community interests and aspiring to be objective	Always developed in deep relationship with others and dependent on epistemic communities
Who do we assume makes knowledge?	Professional academics, deploying established research methods and usually working in formal settings	Partnerships of people, including academics but also practitioners and those with lived experience. All are embedded in power relations
How are claims to knowledge evaluated?	The opinion of acknowledged experts, as in the process of peer review, and of official agencies such as funding bodies	The opinions of nonacademic experts are included in assessment, along with an invitation to revisit conclusions when social dynamics change
Who directs the research process?	Funding bodies, expert hierarchies, formal institutions of learning	Partnerships of scholars and nonscholars, often through explicitly power-sharing commissions where representation is broad and inclusive

experiences can agitate or “stir things up” in the service of reshaping our thinking, adding new dimensions to reflection and shifting practice as a result.

Relationality

Human relationships sit at the core of the relational method. At least since Tocqueville, humanity’s desire for an associational life has taken its place at the center of political science (Sabl 2002). In more recent years, political science has also taken a “relational” turn, with a growing sense that among the study of institutions, structures, and systems, we have lost sight of the fundamental importance of the quality and kind of connections that human beings have with each other. Along these lines, scholars have started to analyze the ways in which human relationships stand behind as diverse a range of issues as the willingness of voters to turn out in elections, the effectiveness of core public services, and the enforceability of contracts in private markets (Baker, Gibbons, and Murphy 2002; Banerjee 2022; Besley and Dray 2022; Eyben 2010; D. Honig 2024).

Despite this academic interest in the importance of relationships, conventional academic practice remains a fairly unrelational endeavor. Although the era of the lone scholar has been superseded by that of the research team in political science, it remains very rare for scholars to spend much time focusing on the nature of the relationships within that team or between the team and the broader community of research participants, other stakeholders, or the public as a whole. Knowledge is produced in this conventional model by experts deploying their expertise, rather than by individuals joining forces with each other and drawing on their capacity for human connection.

In contrast to conventional academic practice, the relational method expends significant effort to attend to the ways in which distinct forms of lived experience can come together dialogically to produce knowledge. It recognizes that knowledge outside the university is deeply contextual, and it emphasizes participant-led processes that value and make space for the distinctive knowledge that marginalized populations may acquire in their political interactions with others or with institutions (Cramer and Toff 2017; Foucault 1980; Saltmarsh and Hartley 2011; Weaver, Prowse, and Piston 2019). Politically, valuing relationships is about treasuring our inherent differences but being aware that they stand in tension with our need to be connected with each other when undertaking collective action in the public sphere (B. Honig 1995; Tattersall 2024; Young [1990] 2012). Relationality’s tensions are captured in Hannah Arendt’s (1958) description of politics as taking place in the “space in-between” people.

At its heart, the relational method values the uncertainty and unpredictability of difference at a philosophical level while advocating research strategies that seek to manage

the tensions that result from it. Practically, differences based on interest, identity, institution, geography, or roles are ever present, often connected to power, and important to recognize when undertaking community-led research, with the success of any research process heavily shaped by the ability to negotiate across difference (Allen 2023).

The relational method’s most practical tool is the relational meeting. Community organizers argue that their most radical act is to stage countless one-to-one meetings, a practice that sits in stark contrast to other people-power strategies like mass mobilization (Han, Campbell, and McKenna 2023; Tattersall and Iveson, *forthcoming*). Relational meetings are one-to-one meetings that are a form of exploration and exchange, where two people connect and confront one another to understand each other’s energy, capacity, and story (Chambers 2003, 44).² In modern-day community organizing practice, participants are trained in relational meetings and work to expand a relational culture in their institution alongside working on issues of policy change in the wider society.

Relational meetings draw on a tradition of building connections that has its roots in Martin Buber’s ([1923] 2003) celebrated distinction between “I” and “it” and “I” and “thou.” In an I–thou connection, Buber taught, human beings try to meet each other without judgment, with little wariness and without any predetermined sense of what they are seeking to gain from each other. Meetings like this explore what Charles Taylor (1989) has identified as our sense of self, honoring an awareness that who we are shifts and is shaped by our experiences, events, and human relationships. Nowadays, relational meetings are one-to-one, face-to-face (where possible), 30–40 minute conversations in which the intensity of daily life is set aside, and time is dedicated to focusing on another person to explore core aspects of their personality, life story, motivations, and values. While simple, they are, as Buber anticipated, countercultural. The purpose is to explore whether you might build a public relationship, in contrast to more typical meetings characterized by superficial politeness or professional distance, or oriented by the narrower, more transactional purpose of getting someone to do something. In this way a relational meeting is not a moment when you “hear” someone’s side, but a space where you can listen underneath someone’s beliefs to get a deeper understanding of where those beliefs come from in the first place (Cramer and Toff 2017, 758). These meetings are two-way. They are open, vulnerable, agitational engagements requiring a sense of mutual trust. Relational meetings are not scripted, but they are filled with “why” questions that seek out stories and experiences that reveal our passions and interests. Such meetings are not purely dialogical encounters; there is an intentional exploration of people’s interests and drives, and accordingly there are often interruptions that probe for more information. When the meeting ends, there is further time for reflection on both

sides—most particularly as to whether there is a desire to work together. If so, more meetings are scheduled.

That said, the practice of relational meetings has to be conscious of the differences between people's public and private roles, with the relational meeting explicitly a public encounter that places some more deeply personal issues outside its scope (Arendt 1958; Chambers 2003). This distinction is, of course, difficult to maintain precisely. Organizers argue that public life and private life are connected (Mills [1959] 2000), with "public" and "private" sometimes depicted as a Venn diagram and relational meetings as opportunities for people to share stories beyond their curriculum vitae or professional role. To defend the public nature of these meetings, however, organizers teach about boundaries, using the analogy of probing and prying. When a medical doctor probes, they gently touch the skin—just as a good relational question openly explores the intention behind a person's public decision. But when a doctor pries or cuts the skin, it bleeds. Relational meetings do not voyeuristically explore someone's private life, even though they do recognize the blurring of boundaries.

Unlike conventional academic practice that traditionally values objective knowledge and researcher detachment, relational meetings are based on an approach to scholarship forged through connection and cocreation (Calhoun 2008). As a practice, relational meetings are different from conventional qualitative methods like interviews, where intention and outcome are designed by the researcher acting alone, or even oral history, where the role of the researcher is usually just to prompt and listen. Relational meetings are not a means for "translating" research to broader publics, "creating rapport," or generating social license for a preexisting research question. They demand whole-hearted engagement in an unscripted, lyrical back-and-forth where the researcher opens up about why they do what they do to build trust and explore the interests of the community participant (Abbott 2016). Vitality, relational meetings do not *replace* more conventional methods but *precede* them. Their intention is to frame how any research relationship will proceed. They are an opportunity for what Australian Indigenous researcher Lyn Riley (2021) calls the "precursor" phase of community-led research. This early work opens the door broadly to explore personal interest and organizational interest, and over time in subsequent meetings communities and researchers begin to identify potential research questions together. Community organizers often say that "relationship precedes action." In the relational method, "relationship precedes data."

Relational meetings are a moment of recognition between two people, where the act of "relating to" is not the same as "identifying with." The power of the exchange lies in hearing and exploring difference and seeing how people's hopes and interests are grounded in life experiences. Relational meetings are not a moment

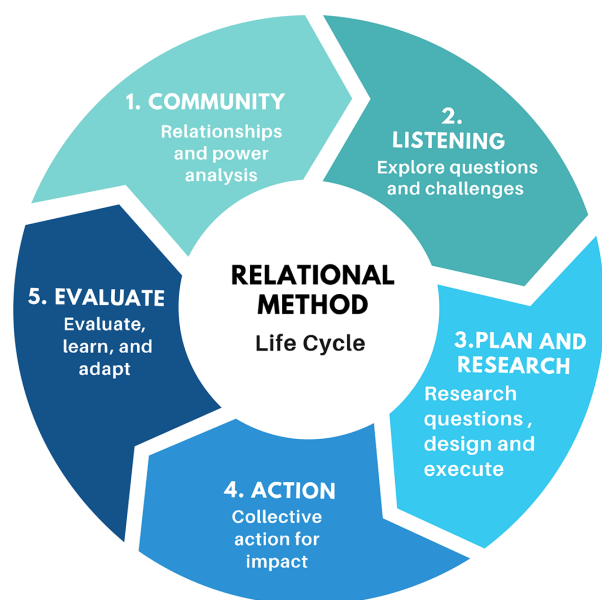
when two people play a game of snap, where the aim is to identify with another's "sameness." The goal is not to pretend that we can walk in someone's else's shoes, but to hear how another has walked and to share our own journey in turn. This is what Brené Brown (2021) calls "cognitive empathy," the skill of allowing ourselves to understand what someone else is experiencing and reflecting back that understanding, not pretending that we can feel it for them.

The research process arises out of relationships formed through relational meetings. Yet relationality remains a constant theme, where research questions, research design, and data analysis are constituted in-between the community participant and researcher. Relationality centers the research process on community needs and agency, decentering the control of the researcher. This coproduction of knowledge creates research agendas and impacts that are accountable to the substantive issues and concerns faced by communities, while developing research in a way that enhances the capacity of communities so they are stronger for their engagement with the research process. Amid this dynamic, more traditional person-to-person research practices—workshops, seminars, interviews—can continue to be productive, but these techniques are qualitatively transformed when preceded by individual relational meetings. Here we reap the benefit of "relationship preceding action."

When it comes to thinking through the practicalities of a relational research process, the IAF's approach to organizing as a process and as leadership development offers a helpful guide. The IAF diffuses the habit of relational meetings across a broad-based coalition through extensive training and mentoring programs. Over decades across four continents, literally millions of community leaders have attended week-long retreats exploring the organizing method as well as shorter-form trainings in relational meetings. Training is coupled with the opportunity for ongoing mentoring from organizers and fellow leaders. This relational practice is then anchored in a broader social change process—an organizing-inspired relational method "life cycle"—where relationships anchor research development through five phases, depicted in figure 1.

First is "community," where one-to-one relationships and power analysis (see below) are used to identify, convene, and relate to a community of people and explore building a research relationship. Second, "listening" is a process of wider and deeper community engagement that seeks to identify problems and challenges that will frame the subject of research and policy work. The third phase is "plan and research," where listening is translated into research questions and community participants work with researchers to explore the causes and solutions to problems. The fourth is "action," where community participants and researchers design and undertake collective research action that negotiates solutions with policy

Figure 1
Relational Method Life Cycle



decision makers. The fifth phase is “evaluation,” where the participants and researchers analyze their successes and challenges before initiating a further cycle. In this process, a culture of relationality is scaled beyond individual relational meetings. This may occur through house meetings or table talks where small groups of individuals meet to explore the challenges they face. Relationality may also be linked to strategies for civic feedback, where communities collectively learn about the causes of shared problems identified in the listening process (Han, Campbell, and McKenna 2023). Relational content can be brought further into traditional meetings by giving people time for small or whole-group relational exchanges at the beginning of a meeting, before getting down to business.

As all-encompassing as it is to propose that “relationship precedes data,” there are several practical ways in which researchers can apply this insight. Most obviously, the relational method offers researchers the craft of the relational meeting, a form of engagement in which researchers can be trained in both community and university settings.³ Yet, to become skilled in the craft of relational meetings, researchers also need to practice. Usefully, relational meetings can be practiced not only with community participants but also in a university context with colleagues, such as members of a research group, bringing the added benefit of relationality—even in a small way—to conventional academic practice.

For researchers to undertake relational meetings, they will likely need to cultivate new ways of representing themselves that are different from conventional academic

practice. It is countercultural for most academics to share stories about why they do what they do, especially stories that draw on personal experiences beyond the research role. To become proficient at relational meetings, researchers might need to do some preparatory work reflecting on why they do what they do, identifying stories and experiences from beyond their role and research that help to demonstrate their interests and passions (see, for instance, Tattersall 2021). The work of exploring one’s public autobiography is not about crafting a singular fixed public narrative but rather about identifying a clearer sense of the many small and big experiences that have framed one’s diverse interests.

A researcher’s ability to represent themselves as a whole person is particularly helpful for building trust in the context of the actual and perceived power differentials in researcher–community relationships. While Alinsky was right to note that “personal relationships cannot replace power relationships,” and while relational meetings do not change the power dynamics in relationships, making the personal dimensions of a researcher’s public interests more visible rather than obscuring those interests behind a professorial title can strengthen a researcher’s ability to build trust across researcher–community differences.

Power

Just as Alinsky once noted that relationships and power interconnect in community organizing’s worldview, the relational method sees power as central to the practice of research, change, and knowledge creation. In doing so, it brings an understanding of power that is distinct. Recognizing that power lies at the center of knowledge creation is different from conventional academic practice that tends to avoid an analysis of power. It is also different from critical theory research methods—such as feminist participatory action research, for instance—which have a tendency to view power in terms of larger relations and to see it negatively. Such research methods tend to perceive power as something “done to” communities, where power is shorthand for systemic power structures like patriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism, or capitalism (Reid and Frisby 2008; Rose 1999). Instead, the relational method sees power in more neutral and ubiquitous terms. In that sense, it sees power as an “ability to act,” with power having both negative and positive dimensions. That is not to say that power is perceived individualistically. The IAF tradition also explicitly borrows from the insights of Hannah Arendt and those of the early twentieth-century pluralist thinker Mary Follett, with power seen as an essentially social force that can be contested and can vary according to the strength of connections between people. At one extreme, “power over” describes the ways in which some individuals or groups seek to dominate or control others for their own arbitrary ends, in much the same way

that Arendt ([1970] 2023) describes “violence” in her famous essay. Conversely, “power with” is seen as a hopeful, creative, and relational form of power where people’s ability to act comes from the relationships they have built together and from a shared desire for collective action (Follett [1942] 2003).

By arguing that public life is governed by power dynamics that operate in both of these ways, organizers throw light not only on the interpenetrating micro- and macrodimensions of how people act, but also on how those with less power can build more power (and as we point out later, that includes community-led researchers in a conventional university setting). For organizers, problems of social policy are rarely a result of a lack of ideas but a reflection of a “power problem,” a sign that a community lacks the agency and influence to have their needs dealt with. Power here is represented as a process. In their practical work, community organizers often present power somewhat simplistically—but also in practical terms—as coming from “organized people” and “organized money.” While recognizing that all communities have both forms of power, less privileged communities tend to be rich with people and poor with money. Layered over these dynamics, some organizers build on the dimensions of power theorized by Gaventa (1980) and Lukes ([1974] 2005), identifying how the push and pull of power is also shaped by culture, narrative, and ideology in public life (see also Boyte 2004), including the treatment of race and gender (Sen 2003; Tattersall 2024). When looking at “organized people,” the focus is to examine existing relationships and connections (with other “organized” people, not just those with other people in general). Organizers seek to identify and activate people who already have a following, such as those leading institutions and associations, as the means to engage others. In this way the method’s commitment to relational associations is reinforced by the method’s relationality, building power through relationships. The focus on “organized people” also connects to the idea of a broad-based organization, where “power with” is linked to relationships across a diversity of experience, class, race, gender, religion, ability, and geography. Diverse organizations and coalitions involving “unusual suspects” can be particularly powerful (Heersink and Lacombe 2023; Tattersall 2010). An organized group of people lacking in diversity risks seeing itself as disconnected from the whole and can make the mistake of exercising power over other communities rather than building power with them.

Crucially, power like this is built through relationships that come together before action. Unlike social movements that can sometimes appear spontaneously as the result of some immediate crisis, community organizers slowly and intentionally build broad-based organizations as networks of community power that precede public action. As a strategy to invite the organizational community to participate, relationships are not only built with

organizations but also inside organizations. This process of engagement is made easier not only where there is pre-existing organizational support for collaboration, but also when there is an openness within an organization’s leadership to test and experiment with new relational tools (Pirinen 2016). The process is designed to elevate the leadership and power of the community over time. This is a strategy for engagement that applies an “organizing” pedagogy regarding the importance of broad-based relationships, institutional engagement, analysis of power, and public action (Chambers 2003). Like good community-led research, community organizing is a confluence of different skills and knowledge, where communities bring their relational and experiential knowledge derived from lived experience, and organizers, like researchers, bring an approach to community building based on a defined pedagogy. Together, this space can create a shared interpretive community capable of defining problems and proposing solutions (Bretherton 2015, 129–30).

But as well intentioned as any collaborative process tries to be, IAF organizers remind us that “power-with” community engagement also has a tendency to corrupt (Lazarski 2012). Organizers argue that the process of relationship and network creation needs to perpetually guard against this threat. This can include a commitment to decision-making structures that reproduce a relational culture, as well as to creating space for accountability, confrontation, and transparency. This is particularly important when challenging entrenched exclusions and inequalities, such as those associated with race, gender, class, and sexual identities.

Rather than ignoring power or seeing power as external to the research process, the relational method attends to the power dynamics at its heart. The relational method criticizes the conventional academic assumption that separation and objectivity can disconnect research from power relationships, instead arguing that power dynamics always define public life and the research process as well. The method deploys strategies to counteract the sense of control implicit in traditional academic work, where the “expert” academic sets the research questions and process (McGuinness and Slaughter 2019). Instead, the relational method privileges the power and authority of the community in the research process, establishing coalitions or decision-making spaces where the community can hold the power of the researcher to account. Underpinning the research process is the sense that knowledge is contestable and in negotiation, and while power is systemic it is also interpersonal and not all bad. In this way, the relational method calls for researchers to make decisions about power in their research methods. Counterculturally for many academics, it argues that good ideas are not powerful by themselves. Instead, it sees that powerful research arises out of powerful researcher–community relationships, where community participants can be researchers as well,

and where these relationships value the experience and knowledge of everyone involved while attending to the sharp power dynamics in those relationships over time.

Working in this way, the relational method brings a power lens to understanding researcher–community relationships. Power dynamics are not simply something “out there” to be studied but are alive in all our relationships, including in our research. No researcher can escape these dynamics: benevolent research can easily slip into problematic “research-for” communities, and even accountable “power-with” research occurs within universities that often use “power-for” tools such as research contracts and funding models to control the intellectual property of cocreated knowledge. If research is itself a process of exchanging power, the challenge for researchers is not to pretend that we can escape power’s dynamics but to intentionally use strategies that mitigate power’s “tendency to corrupt” by holding power to account.

When it comes to accounting for the power between researchers and community, the relational method offers practical suggestions regarding the recruitment of community participants and researcher–community decision making. It identifies how important it is to tend to the relative independence and power of community partners, suggesting how a group of organizations is likely to have a greater ability to hold researchers to account than disconnected individuals who do not have preexisting relationships.⁴

To render this form of power analysis into a practical guide, the relational method adapts the community organizing tool of power analysis to sharpen community engagement and research impact. In community organizing, a simple two-dimensional grid is used to plot people and organizations based on who supports the community and their issue, who is hostile, and how much power they have vis-à-vis the decision maker the community is targeting (McAlevey 2016; Pierce 1984). The grid itself is a process built through relationships. Hunches are workshopped and meetings are then staged to “check out,” test, and improve the accuracy of the power map. The power map makes an analysis of power relational by allowing powers to be interpreted together. The iterative and dialogical development of a power grid aims to make visible what is often implicit knowledge held between researchers and a few community participants, and it is used to educate new leaders about how power works. The tool is used to make judgments about who is best to work with and who should not be worked with. For instance, if a group has no power and has little interest in the community’s issue, the map makes clear that it is not strategic to work with them (even if members of the community know them well). The power analysis tool helps communities and researchers to make relational strategic choices based on power.

Power analysis invites researchers to question what power looks like in practice. Power raises the question of

power “for what,” and for research that partly means building enough power for the research to have an impact in the real world. Questions of community engagement occur with this end in mind, inviting researchers and communities to consider who is needed to make change rather than just working with those who are already known. Yet when it comes to a community engagement strategy, it would be problematic to suggest that the only communities worthy of research are those with already existing material and social resources. Similarly, privileging organizations per se would be a mistake (Pirinen 2016). Instead, powerful communities are measured in relational terms; “organized people” are communities with deep relational networks, where positional leaders are supported by community participants and where those communities are formally or informally linked to others. These are important criteria. Civil society, for instance, is diverse and there are plenty of “power-over” community organizations that lack strong relational ties, or service organizations that tend to exercise more limited “power-for” community constituencies. However, raising these questions about power is vital. Working with the wrong community partners can lead to selected communities having the wrong mix of people to participate in the cocreation of knowledge or deliver on identified solutions, which can in turn lead to poor research outcomes and a lack of policy impact (Han, Campbell, and McKenna 2023).

Uncertainty

In addition to relationships and power, the relational method draws a third lesson from community organizing: the irreducible contingency and uncertainty of research. This focus on fundamental uncertainty underscores another important difference between the relational method and conventional academic instinct that has a positivist and objective approach to knowledge.

Community organizing is, at heart, a form of politics, and it is this political orientation that informs the relational method’s focus on uncertainty. Community organizing concerns the effort of one group of people, or a broad coalition of groups, to assert themselves within a potentially conflictual situation with others. Even when these participants are attempting to forge their path through a “power-with” strategy rather than a “power-over” one, they remain located in a broader context facing a potential set of opponents with contrasting interests, ideas, or aspirations, some of whom will be seeking to assert or reassert their dominance in any situation.

Community organizing’s fundamentally political nature means that community organizers themselves have to constantly ready themselves for defeat as well as victory. There can be no guarantees in a political process, especially in areas where vigorous contestation is the norm. Any action is likely to garner a reaction, which can either edge a

group closer toward their hoped-for outcome or push them further back. Community organizers make the case for negotiation and compromise, an argument most clearly on display at the IAF's celebrated national training program, which begins with a role-play based on the Melian Dialogue that encourages participants to make deals and not war (Gecan 1999). Even where organizers have amassed coalitions that are large and look as if they are moving with and organizing supportive public opinion, events and other external shocks can reorder the state of play in an instant, sometimes leading to a deep sense of confusion and disorientation as well as to the more normal disappointments that are associated with any competition. While organizers are committed to the process of political planning, the plans themselves are subject to constant evaluation and change.

Community organizers within the Alinsky tradition spend a great deal of time considering the emotional preparedness and other psychological requirements that are needed to respond to this degree of uncertainty. While Grace Lee Boggs (1978) argued that relationality lowers uncertainty by allowing practice to emerge out of action and reflection rather than predestined intentions, Alinsky warned of the dangers of presuming that any kind of clear outcome would have to be reached through community organizing. As in traditions as varied as the Eduard Bernstein school of social democratic organizing and the methodological advice of Andrew Abbott's (2016) "processual sociology," community organizing places as great an emphasis on the ongoing process that underpins the search for change as the ultimate direction in which change is heading (Ostrowski 2021).

Alinsky (1971, 21) himself explained this priority of process over end in one of the most famous passages in *Rules for Radicals*:

If we think of the struggle as a climb up a mountain, then we must visualize a mountain with no top. We see a top, but when we finally reach it, the overcast rises and we find ourselves merely on a bluff. The mountain continues on up. Now we see the "real" top ahead of us, and strive for it, only to find we've reached another bluff, the top still above us. And so it goes on, interminably.

As with Bernstein and Abbott, the point of this metaphor for Alinsky was not to dissuade people from taking the climb but rather to insist on its importance, irrespective of the opportunity to achieve its apparent end goal. The knowledge that perfection will always evade us whatever we do is intended instead to make each community actor more able to take the risks and handle the disappointments that follow from engagement. Community organizers encourage everyone to abandon what Alinsky calls "a tenuous security" and embrace the uncertainty of "adventure."

Such an account of politics is, of course, also reminiscent of key aspects of the teachings of Max Weber, as Wendy Brown (2023) has recently reminded us. For Weber, one of

the fundamental elements of political life was the unpredictability that followed from its constant state of conflict. Political efforts of all kinds, Weber (1994) insisted, were like the "slow boring of hard boards," and even the most spectacular political careers end in ultimate failure. Detecting the Weberian roots of this approach helps us to understand why this form of dealing with uncertainty is difficult for many conventional academic researchers. As Wendy Brown (2023) notes, in Weber's mind the kinds of personality types who are suited to the vocation of politics are often sharply different from those who are suited to academia. The former steel themselves so as to be ready to deal with the inevitable contingency, the latter are drawn to scholarship precisely because it offers a potential protective shell from the vicissitudes of political life. For Weber, that protective shell is seen, in particular, in the scholar's disavowal of disputes about the fundamental values of life and their turn instead to the more solid, apparently objective truths of scientific enquiry, or to the certainty of political theory or ideology.

Even if Weber's distinction between the people who are driven to a life in politics and those tempted by a career in scholarship is overstated, it points to a fundamental theme. Much of traditional academic life is driven by a desire for greater certainty than is the case in many other professions. Peer review is intended to provide academics with a sense that if their work meets a quality threshold, it will be published; processes for academic promotions are at least theoretically driven by fixed criteria that map onto well-established and surprisingly inflexible career stages; and the expectations that govern performance review in most neoliberal universities offer remarkably little flexibility for career breaks, unorthodox inquiry, or projects that are simply not going according to plan (Muller 2018). Indeed, the higher education system as a whole still seeks to assert objective and certain criteria to measure institutional performance, creating league tables and rankings as signifiers of intellectual and social worth. This is a world away from the uncertainty that is at the heart of Alinsky's model of community organizing, and it is very poorly suited to the kind of community-led research that the relational method recommends.

A research process that places relationships and power at its heart is always going to struggle to pass muster with academic expectations of this kind. It could be argued that it is therefore poorly designed for university life. But equally it could be thought that it gives us good reason to reimagine university expectations instead. Recent research in science studies has drawn attention to the vital phenomenon of "undone science," understood as "areas of research that are left unfunded, incomplete or generally ignored" by university academics but remain of great importance "to social movements or civil society organizations" (Frickel et al. 2010, 444). These oversights often continue for decades because scholars present

arguments as “over” or “closed” and findings as “robust” when in fact the perspectives of nonscholars, such as those with lived experience of a practical issue, might fundamentally challenge them (for an example, see Pellicano and Heyworth 2025). Using the uncertainty central to community organizing as a guide could well inoculate researchers against this error.

Furthermore, as Wendy Brown argues, the approach to scholarly life that steps away from uncertainties and cleaves to a more predictable set of patterned outcomes is also an approach that rips scholarship away from any proper immersion in the political and social struggles of the present. Brown (2023, 96) posits against this an alternative kind of higher education: “In an age of so much confusion and duplicity,” she argues, “what could be more important than exploring with students how these things are constituted, secured, destabilized, or superseded? Far from being dangerous, understanding the human creations and conventions here is a vital part of educating citizens.” This is right, but also not bold enough. Fully responding to the uncertainties of the world also means reshaping our research processes and being willing, like Alinsky, to throw ourselves far more frequently into the unknown that comes with working with others.

In practical terms, the element of uncertainty encourages community-led researchers to think of the research process as a practice that is in the world and not separate from it, and for the purpose of real-world change. It also asks community-led researchers to consider whether university practices, often created in the name of academic excellence, are in reality producing “power-over” barriers to more relational methods. This includes ethics processes that often require researchers to identify research questions *before* undertaking community engagement, or university research agreements that insist on ownership over all intellectual property even when the research is cocreated with community partners.

Conclusion: Implications of the Relational Method

Across the world, within political science and beyond, scholars are grappling with questions related to their purpose and social role. Whereas it was once widely accepted that universities were public institutions that produced knowledge for the common good, it has increasingly been argued that they now serve their own interests or the interests of a distinct and relatively narrow set of the population (Connell 2019; Readings 1996; Saltmarsh and Hartley 2011).

Underpinning this critique is an increasing unease with conventional academic practice that constantly places distance between researchers and communities. For many years now, community-led researchers have called for changes to the university project. We believe that among these critiques, the relational method offers a guide with

particular practical potential. Its foundational elements not only provide a clear counterpoint to the fundamental pillars of traditional academic practice, but as a method of social change it also presents tools that can be useful for changing the university—the institution that is reproducing barriers to community-led research practice.

First and foremost, community organizing is a strategy for political change, which makes it well suited to changing conventional academic practices and the more recent shift to privatization in the modern university. By building diverse, powerful coalitions of key interest groups in more than 56 cities in the US and 99 worldwide, the IAF’s organizing’s success in negotiating with institutions to secure policy changes on issues like housing, living wages, and social inclusion is evidence of its potential as a tool to negotiate for new university practices. Indeed, the IAF’s sister organization, Citizens UK, offers evidence for the potential of organizing in higher education, having built lasting, local partnerships with more than 33 universities across the UK,⁵ introducing organizing into syllabi, research, university culture, and civic purpose (Hall 2024). Moreover, the crises of culture wars and funding have created what social movement theorists recognize as a political opportunity, inviting university administrators and decision makers to reimagine the role of the university (Tarrow 1994). The relational method might offer a new way to “disorganize and reorganize” the public purpose of universities by changing how universities build relationships with others. If a dependence on financial relationships has led to the privatization of a university’s purpose, then collaborative “power-with” communities, in research but equally in university life more broadly, may help to reanchor the democratic role of higher education.

The relational method is particularly useful in this regard because it borrows from community organizing a theory of change that is not simply focused on achieving substantive policy or social change, but is also about creating a more lasting institutional and personal transformation of those involved in the change process. As the celebrated community organizer turned academic Marshall Ganz (2009) describes, the purpose of community organizing is to achieve three integrated goals: policy change, institutional change, and personal leadership transformation. Applied to the university context, an organizing approach to community-led research has the potential to produce powerful research outcomes while changing the university as an institution and its staff in the process. In practical terms, the relational method offers a way to bring the magic and contingency of community life into the practice of university life.

This is not only a theoretical proposition and a practical guide, but also a story in progress. Encouraged by programs such as the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, researchers and professional staff at places like University College London in the UK, Augsburg University

and Northern Arizona University in the US, and the University of Sydney in Australia have used community organizing not only as tools for research but also as a practice that can change how universities work. At the University of Sydney, we have used the relational method to enact and teach community-led research in ways that have made initial gains in reorganizing how the university acts for the common good. This has included using training and workshops to bring together a cohort of community-led researchers to not only strengthen each other's individual research practice but also to collectively make change to university practices, such as the protocols used for research agreements, employment contracts for lived-experience researchers, and training. The authors of this paper deploy this approach in our own, very different, work, spanning political theory, comparative politics and public policy, political geography, and environmental politics.

While these approaches are in their infancy, they indicate the possibilities of scalable change. Beyond these projects, steps toward a greater community purpose are underfoot. At the University of Sydney, university-wide strategic plans, staff leadership programs, and university-wide teaching and learning policies have taken up relational and outreach techniques directly or indirectly linked to the relational method. While these changes are still at an early stage and progress is not without significant obstacles or detractors, they do signal a more ambitious understanding for the purpose and goal of community-led research.

This is a time of polarized debate and growing disconnection between higher education and the community beyond. We see this as a moment when universities and researchers, including researchers who seek to undertake community-led research, are invited to evaluate and sharpen their approach. By connecting community-engaged research to the transformation of universities as community-facing institutions, the relational method offers a practical means for reestablishing the civic mission of higher education.

Notes

- 1 Beyond these formal networks, Alinsky inspired decades of organizing in Asia and Africa (Alinsky 1972; Brooks 2020; Maglaya [1974] 1978). Strategies that look like US organizing have also taken root in places entirely distinct from US traditions, such as those used by the Platform of People Affected by Mortgages (Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca, La PAH) in Spain (França 2021; Tattersall and Iveson 2023).
- 2 Tattersall (2021) illustrates what a relational meeting can look like in practice, describing an example of a one-to-one meeting and exploring its elements.
- 3 Training in how to conduct relational meetings is offered by a vast range of community organizing networks, including in the US (IAF), the UK (Citizens UK), and Australia (Sydney Community Alliance and

Queensland Community Alliance). The skill of relational meetings has been adapted specifically for researchers at the University of Sydney. An overview of training materials is available at <https://amandatattersall.com/community-methods>.

- 4 For instance, Tattersall's Real Deal for Australia project has explored community-led strategies to address climate change and economic transition for over six years. Power analysis and relational outreach led to the formation of a coalition of 12 national community organizations and unions that then cocreated a set of research priorities (Tattersall et al. 2020). When that coalition chose to focus on place-based strategies, regional communities and urban communities built a research agenda using the same process of coalition formation followed by a listening campaign (Tattersall et al. 2025).
- 5 That is just under one-quarter of the total number of universities in the UK.

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