

## **Enacting Indigenous Community Relationships and Governance Systems**

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### **Abstract**

COVID-19 has had an overwhelming impact throughout the world. Many countries, including Canada, declared states of emergency. Many people experienced self-isolation and practiced physical distancing, and schools have been closed. Around the world, Indigenous communities and leaders have drawn on their own environment, health, and education systems and taken important measures to prevent the spread of the virus. This paper provides an overview of Indigenous health systems, and a short historical discussion of the impacts of earlier pandemics on Indigenous people. It examines Indigenous experiences dealing with and managing the COVID-19 virus, and reviews literature from various reports, scholarly articles, websites, and databases. The findings show that Indigenous people have valued the knowledge that Elders carry with them and have developed procedures to protect the Elders. Indigenous people have also found ways to connect with each other, to live their daily lives, and to build and nourish caring communities. Findings from this research reveal the ways in which Indigenous people experience and address the pandemic through their governance models and show their adherence to Indigenous codes of ethics and laws.

### **Introduction**

According to the First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) (2020), Indigenous peoples always had ‘health protecting’ lifestyle and ways of being. Indigenous peoples live off the land and experience spiritual wellness and overall good health. Intricate systems connect each Nation to its territory (Vancouver Coastal Health, n.d., p. 7). These ways of life are ingrained in Indigenous laws and protocols which benefit the whole community. For example, The First Nations Health Authority notes that oral and historical traditions and contexts confirm practices and beliefs that have persisted over time (FNHA, 2020). Indigenous peoples’ understanding of health and wellness is shaped by their relationship with the earth, the water and all living beings (p. 7). Those who become unwell in the community have the support of their family and community, and this practice is still evident today. Therefore, Indigenous people, based on their

philosophy and understanding of their Indigenous world model, practise a holistic way of health and wellness (Vancouver Coastal Health, n.d).

### **Historical Context on Pandemic**

The impact of colonization and government legislation, including policies concerning residential schools, forced adoptions, foster care, and displacement, continue to have a detrimental impact on Indigenous people (Vancouver Coastal Health, p. 3). Indigenous people experienced quick changes to their structures, governance systems, and everyday life. The First Nations Health Authority (2020) explains, “they retain virtually no political power in the face of Canada’s repressive legislation” (para 23). Barrera (2020), writing about some historical accounts in Canada, notes that from the 1830’s to the 1930’s, successive epidemics swept through Algonquin settlements in the Upper Ottawa Valley, destroying families and villages alike. Loggers, fur traders, miners, labourers, and settlers introduced the diseases, forever reshaping the Algonquin communities (para 5).

Canada’s residential school system, which Indigenous children were forced to attend, included industrial schools, boarding schools, homes for students, hostels, billets, schools with a majority of day students, or any combination of these (Castellano & Archibald, 2007 p. 76). Tuberculosis and other disease outbreaks were common at residential schools, and children – many of whom died – were quarantined on a regular basis (Longhurst 2020). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report of Canada (2015) asserts that there were over 6,000 deaths in residential schools.

These experiences were not exclusive to the Canadian context but were felt in Indigenous communities around the world. For example, since 1492, in the Caribbean territories where I am from, where my ancestors were brought to be enslaved as chattel, and where some of my ancestors were Taino and the original peoples of those lands, European contact resulted in the introduction of new and devastating diseases (Longhurst, 2020, p. 2). Smith-Morris and DeLuca (2020) remind us that these pandemic and other epidemics are connected to broader structural challenges which Indigenous peoples face, including threats to their food security, deforestation and climate crisis.

As I reflect on the current COVID-19 situation, a Canadian court has dismissed an appeal by the Squamish Nation, Tsleil-Waututh Nation, the Ts'elxweyeqw Nation and the Nlaka'pamux First Nations against the Trans Mountain pipeline expansion (Indian Country Today, 2020). This

is occurring in the midst of a pandemic. The United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commission (2020) argues that Indigenous peoples are being denied their freedom of expression and association, while business interests are attacking and destroying their lands and resources (para. 8). This is happening while Indigenous people are working to alleviate the crises in their communities and to protect themselves against the virus. Indigenous people have a right to self-determination, and their lands and resources must be ensured (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commission (2020, Para 8). Varallier (2020, para 1) discusses how impossible it is to understand the impact of the virus on Indigenous people in Canada without understanding the repression, oppressive policies, and genocide that they experienced. The literature demonstrates how Indigenous people in Canada care deeply about Elders and Knowledge Holders and shows the steps that Indigenous leaders have taken to ensure the safety of the Elders and communities.

### **Emerging Themes-Indigenous Elders are Sacred to Communities**

According to Nuorgam, chair of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the COVID-19 pandemic poses a major health threat to Indigenous peoples around the world (para 1, 2020). This is due to the generational inequities that Indigenous people experience across all institutions. In Canada, the First Nations Health Authority cultural safety attribute working group explains that colonial policies and actions were targeted to get access to Indigenous Lands. They argue that the continued attempt at the assimilation of First Nations Peoples also includes the “denial of First Nations rights and title, residential schools, and *Indian* hospitals” (The Cultural Safety Attribute Working Group, 2019, p. 5). Canada has a long history of institutionalized and oppressive laws which produced blatant inequities in Indigenous people’s health, education and more.

Rodriguez-Lonebear describes how COVID-19 amplifies the ways in which Indigenous peoples are treated by oppressive colonial systems. Rodriguez-Lonebear argues how losing even one Elder threatens Indigenous nations’ futures “as it means losing our language, oral histories and the cornerstones of our families and communities” (cited in Lakhani, 2020, para 17). Indigenous people throughout the world have echoed similar responses about Elders. For example, throughout Latin America and Asia, Indigenous leaders have expressed concerns about the safety of their community and Elders who they describe as the “keepers of heritage” (Garrison, Lammertyn &

Boadle, 2020). Nieva, a community leader in Argentina, states "The fundamental importance of Elders is that they hold the collective memory, particularly regarding our identity" (cited in Garrison, Lammertyn & Boadle, 2020, para 5). The impact of COVID-19 on Indigenous Elders has implications for whole communities, since Elders are key in transmitting Indigenous Knowledge, culture and practices. Nuorgam (2020, para 1) discusses the importance of recognizing Indigenous peoples as essential in fighting the pandemic, and of recognizing Indigenous governance and knowledges, including health and food systems, which can aid in building effective COVID-19 emergency response and recovery.

In one instance, The Haida nation urged the public, in the spirit of respect to cancel any trip to Haida Gwaii. Their statement read:

Dear Public: We respectfully ask you to do your part and protect Haida Gwaii by staying home. The Haida Nation survived decimation—notably from smallpox and tuberculosis—and the trauma of the colonial encounter. The Elders and knowledge holders are one of the last links to the wisdom of our ancestors about how to live with the Earth and each other. Please, do your part and cancel your trip to Haida Gwaii this summer. The stakes are too high and outweigh the inconvenience; and, Haida Gwaii will always be there in another year. (Haida Nation, 2020)

Speaking about the smallpox that historically ravaged the community, Wilson Kii'iljuus states "Smallpox running through our people can be likened to a fire burning a library of 30,000 books. Our Elders are our books of knowledge and the young people are the first drafts..." (2009, p. 9).

Indigenous people have gone to great lengths to protect their Elders and communities since the diseases that Europeans brought have caused considerable destruction which has an ongoing legacy. As a result, Indigenous leaders and Elders exercise and assert their governance systems. Champion (2020) explains that "when an epidemic comes, it is important to beware of the disease, and the consequences of it" (para 12).

Many Indigenous communities are keeping borders closed while Canadian provinces are opening businesses and amenities. For example, there are only three remaining fluent Nuxalk-as-a-first-language speakers left in their British Columbia community. Therefore, the Stataitmc Nation are preventing the arrival of outsiders in order to keep the virus out of their community and to protect the Elders from COVID-19 infection (Para 3). Contact for Indigenous people, whether it is European contact with the Taino in 1492, or with other Indigenous nations in 1600 or 1700, has resulted in destruction and decimation. Smith-Morris and DeLuca (2020, para 3) discuss the significance of Elders and their knowledge to Indigenous communities and to future generations.

While StarBlanket and Hunt observe that “in many ways, the pandemic carries on a lineage and does the work the state cannot do; that is to say, eradicate us so Canada does not have to deal with Indigenous social and political life” (2020, pp. 3-4). The literature discusses how Indigenous people continue to assert their forms of leadership and governance, continue to engage with their communities, are proactive, and continue to work to prevent the disease from entering their communities. As a result, travel into many communities is limited, and Indigenous people have found ways to develop outreach programs for the community (Smith-Morris and DeLuca, 2020, para 6). This is in spite of Indigenous people’s collective experience of systemic and oppressive health care and other power systems under Canada’s settler colonial governments.

StarBlanket and Hunt (2020) refer to the Canadian government and their jurisdictional and bureaucratic colonial processes regarding Indigenous people as a “convoluted relationship between different levels of government. Even outside of a pandemic, the provision of health services to Indigenous people is a messy, patchwork arrangement” (pp. 3-4).

### **Living Indigenous Pedagogy**

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus, Indigenous people have used technology and social media to connect with each other, build relationships and form communities virtually. The Cultural Safety Attribute Working Group (2019, p. 14), states “Community represents where we live, where we come from, and where we work. There are many different communities: communities of place, people, knowledge, interests, experiences and values.” Over the past several months of the pandemic, Indigenous people have used innovative ways to stay connected with each other, to learn and to practise their knowledge systems and transmit their cultures. These include using online webinars and social networking to share information to protect people in the community (Smith-Morris, 2020, para 7). Indigenous youth are building and inspiring community through the TikTok-based #PassTheBrush challenges on social media platforms (Brant, 2020, para, 3).

In many ways, Indigenous people are adapting to the situation and are finding ways to work within the challenges that COVID-19 presents. The seven Anishinaabe teachings of wisdom, love, respect, bravery, truth, honesty, and humility are all exercised and are expressions of the methods in which Indigenous people meet, lead and share with each other. They exemplify the ways in which Indigenous people have always carried out Indigenous Ethics, and the teachings guide them through this pandemic. Brant (2020) observes that Indigenous authors and podcasters are bringing

people together through dialogue, while the survivance and the solidarity of Indigenous peoples “hold us up and keep us well” (p. 4). Longboat (2020) describes this as practicing reciprocity, guided by gifts of kindness, honesty, sharing and respect, and as acts of taking up the call to action (para 6).

Smith-Morris (2020) speaks of the gift of Indigenous languages and discusses The Cree Literacy Network which introduced a “Stay Home: Learn Cree” broadcast to engage people who are staying at home to learn their language. Similarly, the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto (and other Indigenous organizations throughout Ontario) has introduced online language and culture learning programs (NCCT, 2020).

Longboat (2020) shares that Indigenous philosophies across “Turtle Island have spoken about this illness and have provided instructions that Indigenous people can use to strengthen in this time of illness” (para 2). Meanwhile, Indigenous communities have hosted virtual beading circles. When schools closed, Indigenous educators and scholars created “Think Indigenous” online as a way to teach, inform, entertain and dialogue with Indigenous youth from K-8. When people could no longer meet face to face, Indigenous people moved online. Brant (2020) states that “Our virtual Indigenous community... is stronger than ever as evidenced with each YouTube, TikTok video and virtual jingle dress dance” (para 5). Indigenous people found ways to continue to embody their Indigenous ways of life. These are significant activities since, in the past, the Canadian government prohibited Indigenous people from practicing their spiritual ways of life. Even then, they found ways to live their Indigenous ways despite the gaze, hostility, and violence of the settler colonial society. Below I have outlined some calls to action for governments to adhere to as communities continue to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Some Calls to Action**

\* The United Nations has called on governments to provide effective support to Indigenous communities that have imposed restrictions to stop the spread of the COVID-19. The Canadian government must provide support to Indigenous communities as they have done throughout the rest of the country. Indigenous Health is a Treaty and Inherent right. The government should be more effective and refrain from sending body bags to First Nations communities as it did during the H1N1 virus. That was reminiscent of Canada’s assimilative and genocidal policies towards Indigenous peoples (United Nation COVID-19 Response, 2020).

\* The impact of historical under-funding of Indigenous communities becomes more evident during a pandemic. Funding support in a reasonable amount and time remains crucial (Nuorgam, 2020).

\* It is critical that free and informed consent of Indigenous peoples be obtained before initiating activities with Indigenous peoples or communities. Everyone, including the government and members of the public, must consult with Indigenous leaders/peoples before going on Indigenous Lands and before making decisions that will impact their lives and communities (UNDRIP, 2007).

### Conclusion

Through generations, Indigenous peoples have established responses to different circumstances within their communities. These are founded on the principle of ensuring that the community survives (Degawan, 2020, p.3). While the current pandemic has impacted people globally, this paper shows that Indigenous peoples have experienced many systemic inequities and oppressive structures (see Begay 2020). As Starblanket and Hunt (2020) state, the current virus affects not only the present generation, but also “the future well-being of coming generations.” Indigenous communities are exercising their governance systems and have grounded their responses to COVID-19 in their own Indigenous Knowledge systems.

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