

“Our spirit is like a fire”: Conceptualizing intersections of mental health, wellness, and spirituality with Indigenous youth leaders across Canada

Jeffrey Ansloos, Ph.D.
University of Toronto (Corresponding Author)

Elissa Dent, M.Ed.
University of Toronto

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Abstract

Indigenous youth in Canada experience adverse health outcomes at disproportionate rates to their non-Indigenous peers. The impacts of colonial efforts maintain the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from land, language, community, culture, identity, and other socio-cultural resources necessary to promote wellbeing. High rates of suicide among Indigenous youth in Canada, and its lasting impacts, speaks to the need for culturally relevant mental health promotion and healing. To better support mental health and wellness for many Indigenous people, it is important to understand how it is intimately connected to spirituality. There is scant research that has considered how Indigenous young people conceptualize mental health and wellbeing, particularly at the intersection of spirituality. Central to addressing the persisting mental health inequities experienced by Indigenous youth in Canada, is the vital importance of involving Indigenous youth in framing these efforts; however, this involvement is desperately lacking. This study presents findings from research with a group of 15 Indigenous youth leaders working in community health, suicide prevention and mental health organizations across Canada to understand how they are conceptualizing mental health and its intersection with spirituality. Through a thematic analysis of qualitative interviews with these young people, we consider themes related to how Indigenous young people conceptualize mental health and the intersection of spirituality, and challenges and barrier to promoting Indigenous youth mental health and wellbeing.

Introduction

Indigenous youth in Canada experience adverse health outcomes at disproportionate rates to their non-Indigenous peers. In Canada, Indigenous peoples include First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. Persisting mental health inequities are a result of colonization experienced by Indigenous peoples (Barker, Goodman, & DeBeck, 2017; Gone, 2013). Colonization in Canada has occurred through the systematic efforts of governments vis-à-vis policies and practices of assimilation and

dispossession. The impacts of colonial efforts maintain the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from land, language, community, culture, identity, and other socio-cultural resources necessary to promote wellbeing (Reading & Wien, 2013). For instance, the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from land has resulted in the imposition on quality, affordable housing, which leads to overcrowding (Reading & Wien, 2013). Colonization has denied Indigenous peoples the access to education opportunities, employment opportunities, and community resources (Reading & Wien, 2013). The accumulation of stressors from these inequities faced by Indigenous Canadians are factors that contribute to higher rates of psychosocial distress (Reading & Wien, 2013).

Low levels of mental health may increase one's risk of suicide. Indigenous youth between ages 15 and 24, experience the highest rates comparative to all other age groups (Kumar & Tjepkema, 2019). Among First Nations and Métis youth in Canada, the suicide rate is approximately two times higher than that of non-Indigenous youth, while among Inuit youth, the rate increases to nine times higher than non-Indigenous youth (Kumar & Tjepkema, 2019). The loss of youth by suicide not only has lasting impacts on families and friends, but also to communities and society (Maple et al., 2016). High rates of suicide among Indigenous youth in Canada, and its lasting impacts, speaks to the need for culturally relevant mental health promotion and healing. To better support mental health and wellness for many Indigenous people, it is important to understand how it is intimately connected to spirituality (Running Bear et al., 2018). Scant research has explicitly explored how Indigenous young people conceptualize mental health and wellbeing, particularly at the intersection of spirituality. Central to addressing the persisting mental health inequities experienced by Indigenous youth in Canada, is the vital importance of involving Indigenous youth in framing these efforts; however, this involvement is desperately lacking (Lopez-Carmen et al., 2019; Glauser, 2020). Research which seeks to nuance understanding of intersections of Indigenous mental health and spirituality must include the voices, perspectives, and experiences of Indigenous youth (Wood et al., 2018). In this study, we engage with a group of Indigenous youth leaders working in community health, suicide prevention and mental health organizations across Canada to understand how they are conceptualizing mental health and its intersection with spirituality. Through a thematic analysis of qualitative interviews with these young people, we consider how Indigenous young people conceptualize mental health and wellbeing, the intersection of mental health, wellbeing and spirituality, and challenges and barrier to promoting Indigenous youth mental health and wellbeing.

Literature Review

Indigenous Conceptualizations of Mental Wellness

Across Canada, there is great diversity between Indigenous nations; while there are commonalities in how mental health and wellness is understood and conceptualized, there is no single worldview that accounts for the diverse perspectives that exist (Hodge et al., 2009; Vukic et al., 2011). Indigenous theories on mental health and wellness, like all theories of health (i.e., including western theories) are contextual, and are best understood within local and linguistic contexts (Barker et al., 2017; Gone, 2013). Indigenous theories of mental health and wellness unsettle the narrowly psychocentric and individualistic perspectives that dominate Western theories and draw on concepts such as holism and relationality. Wellness is approached from a holistic lens, seen as the interplay between physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of a person (Sasakamoose et al., 2016). These multiple domains are in relationship to one another, and one achieves a state of wellness and lives a good life when there is balance and harmony between these domains (Hodge et al., 2009). Along with the relationship between the various aspects of personal identity, some Indigenous perspectives of mental health and wellness center around reciprocity and the interconnectedness of an individual with their family, community, and land, wherein strength in these connections promote a sense of mental wellbeing (Vukic et al., 2011; Petrasek MacDonald et al., 2013). Given the differences in how mental health is conceptualized and experienced between Indigenous and Western perspectives, more Indigenous-specific and community-led approaches are necessary to create opportunities for Indigenous youth to achieve mental health and wellness (Mental Wellness Continuum Framework, 2015). Mental health promotion for Indigenous youth must approach wellness with an understanding of Indigenous concepts, contexts, and worldviews (Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2012).

Indigenous Youth Mental Wellness

The emerging field of Indigenous youth mental health studies is aligned in calls for strengths-based approaches; that is, there is a need to shift away from damage-centered narratives towards those that center around desire (Tuck, 2009). Desire centered research is concerned with advancing the self-determinism of Indigenous peoples and attending to the strengths that Indigenous peoples bring to the task of addressing social and health challenges. Despite the historical, intergenerational, environmental, and social trauma impacting Indigenous youth,

research around protective factors is emerging more prominently in the literature regarding the cultivation and maintenance of positive mental health and wellness for Indigenous youth. These protective factors exist at the individual and interpersonal level and include relationality to the land (Gray & Cote, 2019; Petrasek MacDonald et al., 2013). At the individual level, Indigenous youth identify education, having hopes and goals for the future, strong coping skills to overcome adverse experiences, and having pride in who you are all contribute to wellness (Gray & Cote, 2019; Petrasek MacDonald et al., 2013). Interpersonal protective factors include strong ties to peers, family, and community, and connection with land allows for engagement with culture and spirituality (Gray & Cote, 2019; Petrasek MacDonald et al., 2013). All these different factors nurture positive feelings like hopefulness, resilience, self-esteem, and connectedness (Petrasek MacDonald et al., 2013), in turn, helping youth overcome adverse experiences in their lives to maximize their wellbeing (Wexler, 2009).

Some Indigenous youth identify their home community as being a space of hope and healing (Wood et al., 2018), as it reinforces a sense of belonging. Living on, or returning to, their Reserve provides youth with access to land, opportunities to become engaged in cultural traditions and values, and the development of intergenerational relationships and learning with and from Elders, all which strengthen feelings of belonging and social support (Wood et al., 2018; Clark et al., 2013). Some youth even acknowledge that they do not know how to feel good without being physically present in their home community (Wexler, 2014). Connection to family and community support gained through time spent in their community fills the need for social support and belonging that is so integral to the mental health of Indigenous youth.

A strong evidence base is emerging that suggests that being connected with one's culture supports and promotes the mental health and wellness of Indigenous youth. Cultural connectedness is identified by Indigenous youth as the primary determinant of their health, even more so than other social determinants of health (Snowshoe et al., 2017). Clark et al. (2013) found that participating in cultural ceremonies was central to youth wellbeing. Similarly, youth indicate that having opportunities to connect with their culture through practices such as being on the land, sharing stories and food, practicing their language, and engaging with traditional ceremonies provides them with psychosocial strength (Barker et al., 2017; Wexler, 2014). Cultural connectedness is central to mental wellness as it gives youth the self-efficacy necessary to work towards and achieve their goals (Snowshoe et al., 2017). Connectedness to culture is also tied to

the development of positive self-identity. Engaging in culture provides Indigenous youth with the opportunity for shared meaning-making to inform their own ideas of selfhood and identity within community, providing them with a sense of belonging to support them in overcoming challenges (Wexler, 2014). Through feelings of self-determinism, there is space for youth to explore and affirm their personal and collective identities to achieve self-determination, which is integral to the health of Indigenous young people (Barker et al., 2017; Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2012).

Spirituality is often acknowledged as being foundational to mental health and is often cited as an appropriate framework for healing. Indigenous peoples who are more strongly connected with their cultural spirituality perceive their mental health to be better than those who are not as strongly connected (Running Bear, et al., 2018). For Indigenous youth, Clark et al. (2013) found that culture-based spirituality was the primary influence on health for many, as it is the driving force behind the ways they live their life and provides Indigenous youth with a sense of purpose for their futures (Snowshoe et al., 2017). Despite its significance to wellness, spirituality is identified as a commonly overlooked aspect of mental health support for Indigenous youth. In the Canadian context, there is a tendency to generalize Indigenous spirituality within broader conversations of Indigenous culture and cultural connectedness; there is rarely explicit separation of these two aspects of Indigenous identity and culture. As such, there is a significant gap in the literature that fails to explore how one's connection to spirit and spirituality guide Indigenous youths' understandings of mental health and wellness. To address this gap, our research engaged with Indigenous youth leaders from across Canada to share their stories of how mental health and wellness is experienced, and the ways in which spirituality contributes to Indigenous wellness.

Methodology

There are two key concepts that frame this study with Indigenous young people. First, it is the assertion that Indigenous young people's own theorizations about the meaning of mental health and its intersection with spirituality is critically relevant for the advancement of culturally relevant mental health promotion within youth serving community organizations. Collaborative research which includes Indigenous young people is critically important for mental health research. Indigenous youth engagement and the prioritization of young people's own language is central to this study. Second, we consider the applied findings and implications for enhancing youth facing social and health services as central findings of this research. This means we closely attend to the

challenges and barriers of promoting Indigenous mental health and wellbeing, from the perspectives of Indigenous young people. We understand this as *justice doing* research (Reynolds, 2019; Ansloos et al., 2021), which is concerned not only with what research says, but what research does in the world to respond ethically to the materiality of colonial violence manifest in health inequities.

Participants

This research draws on interviews with fifteen Indigenous youth who identified as leaders in their communities, and who work as activists and community organizers around issues of health, spirituality, and suicide prevention. This research was approved by an institutional research review board and received supplemental review by an Indigenous advisory group. Participants were recruited through initial direct recruitment and peer referral sampling, where participants in the study encouraged us to reach out to other individuals that might be interested. All participants were told about the topic, scope, and details of the research before participating, and were able to provide informed consent. Participants were also provided with a copy of transcripts of their interviews to edit and/or redact any content. Recruitment criteria for this study was that participants needed to be between the ages of 15-35 years old and to be Indigenous peoples. Participants did not need to provide any other descriptive or demographic information to participate in this study. Disclosure of participant's gender, sexuality, age, and other demographic information were not solicited, beyond what participants volunteered on their own accord without prompting. All interview participants were invited to anonymize their interview through the creation of a pseudonym or to provide permissions for the use of their own name alongside their quotes. Participants quoted in this article variable chose to self-identify or use pseudonyms which they personally selected.

Method of Analysis

This study draws on thematic analysis as a method of analysis to emphasize the importance of contextualist approaches, which seek to bridge individual meaning making within social context. It also supports the involvement of young people in knowledge creation processes through member checking and iterative interpretive feedback. Procedurally, we have drawn on Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of repeated reading of interviews to form initial organizing structures,

impressions, and familiarity with the data, and then used NVivo to code interviews line-by-line. To support inter-rater reliability, the research team reconciled all codes, and themes were developed through a consensus-based approach. To do this, codes were organized into broader categories (i.e., themes). Descriptions of all themes were created and put into conversation with relevant examples from the interviews.

Results

Our analysis of the interviews with Indigenous young people in this study yielded 5 themes surrounding Indigenous young peoples' conceptualizations of mental health and wellness (themes 1-5), 5 themes related to Indigenous spirituality and mental health (themes 6-10), and 3 themes related to challenges and barriers to Indigenous youth wellness (themes 11-13).

Theme 1. Wellness is not Monolithic

While conceptualizations of mental health are often applied universally, conversations with Indigenous youth suggest that mental health is best conceptualized in specific, cultural, and contextual ways, as people experience the world in unique ways. As such, the ways in which Indigenous peoples achieve and practice wellness and cope with circumstances are personal and community specific. One participant, Jenna highlighted the importance of avoiding pan-Indigenizing community needs. She asserts, “we can't be painted with the same brush...each community, we're our own nation.”

Another participant Gabby pointed out some of the differences in wellness practices, acknowledging that everyone's journey to wellness is unique – “it's so different for everyone...everybody has their own journey in life and everybody has to figure out what it is that will guide that.” Understanding the personal nature of wellness dictates the ways in which Indigenous youth leaders support others in their wellness. Another participant, Dallas reflected on his approach in supporting Indigenous youth stating, “the approach that I have taken, is that it's not up to me to define how communities or how people are going to heal. They're going to essentially find their own way of healing, their own way of coping.”

Wellness is also multifaceted, requiring various needs to be met. Kairyn, a participant, identified some of these needs, stating that wellness, “looks like healthy relationships, that looks like basic needs being met. That means housing. That means love. That means purpose. That means

education.” Additionally, Kairyn speaks to the importance of self-actualization as foundational to mental wellness. He explains, “that's what I would define as wellbeing as having all of those needs met...just meeting all of the little things in order to become actualized people at the top because so many of our Indigenous youth.”

Theme 2. Wellness is Centered in Relationships

Although mental health and wellness are uniquely experienced by individuals and communities, there is also an understanding that wellness is centered around honoring relations to others. For example, one participant Heather stated, “it’s a shared experience too. Yes, there is an individual element, but I would say in our community, part of that shared experience is really important too...it’s self-care and community care.” These relations, particularly to community and family, are identified by some as being a source of strength and support from which people can draw on. Another participant Thea described her family as being this source of support for her:

I’m talking about my family because that’s where I feel like there’s the strength and wellbeing and regardless of what’s happening in your life and that you do have these people that you can rely on...I feel like that’s where a lot of pain and anxiety for people come in because there is this lack of connection.

These relations extend beyond community, including land, culture, and spirit, and positioning oneself within these relations. Another participant Chelsea centered the importance of being mindful of your impact in the world, stating:

It's not only thinking about the self and the individual in relation to the community and creator, or the universe or source, but it's to be conscious of my own life...and how that has a connection to my relations. Not only humans, other people, but to the land and to the animals, and to the sun and to the moon, to different living beings, being really consciously aware of that...I think that’s really what it is. It’s being grounded and connecting to something greater than myself, which is connected to the lifeways and culture of my ancestors.”

Theme 3. Finding Balance in Life

When describing understandings of mental health, many young people referenced the interplay of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual wellbeing as contributing to overall wellness, approaching vitality from a holistic perspective. This interplay is identified by a participant Kairyn, who states, “for me wellbeing always comes from my culture and from what I was taught about the circle and the Medicine Wheel and having mind body spirit and energy all

being connected.” Several young people described wellness as a balance or harmony between the different aspects of the self. One participant, Rhode, explained that he had been introduced “to the concept of using the medicine wheel to find balance in your life...this is where my concept of balance came into play.” Another young person, Jenna used the analogy of a stool to describe how this balance contributes to wellness. She said, “if one of those [domains] is lacking, then it’s like the stool that you’re sitting on is falling over. It’s not balanced.”

Theme 4. Self-Acceptance, -Awareness and -Care

Wellness is also connected to being a positive presence and being content with one’s life. Mathew, a participant, understands wellness as “being at peace with whatever you’re doing in your life. Whether that’s family relationships, what you’re doing on an everyday basis in terms of work or school...I think wellbeing is how you feel about your life as a whole.” Another participant, Hannah, shared similar perspectives of wellness, adding the necessity to remain hopeful in challenging times. She said:

I think wellbeing is just being content with yourself and content with where you are. Because...your life will always have ups and downs...you’re not always going to be happy all the time, but I think just remembering that there’s always going to be a sun...the sun’s always going to rise.

Some young people also discussed the importance of taking care of the self, to be better able to provide support to others. One young person, Rhode described taking care of the self as finding balance. He said, “finding balance is about helping myself first with the notion that if I want to help others, I first need to help myself.” There is a reciprocal relationship between one’s responsibility toward others begins with one’s responsibility to nourish themselves. Similarly, another young person, Heather, shared that caring for oneself is a responsibility that everyone has, stating:

wellbeing is engaging in self-care. It’s either taking responsibility for self-care or responsibility to connect with people when you need care. To make sure that you can be a whole person, so that positive energy continues to grow...it’s our responsibility as individuals and our responsibility to each other to support that.

Theme 5. Tied to Culture and Land

Many of the youth we spoke with strongly asserted that wellness and mental health are often tied to engaging with, and being connected to, land, culture, and language. As Chelsea, a

participant, articulates, “I feel the way that I would define [wellness] now, is being connected to my culture and my language.” Another young person, Tunchai, shared how she finds strength from the land, stating, “even when you feel like you have no support or no resources or nobody around you, you have the land...that in itself is a support and a resource something that you can rely on in times of need.” This connection to land also involves honoring one’s relationship to the land.

Another participant, Smokii, shared how wellness is tied to honoring these relations:

I can speak knowing what medicine can be to be by a tree. Now we go every day, and I noticed the change in the trees. Noticed the budding, I noticed the cycle of the earth...That’s how I look at the good life. It’s honoring that relationship by witnessing and taking part in it.

The land is a source of peace and strength that Indigenous peoples draw upon for support, to live a good life.

Theme 6. Spirituality Provides a Strong Sense of Identity

Many Indigenous young people connect spirituality to a positive self-identity. One participant Paul expressed, “spirit is like an understanding of oneself as well. I feel like once you fully understand more about yourself, you become a lot stronger, especially in your values and things that you really, really hold dear to yourself.” Another young person, Heather emphasizes the importance of spirit in self-acceptance. She said, “I think that acceptance and that knowledge that you’re good enough, even in the moments that you’re not perfect, I think it’s really important for youth.” Heather continues, articulating that spirit is a means for Indigenous youth to find their sense of self-worth, stating, “personally, and I think for other people, it gives people something to be proud of. It gives them a way to carry themselves.” The development of positive identity leads to self-love and self-acceptance; in turn this promotes mental wellness. As Jenna, a participant highlights:

when you start to have love for yourself, then there's less room for worries. You have less room for anxieties and fears or self-criticism or judgment. There's just less room for that. So the more you practice it, the more it reinforces the teachings, and that's all part of spirituality.

Spirit not only connects one to their personal identity, but also to a greater, collective Indigenous identity. For example, as Heather acknowledges that, “sometimes [spirituality] gives people a way to come back to community if they’ve been disconnected from community.” Similarly, another

participant, Hannah, states, “it’s the way of bridging a gap. Connection with people...it’s not just young adults...even the elderly as well. It creates a variety of connections with people.” Hannah also shared that these connections are vital to wellness, stating, “I think that’s one of the most important things about being well, is having good community, because then you always have good supports.”

Theme 7. Spirit is Hope

Spirit was described as hope for Indigenous young people, to persevere through challenging times. One young person Heather explained that spirit helps her in “remembering that there’s something so much bigger than just me and my little existence and things that are stressing me out...[spirit] gives me a lot of hope and almost faith that things will be ok. Even when they’re really bad.” Similarly, another young person Tunchai said,

I truly believe that for anybody to heal, any communities to heal, any Indigenous young people to heal – they need to call back or reconnect with that spirit. Because that’s where hope comes from. And that’s usually how I describe hope to Indigenous young people is talking about spirit.

Tunchai described spirit as being inseparable to hope and healing. Tunchai also used the analogy of a fire to describe spirit as hope:

I tell young people that our spirit is like a fire and that fire is warm and it’s burning...so long as that fire is burning within us, we have hope. We have a sense of living; we have a purpose. we have a drive to move forward. And sometimes that fire dims...and we need to stoke it...when you let that fire fizzle out, that’s when our spirit dies, and when we see that hopelessness.

To support Indigenous youth wellness is to provide them with the opportunity to stoke the fire of their spirit, working to remove the contextual factors that operate to diminish it.

Theme 8. Spirituality Guides Decision-Making

Spirit for many Indigenous young people act as a guide to make good choices in their lives. For example, one participant Paul described spirit as a source of motivation for himself. He said, “culture and spirit really did give me the drive to want to succeed and to want to finish my education and work and build a life for myself.” For another young person, Dallas, this involves Spirit guiding him towards positive ways of coping, expressing,

Spirituality has kept me from doing a lot of things that I would...probably regret later. My foundation in ceremony, for example, has prevented me from drinking...my foundation in ceremony and culture has prevented me from doing drugs. I essentially used ceremony and spirituality as a way of coping...and that has guided me and led me to where I am today.

Being connected with Spirit also gives Indigenous young people a way of learning from adverse experiences. As another participant Kairyn explains:

I have just gone with whatever makes me feel like I'm doing the right thing at the time. Even if it turns out to be something negative, I know in my heart that Creator will want me to have that lesson...regardless of whether it's amazing or if it's going to be there to hurt me and to teach me something. I take lessons from my spirit all the time.

As Kairyn suggests there is a pedagogical nature to navigating challenging circumstances, as even when decisions in life turn out to be negative, there is a lesson to be learned.

Theme 9. Spirit is Connected to Culture

The relationship between spirit and culture is one that is one that is dynamic, flowing, and intertwined. Engaging and embodying these teachings and practices are forms of medicine and healing, supporting the vitality of Indigenous young people. One young person, Jenna speaks specifically to the healing properties of traditional medicines. She said, "even just using the medicines alone, I feel like [it relieves] a lot of anxiety or uncertainty or worry...you could look at the science behind it, or you can just listen to how your body is feeling...I think they do a lot with mental health, especially when you're going over the teachings." For another young person, Mathew, engaging in culture is a way for Indigenous young people to find peace. He said, "I think teachings about ceremonies...it could give our communities almost another outlet...they could try to maybe bring some peace into their lives or to give themselves answers that they otherwise haven't been able to get."

Theme 10. Spirit is Life Promoting and Sustaining

Through providing hope, connections to community and culture, and developing a strong sense of identity, Indigenous youth attributed their lives being saved to the role of spirit and spirituality in their lives. This was exemplified by one young person, Smokii, who acknowledged:

I'm alive now because of it. It saved my life... I do not think I would be here. I have no doubt that I would not be here, had I not been able to start walking this road, and been gifted with the teachers that I had and been able to see it and really witness it.

Similarly, another young person, Gabby expressed the role of spirituality in being life promoting. She stated, “without me having a strong sense of spirituality and connection to the land and to ceremonies and to the songs, like I probably wouldn't be alive today.” Connection to spirituality holds an integral role in the livability and life promotion of Indigenous young people. It provides a source of purpose, and thus, a source of life.

Theme 11. Access to Resources

Of challenges, most noted were issues around access to resources, both tangible and intangible. Many Indigenous young people identify a general lack of funding overall, particularly in smaller communities, as a significant barrier to Indigenous youth wellness. As one participant Mathew states, “[Funds] seem to be more concentrated in certain communities as opposed to minority communities. For whatever reason, it doesn't seem like the funding gets spread out like it should be.” Access to wellness supports for Indigenous youth, including mental health care supports and professionals, can be precarious, particularly for rural and remote communities. As one young person, Hannah, shared:

we're so far away from the rest of Canada that its' difficult to have consistency in health care professionals. They come in and out of our communities, resulting in us being unable to receive mental health support...you can't really get people to stay that long here.

Other supportive environments, like community space, provide Indigenous youth the opportunity to gather and build relationships with one another. As one participant Heather highlighted the importance of being able to access more of these types of spaces, articulated, “the physical space where youth can gather together and feel that that is their space and that they are welcome there and they're valued. An actual physical space, I think is really important. We don't always have that.” In environments where geography prevents physical gatherings, building connection and community shifts to a virtual setting. Another young person, Tunchai stated:

now it's even harder for us to reach those young people, particularly in very remote regions...not a lot of communities actually have great internet...we're not seeing the engagement in those really hard to reach areas, which are often the ones that lack the most resources.

Theme 12. Structural and Systemic Colonial Violence

Persisting structural and systemic violence, felt through colonial policies and practices within various public institutions are major barriers to Indigenous youth wellness. Institutions like healthcare, education, and law enforcement are colonial spaces that work in dissonance with Indigenous worldviews of mental health and wellness, failing to meet the needs of Indigenous young peoples. For example, as one young person Carrington highlighted, “healthcare and education are colonial systems, and you can’t decolonize a colonial system. You can...Indigenize it, but the structure was still not made for us.” There is much advocacy for supports for Indigenous youth that are Indigenous-specific to fill this gap. Another participant Mathew spoke to the mistrust between Indigenous youth and law enforcement:

There is a lot of mistrust between the youth and the police in Nova Scotia...I think that can cause certain communities to isolate themselves from other communities... A lot of Indigenous communities and black communities down here don't have a lot to offer in terms of what's offered in that specific community, so if the youth want to do something, they usually have to go outside of their comfort zone and do it.

The racism on which these systems were built prevent Indigenous youth from feeling safe in pursuing their interests and sharing their gifts and strengths within broader communities.

Theme 13. Elevating Indigenous Youth Leadership and Governance

Young people advocated for greater involvement of Indigenous youth in guiding conversations and decision-making related to supporting youth and their communities. One participant, Jenna, highlighted that the youth “come up with solutions quickly” to their community’s challenges. Indigenous youth have ideas, passions, and desires that need not only to be shared, but also listened to by others. Another participant Chelsea stated:

I think a big [opportunity] is giving youth the opportunity to speak up...it’s not only on the Indigenous youth to work their way up that staircase. It’s on the people around them to ensure that, ‘...I see that they’re really passionate about this and I’m not going to tear it down or I’m not going to invalidate it.’ It’s really important for them to be able to grow in that way because if not, then there’s always that risk factor...

This exemplifies that Indigenous youth are valuable knowledge holders within their communities and their voices need to be leveraged, validated, and respected.

The opportunities for involvement of Indigenous youth in advocacy roles regarding health needs to be accompanied by the cultural competency of helping professions such as education and

healthcare. Another young person, Carrington, stated that professionals need cultural competency training:

to be able to identify their gaps and barriers and the kinds of supports that are needed, because it doesn't matter if Indigenous young people know what their needs are if the leaders aren't willing to fix them and meet them where they're at.

Providing cultural competency training also lifts the burden off Indigenous peoples to educate others about needs related to wellness. Another participant Kairyn spoke to this, explaining, "it's a lot of...educating people on why we need help, when it should be me collaborating with people who know that we need help, and they already know the issues."

Discussion

Our study makes clear that there are diverse conceptualizations of mental health and wellness and that there is no universal when it comes to how Indigenous young people frame these issues. An implication of the lack of universal conceptualizations of mental health and wellness means that one must appreciate the notion of epistemic pluralism regarding mental health and wellbeing. Put another way, there are diverse ways of knowing and understanding mental health and wellbeing. Responses and interventions regarding mental health should similarly reflect such diversity—there is no one-size-fits-all approach (Elliot-Groves, 2017). This strengthens the argument for a contextually informed approach to Indigenous youth mental health service provision and demands a highly specialized and personalized approach to mental health promotion, as opposed to pan-indigenizing forces in contemporary healthcare spaces, which often treat the profound diversity of Indigenous peoples, as a monolithic group (Vukic et al., 2011).

Our study also emphasized that relationality is at the core of Indigenous young peoples' conceptions of mental health and wellbeing. Their theorizing of relationality is multifaceted including, social ecologies which include human and other-than-human relations. Our findings echo what other research has suggested about Indigenous people's health in general (Gray & Cote, 2019; Petrasek MacDonald et al., 2013), but elaborates on the importance of this key dimension among a youth population. It functions as an important counterweight to the mental health field which is highly individualized, instead emphasizing the importance of community care and collective action in the service of wellness. These findings reorient interventions with Indigenous

young people as necessarily attending to upstream approaches which intervene on the social determinants of health.

Young people in our study draw attention to the ways that balance, and harmony lay at the core of their concept of good living, that is, the various domains of one's life that must be considered and attended to in the promotion of mental health and wellbeing. Indigenous mental health scholars have long highlighted the value of incorporating Indigenous concepts of personhood and traditional teachings, particularly medicine teachings, to help promote more integrated conceptions of health which account for psychological, spiritual, material, physical, social, among other elements (Hart, 1999; McCormick, 1996; Duran and Duran, 1995). This integrated concept of persons espoused by Indigenous young people, challenges the prominence of the psychological orientation of mental health discourse, and invites us to consider what a more balanced approach might be. One of the questions this ultimately raised is whether mental health, and mental health promotion is too narrow and disintegrated of mobilizing concepts, and whether wellness, wellbeing, and indeed life promotion is a more fulsome and integrated framing.

Our study also had important implications for psychosocial practice, in particular that there is meaningful therapeutic work anchored within the promotion of self-awareness, acceptance, and care with Indigenous young people. While there is a burgeoning field of therapeutic research on the value of self-acceptance, reflexivity and self-awareness and self-care among clinical populations, adult, and youth (Chamberlain & Haaga, 2001; MacInnes, 2006) included, there has not been substantial integration of this research among Indigenous communities or young people. Our study highlights that Indigenous young people already perceive this as valuable and core to the promotion of their wellbeing and mental health. From a policy and practice standpoint, mental health service provision should attend to and enhance focus on interventions which help to increase self-acceptance and awareness and support Indigenous young people in leveraging practices of self-care. From a research lens, consideration should be given to both the norming of contemplative therapeutic practices within Indigenous youth populations (for example, therapeutic modalities such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy [ACT], Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT), or mindfulness-based stress reduction [MBSR]), and consideration of what self-acceptance and reflexivity resources already exist within Indigenous healing and wisdom traditions.

Young people in our study highlighted the importance of land-based relations between themselves, their culture, and relationships, and emphasized the positive effects these have on their

mental health and wellbeing. Indigenous health researchers have long pointed out the importance of land-based connections and relations in Indigenous health promotion (Gone, 2013; Wexler, 2014; Walsh et al., 2020). Increasingly, non-Indigenous health research has turned to the central importance of integrating planetary health in health promotion, as well as recognizing the importance of environmental connection in health promotion (Hansen-Ketchum & Halpenny, 2010; Maller et al., 2005). Our findings reiterate the important cultural significance of land-based relations in mental health promotion with Indigenous youth, importantly, this relationship is not framed as human on the land, but human with the land – which reflects upon an Indigenous theory of planetary health. While our study did not carve out much space for discussion of land-based reclamation or land-back struggles and their intersection with mental health promotion, our findings make a compelling case for considering geo-ecological dimensions of mental health and wellness, that are at the least, concurrent with environmental psychology. Our findings are anchored however is in a different starting place, which is a relational assertion of the interconnectedness of Indigenous people's wellbeing, with the wellbeing of land. From a practice standpoint, this highlights the need for land-based healing interventions. Research should continue to consider these issues, especially in urban contexts, given there is a scarcity of such research.

Young people in our study highlight the central importance of spirituality in their identity formation, and in particular, their cultural identity formation. They suggest that this connection has a positive value in the promotion of their mental health. Cultural continuity has long been considered a protective factor in the prevention of psychological distress and suicide among Indigenous young people (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998). Similarly, spirituality vis-à-vis cultural connection or enculturation has been found to be a protective factor in social behavior, academic achievement, and mental health outcomes (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008). Our study suggests that this continuity or enculturation, regarding the ways spirituality is intersecting, has a positive effect on the mental health of young people in our study. More broadly, Indigenous health literature has broadly spoken of the value of spiritual and cultural connection in the promotion of health and wellness, and our study lends support to this assertion, particularly among young people. Spirituality is often something that providers are uncomfortable or unwilling to engage in discussion around, when it is a critical component of Indigenous young people's identity and health. Practices are needed which help providers meaningfully discuss matters of spirituality.

Young people emphasized the importance of spirituality in providing hope. As such, spirituality is connected to personal coping with adversity. While spirituality has long been sociologically and psychologically recognized as a means of coping within adversity (Krok, 2015; Pargament, 2011), Indigenous research in health has long called for the integration of spirituality in services (Stevens, 2010). Our study highlights the ways that Indigenous young people describe it as not only instrumental to coping, but as inspiring and nourishing their desire for living. This means that spirituality for young people can promote a type of future orientation that is vital for health promotion. Therapeutic practice that integrates an appreciation for Indigenous young people's spirituality needs to be both tethered to coping with existing challenges and stressors, as well as attending to the futures young people desire. Young people in our study pointed to the way that spirituality was formative in their decision making and behaviors. There has been some research which has highlighted the ways that spiritual traditions, wisdom traditions, and culture might orient Indigenous youth decision making and behavior, especially towards pro-social ethical decision making (Ansloos, 2017; Park, 2013; Spaniol, 2002). Our study lends support to this assertion. Importantly, our study makes clear that spirituality for Indigenous youth, both in terms of identity and practice, contains values orientations which shape behaviors.

Young people see spirituality as deeply entangled in concepts of culture. Often, young people in our study use these terms interchangeably. It is important to note that rarely throughout our study did young people reference spirituality in highly institutionalized or religious form, dogma, or structure. Spirituality as they described it is every day and embodied. Or as Fleming & Ledogar (2008) have suggested, spirituality is better conceived as an orientation. This matters because many young people do not consider themselves religious, but highly spiritual, and their spirituality is manifest in the commonplace and intimate aspects of everyday life. At the same time, young people also acknowledged aspects of particular beliefs, ceremony, and tradition that they frame in more cultural than religious language. Our study demonstrates the central role that spirituality plays in promoting living and sustaining life, which has important implications for the practice of suicide prevention. This is consistent with the findings of previous research, that there is a protective factor in cultural continuity (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998) however this also emphasizes the ways that spirituality is a particularly useful means of threading relationship to culture, land, and community. This is grounds for the expansion of life promotion-oriented work

(Wise Practices, 2021) which explicitly takes up profiling community projects. Future work might focus on programs where young people connect to spiritual traditions and practices.

In terms of the barriers that our study identified, our study makes clear that like most inequalities which Indigenous peoples face in Canada, Indigenous young people's mental health promotion is significantly affected by a scarcity and lack of resources, materials, and funding. Broadly speaking, this finding is entirely consistent with the current status of literature on Indigenous mental health inequities, and social determinants of health for Indigenous peoples. To adequately support Indigenous youth, our study makes clear the importance of major public service investment and resource allocation for Indigenous community organizations. On the level of policy and practice, there are significant implications here which warrant investigation into more sustainable funding and grant opportunities for Indigenous young people, but more broadly, this points to the need for wide scale expansion of mental health, wellness, and life promotion funding and services across Canada.

Our study highlights that some of the greatest impediments to mental health and wellness for Indigenous young people, are the historical and enduring structural and systemic experiences of colonial violence. Our finding echoes what other research has suggested that issues like racism, colonial disenfranchisement have significant effects on mental health (Greenwood & de Leeuw; Gone, 2013; Reading & Wien, 2013) and points to interlocking sites of oppression (such as healthcare, education, social services, policing) as critical junctures for collective social action. While young people in our study did not universally specify theories of change, such as reform or abolition, they make clear that there is no mental health and wellness promotion that is meaningful or substantive for Indigenous communities, unless it is meaningfully tethered to actions which address structural and systemic oppression.

Towards solutions, young people make clear that Indigenous youth leadership must be more than mere consultation, stakeholder engagement or an afterthought. Rather, they want substantive leadership and governance around issues that have an impact on their lives and the life of their communities. Substantive leadership and governance are key issue that needs to be addressed to promote wellbeing and mental health. Self-determinism has been widely regarded as a key factor in the promotion of Indigenous health (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998) and more recent calls for Indigenous rights informed approaches to health care emphasis community participation and leadership (Wood et al., 2018; Glauser, 2020). Youth by virtue of ageism are often ignored

regarding leadership in healthcare, and therefore our study makes an important contribution by advancing calls for substantive youth leadership and governance within mental health systems and services. On the level of policy and practice, public services should seek to include youth as substantive decision makers and leaders in mental health services. On the level of practice, this also reinforces the justification for the value of peer-led and youth-led services.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, we have drawn attention to the importance of considering the ways youth themselves conceptualize mental health and wellbeing, and in particular, tried to nuance appreciation for the intersection of spirituality. Our study makes clear the importance of listening closely to wisdom of young people to gain a deeper appreciation for the multiple dimensions of health and wellbeing. As our study demonstrates, spirituality is intimately connected to wellbeing, and deepening understanding of this dimension of health and wellbeing is critical to the development of culturally relevant approaches to mental health promotion with Indigenous young people. Through a thematic analysis of interviews with Indigenous young people, our study has highlighted 13 themes which nuance our understanding of the conceptual foundations of Indigenous youth mental health and wellbeing, spirituality, and challenges and barriers in supporting youth mental health. What is clear across all these findings is that a key factor in suicide prevention and mental health promotion is to nourish opportunities for young people to connect to their spirituality, as it is a source of hope and connection.

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