Indigenous Elders’ Conceptualization of Well-being: An Anishinaabe Worldview Perspective

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Abstract

Language and cultural revitalization are vital in developing the self-healing capacity of Indigenous Peoples. This study emphasizes the perspective of first language-speaking Elders—our knowledge keepers and community leaders—to critically examine what wellness means for one Indigenous Nation in the Midwest. Semi-structured interviews with Elders were conducted in the Anishinaabe language by fluent second language speakers. Under the guidance of Elders, these interviews were transcribed in Anishinaabe and then translated into English. Both Anishinaabe and English transcripts were used simultaneously in analysis. Elders conceptualized well-being as being a complex and interrelated system grounded in spiritual connectedness, which is guided by Anishinaabe language and ways of life. The results of this study broaden the perspectives available on Indigenous well-being and are important to consider as we study culture as healing, and implement cultural-based health programs within Indigenous communities.
Introduction

Indigenous cultures encompass an intergenerational, relational, and holistic worldview grounded in language, values, beliefs, spirituality, and traditional practices (Absolon, 2010; Kahn-John, 2016; Mark & Lyons, 2010; Ullrich, 2019). Recently, Indigenous worldviews and models of health have emerged across academic literature, showcasing unique perspectives from Indigenous communities around the globe. While cultural protocols and practices vary among Indigenous Nations, most carry underlying beliefs of holism, balance, relationships, spirituality, and resilience (Gall et al., 2021).

For generations, Indigenous cultures, ways of life, and worldviews were the target of colonial subjugation, which still impacts the health and well-being of present-day Indigenous communities (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Whitbeck et al., 2004a). Indigenous peoples experienced immediate and long-lasting intergenerational health inequities due to historical trauma and pervasive systemic racism (Gone, 2014; Walters et al., 2002). Indigenous cultures and worldviews are considered the antidote to these historical and contemporary injustices (Walters et al., 2002). Thus, Indigenous communities are in a rigorous state of revival following generations of genocidal acts by colonizing government bodies that diminished access to cultural practices and protocols of health (Braveheart, 2003).

Despite repeated attempts to annihilate and eradicate Indigenous Peoples, many Indigenous communities have maintained strong ties to their cultures, languages, and ways of life. The recognition of culture as healing has come to the forefront of Indigenous health research (Gone & Calf Looking, 2011; Rowan et al., 2014). Culture has been linked to positive health outcomes and protective factors across a variety of Indigenous communities (Biddle & Swee, 2012; Wolsko et al., 2007). Researchers are working alongside community partners to develop new measures of health that honor Indigenous health perspectives (Walls et al., 2019). Measures like Awareness of Connectedness (Mohatt et al., 2011), Multicultural Mastery (Fok et al., 2012), and Cultural Connectedness (Snowshoe et al., 2014) characterize and assess mechanisms to Indigenous well-being not offered by Western models of pathology or disease (Walls et al., 2019). With the help of Indigenous-led and community-driven research, the scientific study of “culture as protective” is broadening to consider contextual determinants of health including societal impacts and the evolution of cultural revitalization (Gonzalez et al., 2022; Walls et al., 2016).

Given this literature and community interest in understanding and promoting culture for Indigenous well-being, it is critical that Indigenous scholars continue to lead the conceptualization of what it means to be well in the first place. Such efforts will inform the approaches we take to tackle health inequities and access cultural community strengths and resources (O’Keefe et al., 2018).

Methods

All aspects of this research were guided by a Community Research Council (CRC). The five CRC members were asked to join the project based on their leadership in language and cultural revitalization, vast experience working one-on-one with Elders, and fluency in the Anishinaabe language (also referred as Anishinaabemowin or Ojibwemowin). The PI/first author leaned heavily on CRC guidance and expertise to make sure this project was authentic, relevant, respectful, reciprocal, and
responsible (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991), especially when caring for the Elders’ well-being during this process. The process of asking, gifting, and eliciting data from the Elders was modeled after the CRC members’ decades of experience working one-on-one with Anishinaabe Elders. The Elders were offered asemaa (spiritual currency), a small gift offering, and a stipend for their expertise. The research was given exemption by the University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board.

The PI/first author is Anishinaabe, a second language learner, and a PhD-level researcher with previous qualitative experience. An Anishinaabe epistemology formed the base of this research, which is centered on the assumption that the Anishinaabe language carries worldview and is the vehicle by which teachings are transferred (Kovach, 2021; Absolon, 2011). Accordingly, all interviews were conducted in Anishinaabemowin, between fluent language speakers. The PI drafted a semi-structured interview guide to answer the research question: What is the role of Anishinaabe language in well-being? After CRC approval, one CRC member and one Elder transcribed these questions into Anishinaabe. The PI trained the interviewers on how to obtain consent and conduct semi-structured interviews. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interview transcripts were translated into English collaboratively with the Elder participant.

Participants

The CRC led all recruitment efforts including deciding which Elders would be appropriate to interview – more specifically, Elders who would provide a wide range of voices/experiences and who varied in gender and reservation/location. All Elders identified as Anishinaabe (also referred as Ojibwe), spoke Anishinaabe as their first language, and lived in various parts of traditional Anishinaabe territories across the Midwest and Canada. CRC members chose to complete 1-3 interviews based on their previous relationships and time available. One more interviewer was invited to conduct an interview based on his fluency in a northern dialect. Ten Elders were invited to participate, and 9 completed an interview (5 women, 4 men).

Analytic Procedure

Each transcript was open coded to understand how the Elders were conceptualizing Anishinaabe well-being. Over several months, the PI re-read the transcripts several times to code the data and immerse in the teachings the Elders had given. Upon each reading, a new teaching would emerge. Eventually, she developed a visual map illustrating the interconnection among themes. This map provided a complete representation of Elders’ teachings, and a breakdown of various parts of a whole (i.e., codes, variables) (Wilson, 2008). The analytic process was conducted alongside continuous engagement with Elders, language, culture, and ceremony. This ongoing process allowed a deepened understanding of the Elders’ teachings within these interviews. Rather than employ data saturation, the team focused on capacity of the interviewers and Elders, and on gratitude for the wisdom that was shared. Traditional Anishinaabe teachings tell us that it is not appropriate to say that we have learned everything (that our knowledge is “saturated”), because only the spirits know everything, and our own learning is contextual and ongoing across our lifespans. The model was shared back with CRC members, Indigenous colleagues, and Elders to ensure that the model was accurate, relatable, and useful. Due to broad Indigenous readership and limited word count, the quotations within this manuscript are provided in English-only.

Results

We discuss each component of an Anishinaabe Worldview (Figure 1) starting from the outer
circle and working inward, beginning with the circle that encompasses all of what we hope to share: an Anishinaabe Worldview.

Figure 1

*Model of Anishinaabe Worldview*
Anishinaabe Worldview

What emerged from these conversations was a general and overall Anishinaabe ontology, which held layers and interconnected, grounding beliefs of connection and spirituality. The Elders described an Anishinaabe life as one designed to bring us happiness, strong and healthy relationships, and a long, healthy life (Good Outcomes, Figure 1). An Anishinaabe Worldview described what behaviors, beliefs, values, and outcomes would transpire if we lived the life that was gifted to Anishinaabe Peoples by our spiritual helpers (i.e., spoke our language, practiced our ceremonies, listened to oral stories, etc.).

Spiritual Connectedness

Spiritual Connectedness lies on the outer line, but purposefully touches the other components to illustrate that spiritual beliefs ground and guide all aspects of an Anishinaabe Worldview. The most pervasive interwoven theme across these Elder interviews was that a good life is transmitted spiritually. This was not merely a one-time transmission; the Elders talked about various spiritual pathways of healing and the constant availability of this spiritual transmission throughout our lives.

Firstly, the Elders stated that the transference of the good life occurred upon conception; it was a gift Anishinaabe People were given by the spirits and something a child brings with them from the spiritual world: “. . . while he or she is in the womb of their mother, it is at that time that the spirit enters the child. That spirit is Anishinaabe” (Elder 5).

The Elders described our way of life as something that is gifted to us by our spiritual helpers: those that have agreed to look out for and help Anishinaabe People, those that we can call upon when struggling, and those we honor when we practice our traditional lifestyles and ceremonies. The Elders acknowledged that everything that we need to live a good life has been gifted to us upon conception and is continuously available throughout our lives; we must simply know, use, and honor those gifts: “The way we act now isn’t what was given to us. Everything that the creator gave to Anishinaabe is good. . . we were given Ojibwemowin to live a good life, to love our people, to help each other when things happen” (Elder 2).

According to the Elders, taking care of this spirit brings happiness and peace and is accomplished by following Anishinaabe ways (hunting, fishing, and gathering; participating in ceremony; honoring traditional knowledge, Elders, spiritual helpers; and speaking our language). The Elders described this spiritual transmission in cyclical terms (Figure 2).

- A good life (e.g., cultural practices, love, help) as something gifted by the spirits to Anishinaabe People
- Anishinaabe People are then capable of giving these gifts to others
- Anishinaabe people receive gifts (i.e., a way of life) from the spirits
Community Connectedness

The next two outer circles, Community Connectedness and Environmental Connectedness (Figure 1), represent the interdependence and reciprocity among individual, community and environmental well-being. Caring for and helping your fellow Anishinaabe person was considered a key part of the Anishinaabe way of life. Caring for others is considered a value and a mindset inherent to a well-functioning community: “We were a community back then. We helped each other. We had the [ceremonies]. When we got there, we helped. We had no animosity toward each other. We were happy to see each other” (Elder 2). The Elders talked about taking care of others as living well; if you were not taking care of others, you were probably sick or ill. They spoke about helping as a skill of an Anishinaabe person. People knew how to help their fellow Anishinaabe; even children knew their roles in community operations. Help was also given freely because money was not considered a value of the Anishinaabe; Elders explained that the “good life” was the payment for helping others, especially when helping Elders.

When people ask me, were we poor back then, I tell them ‘No, we were not poor’. We were Indians. We spoke to each other, we helped each other. If somebody needed help, we helped them. We visited. They always came to visit. We visited a lot. We spoke to each other. We went to visit them sometimes. We were good. I liked that (Elder 2).
Visiting was something valued by the Elders but something they felt was no longer happening. The Elders talked about people treating others badly as they took on a European way of life (e.g., badmouthing, hatred, jealousy, blame). They said that people do not care about their neighbors, that they have stopped visiting, and that they only want to be heard rather than listen to what is going on around them.

The Elders explained that visiting is foundational to a functioning community where people help each other, know if others need help, acknowledge the relatedness of one another, and promote kindness. When asked how things might be different if everyone spoke in Anishinaabe, one Elder answered: “Maybe they’ll be nicer to others if they speak Ojibwe. Maybe they’ll feel better too” (Elder 3). Other Elders echoed this sentiment, saying that community members would get along better, speak more kindly, argue less, and listen better.

Relationships with Elders are considered primary relationships for living a good life. Through Elders, there was a transference of knowledge, understanding, and well-being. One Elder described how Elders being respected and cared for was an indicator that people were living a good life. Additionally, Elders constantly acknowledged that their own wisdom came from their Elders and grandparents. The importance of connection with Elders was clear in their prefacing or clarifying statements such as: “That’s what my grandma said” (Elder 7); “The old man once said” (Elder 2); and, “That’s what I remember [the Elders] saying” (Elder 3). Asking Elders for their knowledge and stories was described as a requirement for living a good life. Approaching Elders for origin stories is an especially vital aspect of knowing the teachings that you need to live a good life. Knowing these specific stories means knowing yourself, your history, and the teachings necessary for a good future.

Children also played a role in the transmission of a good life, both as the reason why it is vital to carry on Anishinaabe teachings, and as role models of living Anishinaabe teachings. The resurgence of language through immersion schools has made many Anishinaabe youth the next strongest language speakers in some communities. One Elder noticed that young people in the community who speak the language have encouraged other people to also start learning. Another Elder observed how when parents speak the language to their children and provide them with ceremonial opportunities, teachings are passed down between parents and children.

Environmental Connectedness

Environmental Connectedness represents a reciprocal relationship that affects Anishinaabe well-being and is affected by the way in which we live our lives as Anishinaabe People. Connection to the natural world is nurtured and valued within an Anishinaabe Worldview.

By using their Ojibwe every day, what happened was that the knowledge embedded in the language was passed down to the children. It was through the language that they taught their children to have respect for everything on this earth and to treat other living beings respectfully (Elder 5).

When Anishinaabe People spend time in the woods to observe and to listen, a reciprocal relationship is cultivated and knowledge and teachings are acquired. One Elder shared one of her own teachings, which suggests that people go into the woods first thing in the morning before breakfast. Before we were nourished with food, it was in the woods that we were nourished with spiritual energy and fulfillment. Another Elder shared an extensive story, which portrayed teachings about Anishinaabe Peoples’ relationship with animals and how our actions can affect the lives of animals in both positive and negative ways. Elders also spoke to the importance of noticing how animals live and eat. They stated that animals, trees, the earth, and water all care for us, and how it is important to reciprocate that respect and care for them.
Our Way of Life

The inner three circles of the model (Figure 1) represent the behaviors, beliefs, and values of an individual that connect them to wellness. This circle in the model is bolded to show the primary importance of living an Anishinaabe way of life, and that this way of life will lead to “Good Outcomes” (relationship illustrated with a gray arrow). In addition, there are “Pathways” that strengthen the relationship between living our way of life and these good outcomes (illustrated with a black arrow). These pathways also strengthen our ability to access our way of life (also illustrated with a black arrow: e.g., using our asemaa to ask Elders or spirits for help with learning the language can strengthen your ability to learn the language). Living our Anishinaabe ways was used broadly throughout and defined by each elder in similar ways. The Elders talked about our Anishinaabe ways or the ways that were given to us as including (but not limited to) the following:

- Helping others (e.g., relationships with our fellow Anishinaabe, helping our fellow Anishinaabe, helping at ceremonies, having unconditional love for one another)
- Engaging with nature (e.g., taking care of the earth and spending time in nature)
- Sustenance practices (e.g., working for our necessities, getting our food/medicines from the woods, cooking, making, walking)
- Spiritual practices (e.g., attending ceremonies, praying, using asemaa, using our pipes, smudging, fasting, feasting)
- Listening to our Elders (e.g., asking Elders for advice, help, knowledge)
- Speaking our language

The Elders stressed the importance of revitalizing all that encompasses an Anishinaabe way of life. They emphasized practicing our way of life in more places: in schools, in storytelling, in healing, and among community members. For example, one Elder said we should offer our asemaa to even our non-Anishinaabe coworkers to enrich the work that we do. She described this practice as not only powerful in that it can spiritually enhance the work, but also in that it can build recognition and understanding of Anishinaabe ways beyond our communities. Another vital practice encouraged by each Elder was prioritizing our way of life over anything else and not putting other peoples’ ways on a pedestal:

Those that handle the finances on the reservation, do not want to utilize the money to accelerate the efforts to teach the language. They do not realize once the Anishinaabe that live here lose that which we have been given, that the quality of life will continue to change for the worst (Elder 5).

Elders said that it is only through the continuation of Anishinaabe language, culture, and ceremony, that Anishinaabe communities can maintain wellness and build Anishinaabe healing capacity.

Pathway

This circle encompasses what is necessary to enhance our connection between living an Anishinaabe way of life with the good outcomes that result. Many of these Elders spoke about times in their lives when they strayed from their Anishinaabe teachings and their path, were distracted by the values of white people and white institutions, or failed to lean fully into Anishinaabe beliefs.
These Elders, all having had varied experiences with non-Anishinaabe lifestyles, shared that there were additional requirements that one must meet, and values and teachings one must fully embrace, to truly lead to a happy and well life. The following themes explore several ways to strengthen the pathways between living an Anishinaabe way of life and experiencing good associated outcomes.

**Use your asemaa.** The use of *asemaa* (a spiritual and medicinal currency) and the belief in its power are vitals aspects of living a good life. Offering one’s *asemaa* to our spiritual helpers was the Elders’ primary recommendation to those who are struggling, and was considered a requirement when interacting with spiritual helpers. Using *asemaa* at ceremony or as a means of daily prayer is a way to respect other beings, honor our connection to spirits, give thanks, and seek help. *Asemaa* might be considered an access point to obtain that which has been given to us so as to live a good life.

This is one of the ways that you can get help if, if you believe in your *asemaa*, when you make the offering with your *asemaa*. Even when you light up your pipe, some help may come from that too. This is what I think. If you believe in your *asemaa*, it will help you. This is what I was told, believe in your *asemaa*. It will work for you; you should always let your *asemaa* lead (Elder 7).

The spirits are present to help, and *asemaa* is a way to access that help. Help was not always described as meeting an acute need, but rather as something one might seek on a regular basis to live a good life. The Elders also stressed the importance of offering *asemaa* to one’s Elders when seeking teachings, when needing help, and when revitalizing language and culture. When they spoke about this gifting of *asemaa* into the hand of our Elders, the Elders described this as a spiritual transfer not only to the Elders, but also to the numerous spiritual helpers that guided each Elder over their lifetime.

**Deeper understanding & belief.** Having a deeper understanding and belief in our ways is a foundational vehicle to accessing a good life and seeking out other aspects of an Anishinaabe way of life. One Elder noticed that it is the young people who learn to speak the language at immersion schools that are compelled to participate in and contribute to ceremonies. Another stated that understanding the language is a precursor to understanding other teachings: “They don’t really understand though, if they don’t speak Anishinaabemowin” (Elder 1). Learning the language, using *asemaa* in daily life and at ceremony, and approaching Elders are practices that may lead one to discover a deeper understanding. However, believing and trusting in our ways is what makes following them a powerful tool for health, peace, and happiness: “If you believe in your *asemaa*, it will help you” (Elder 7). One Elder shared:

> The Anishinaabe must have absolute faith in the way the spirits wanted us as a people to live. We were put on this earth to be as complete in our Anishinaabe existence as we can. It was out of care and love for their Anishinaabe that those spirits decided to give us our way of life (Elder 5).

Another Elder explained that he was not receiving the help he needed from going to ceremony or from using his *asemaa* because he did not truly understand why he was doing it – rather, he was just following the same routine he saw others doing. It wasn’t until he gained a deeper understanding of what was happening at ceremony that he felt his life change for the better. Another Elder explained the importance of this deeper belief when using *asemaa* to ask for help. She explained that *asemaa* is powerful and needs to reach the various spiritual helpers that have agreed to help Anishinaabe people. Sometimes it takes time for what we ask for to come back to us. The belief that what we ask for will eventually come back to us is vital to living a good life and trusting that a good life is available to us.
Take care of your own life. The Elders spoke of the importance of taking care of your own life and the things that you desire to have in your life. This translates to taking care of your name and your clan, creating space for quiet (especially within nature), being grateful, and giving thanks. One Elder shared:

This is what they did long time ago, they honored all the things they use – their canoes, everything they need to make things work, even their paddles. Everybody feasted everything they owned. Everyone honored and respected everything. That’s why the asemaa is so important. It leads us to the things that we want to accomplish (Elder 7).

This Elder also spoke of the importance of feasting and honoring our modern tools (e.g. electronics) that we use to work, reminding us that language and cultural instructions are not only relevant to historical contexts.

Taking care of oneself also means being conscious of what we put into our bodies. According to the Elders, living a good life means abstaining from drugs and alcohol, eating a healthy diet, and eating the foods that were given to Anishinaabe people: wild game, wild plants, and what we can grow in the garden: “They never ate anything from the store. They planted everything they ate. I hope that I’m still doing what they did when they raised me. We were healthy” (Elder 3). Living in this way requires hard work, and the Elders equated this extra effort to wellness. They talked about the ease of modern living and the sedentary behaviors that are a detriment to our health, even on a spiritual level. One Elder stated:

Long ago, my grandmother, my grandfather, my parents always walked... They were active, so it was really easy for them to get around... These days we are lazy. It is easier for us to get things. Soon it is going to kill us (Elder 8).

Spiritual well-being is also an important aspect of living a good life. The Elders explained that Anishinaabe must take care of the spirit within. To take care of this spirit means to honor the values and resources that are designed for the Anishinaabe people, which are found in Anishinaabe language, oral histories, ceremonies, and traditional food sources. One Elder explained:

It’s as if they’re starving their spirit when they’re not pursuing our teachings that were meant to carry us over those hurdles in life. When the Anishinaabe uses his language and dialogues with others, he is nurturing his spirit. Afterall, his spirit is Anishinaabe (Elder 5).

Taking care of one’s life means that you are treating what the spirits gave you honorably, that you are respecting and taking care of the gifts you were given.

Embracing an Anishinaabe identity. Knowing who you are and having a sense of Anishinaabe identity builds pride, fuels purpose, and keeps people on a good path in life: “That’s why they told me, ”Take good care of yourself. You are meant to be here working on something, there is something you are to do” (Elder 8). Each one of us has a reason for being on earth and if we do not know what that reason is, we can seek it out by learning the language and our origin stories, connecting with others (especially Elders), being out in nature, and using the gifts we have been given. The Elders talked extensively about the difference between living our Anishinaabe way versus living by the ways of white people. One of the Elders emphasized that it did not matter if we spoke our language, because we are Anishinaabe nonetheless. The rest of the Elders, however, emphasized that we become white and lose our Anishinaabe identities when we no longer speak the language or attend our ceremonies, or when we don’t live the way of life that was given to our people:
“If we start doing that [living well], things will start getting better. We will become Anishinaabe again” (Elder 2). Becoming Anishinaabe is something that we need to activate in contemporary times, the Elders said, because the values of white people, the English language, and materialism are all too accessible. However, across the board, the Elders said that while this may take work, our Anishinaabe identities remain available. The spirits have provided us with all that we need to withstand pain and illness and to live a good life.

Pursuing our ways. Pursing and seeking are necessary elements of accessing a good life. Working hard, using asemaa, approaching Elders, being quiet and alone, fasting, and being in the woods were suggested as ways one might follow to be at peace and to be happy. An Anishinaabe way of life, or the good life, was considered something one should work at. Actively pursuing this way of life and Anishinaabe teachings is hard work, but engaging in the process was considered indicative of living a good life. The good life is awarded to those that are in the process of pursuing our ways.

Good Outcomes

The Good Outcomes circle indicates how wellness might be experienced on an individual scale (i.e., feeling good, having healthy relationships, and living a long life). This summary, however, is much too simplistic, as it detaches the individual and their experience of well-being from the well-being of community, culture, and the land. Nonetheless, individuals are more capable of contributing to the overall well-being and endurance of our language and way of life when they are experiencing these positive “individualistic” outcomes.

Good feelings. The Elders noted a multitude of feelings and values that were implicit within the Anishinaabe way of life, including unconditional love, laughter, happiness, inner peace, and pride. These feelings do not need to be taught to young people; they are inherent to the Anishinaabe language and lifestyle. One Elder spoke of the ease with which unconditional love can be restored in our communities by simply speaking the language, because love exists within the language: “There’s a lot of love in the language” (Elder 7). Another Elder explained that the language and our way of life was gifted to us with love from our spiritual helpers: “It was out of care and love for their Anishinaabe that those spirits decided to give us our way of life” (Elder 5). The origin of Anishinaabe life is love.

Happiness and humor are both elicited when we feed our Anishinaabe spirit with language, ceremony, and culture. The Elders also talked about the happiness they felt when they heard children speaking the language and saw them going to ceremony. Conversely, the Elders thought speaking English produced feelings in stark opposition to the feelings expressed by Anishinaabe language (e.g., sadness, anger). One Elder stated, “it’s like we’re sad when we speak English” (Elder 2). The Elders also spoke about jealousy and ill humor when people follow a white existence. In Anishinaabe ways, the Elders explained even teasing is based in love. A few Elders stated that it was difficult to be mean or disrespectful when using Anishinaabe language.

Strong, healthy relationships. According to the Elders, Anishinaabe ways promote loving, respectful, and reciprocal relationships among people, spirits, and the natural world. For example, if helping our fellow Anishinaabe was considered a traditional behavior, then receiving help might be considered the result. However, this relationship between helping and being helped is much more spiritually complex than a one-way relationship between people (i.e., when I help her, I am the one helping, and she is the one receiving the good results of being helped. Or, if I help someone, I am fulfilling an internal need to be of service). The Elders reminded us that our spiritual helpers, who gave us this way of life, enjoy seeing us take care of each other, and thus provide us with further good outcomes.

According to the Elders, Anishinaabe ways promote belonging. One Elder contrasted the sense
of belonging that young people experience in gangs with the belonging experienced by engaging with Anishinaabe teachings and speaking the Anishinaabe language: “If our teachings and the language are strong in our communities, it is that which will fulfill the needs of our young people to belong” (Elder 5). Belonging by way of embracing Anishinaabe ways of life is assured in clan membership (the extended family system of many Indigenous peoples), ceremonial participation/membership, and simply knowing and caring for your neighbors. One Elder expressed a feeling of relatedness when they conversed with another adult in the language: “I’m speaking to an Indian [in the language], I don’t need to ask them where they’re from. We’re one. You’re Anishinaabe and I’m Anishinaabe” (Elder 2).

A Long, Healthy Life. Another common theme tapped into the lifeforce of language, ceremonies, and an Anishinaabe way of life. The Elders spoke of the all-encompassing value of our language and cultural practices, and the necessity of holding onto our language and way of life for health, well-being, and survival: “If I did not have my life, I would not know how to live like the Anishinaabe I am. It’s like I wouldn’t have life” (Elder 8). They spoke of our language as “language is life” (Elder 2); “there is life in the language” (Elder 6); and “it was like good medicine” (Elder 2). The Elders also tied losing our language and way of life to a spiritual death, spiritual suffering, and/or a death of our being (e.g., “killing our spirit”). One Elder explained:

It is like they ruined something in their hearts, their spirits, or maybe their minds. I think their Indianness was dead in the way they lived their lives; some were taken to be taught how to speak and be literate in English (Elder 8).

The Elders associated losing Anishinaabe language and way of life with deteriorating physical health as well. A European way of life was thought to cause illness and pain. Each of the Elders identified disorders related to this change of lifestyle and to diversions from Anishinaabe teachings. Cancer, diabetes, addiction, drug use, alcohol consumption, depression, anger, and dying young were all perceived to be associated with European lifestyle. Language and culture help us through difficult times and life challenges.

Limitations

One limitation is in the generalizability of the study. Indigenous peoples are comprised of a wide range of diverse nations and communities, who vary in social, cultural, environmental, and political experiences (Gall et al., 2021). However, there are many similarities and shared values across Indigenous communities, and we expect that many of the findings from this study will hold true across groups. Support is needed to elicit a wider range of perspectives to better understand the differences and similarities across Indigenous cultures. In addition, Elders’ life experiences vary from the experiences of younger generations (Kading et al., 2019; Wexler, 2014), which may create a divide between Elders’ views on well-being and the experiences of younger generations. It may prove beneficial to engage younger generations with these data in order to prompt the application of Elders’ teachings, and to broaden wellness opportunities in contemporary contexts.

In oral storytelling traditions, a story’s meaning is contextual and personal (Mákua et al., 2019). Each time you hear a story (potentially every winter of your life), the same story can provide a new teaching for the listener, who is ever-evolving with each new life experience and insight (personal communication, Sullivan, 2021). Thus, knowledge-making can never truly be complete. Even upon re-reading the quotes provided in this manuscript, new applications for and perspectives on the same statements emerged. Thus, it may be that the process of developing stagnant models or frameworks of worldview is flawed and unnatural, and at risk of missing crucial teachings that enrich what we
know to be true and right. Therefore, especially as it pertains to Indigenous health, evolution of thought must be guided by Indigenous leadership and cultural teachings.

The mapping of our thematic analysis could be more accurate if presented as a three-dimensional and adjustable figure, which would illuminate the lifeforce within and all around an Indigenous Worldview. This two-dimensional figure cannot fully illustrate the important interconnectivity, equality, and value of each sub-concept. However, we can use this model to begin to understand and articulate vital components of one Indigenous Worldview to enlighten how we may reframe our thinking about what it means to be well – and perhaps, what it means to be human.

Discussion

This study articulates the unique and subtle ways that Anishinaabe Elders conceptualized well-being; this is an important perspective, as Elders are the traditional leaders and knowledge gatekeepers in Indigenous communities (Busija et al., 2020; Viscogliosi et al., 2020). Health researchers are deconstructing what Indigenous culture means, and which cultural components will improve health inequities (Kagawa-singer et al., 2014). Importantly, this study attempts to conceptualize Indigenous well-being, which revealed the interwoven union between Indigenous culture and health. The Anishinaabe worldview may fill a gap by guiding researchers in developing culturally relevant measures of well-being to demonstrate the positive effects of Indigenous culture.

Additionally, this study structures Indigenous concepts into a useable framework to inform research, policy, and practice in relation to Indigenous health. Our holistic model can be used to deconstruct and Indigenize structural systems, and decrease social and health inequities. Each model component may be construed as values that our Elders carried with them into their futures, coming from a time that was less distracted and influenced by Western values, with little-to-no access to Western society, news, or social media. Values, beliefs, and behaviors are intrinsically tied to cultural practices and language (Biddle & Swee, 2012). At a time when their whole communities spoke the language and lived an Anishinaabe way of life, they did not have to conceptualize or identify these values; as one Elder expressed, “they lived it” (Elder 2). The teachings shared by the Elders are invaluable, and align with other frameworks of Indigenous well-being.

Ullrich’s Indigenous Connectedness Framework is also grounded in spiritual, community, and environmental connections, which are experienced through Indigenous ways of life (e.g., language, culture, relationships with Elders, and ceremonies). God and Creator (or the Universe, similarly) were “all encompassing, the backdrop to everything” (Ullrich, 2019). In a systematic review of 100 papers representing Indigenous peoples across the U.S., Canada, and Aotearoa, it was found that cultural, spiritual, community, and environmental connections were pervasive Indigenous concepts of well-being (Gall et al., 2021). In Diné tradition, the Hózhó Resilience Model similarly represents relationships and reciprocity among all living beings, spirituality, and ways of taking care of oneself (Kahn-John, 2016). Kading et al. (2019) elicited definitions of health among Anishinaabe young adults who referenced similar concepts of taking care of oneself, obligation to others, Elder wisdom, and connection to the land.

Whether we instinctually carry these values or are fighting to revitalize them, we must also swim against a current of Western values, such as money, consumerism, and individualism. These values are ever-present, loud, and in-our-face across social media outlets, as well as in Western institutions of education, health, and housing, and in everyday depictions of what is right and wrong, both politically and socially. In addition, Elder participants represent the only remaining generation of first language speakers in this territory, which has serious implications for the proceeding generations’ ability to access linguistic and spiritual insights that are passed on through language. Each of the
Elders expressed believing in that European ways of life have brought distraction, disconnection, illness, and pain into Anishinaabe lives. Due to the prevalence of European lifestyles and mindsets within Anishinaabe communities, the Elders saw disconnection and disharmony among people and in their relationships to the natural world. Other studies have also documented the burdens of “two-eyed seeing” (Roher et al., 2021) and the detrimental effects of systematic racism, exclusion, discrimination, and micro-aggressions on Indigenous health (Brown et al., 2016; Priest et al., 2012; Walls et. al. 2016). Even the positive aspects of Indigenous culture may increase feelings of historical cultural loss and ongoing systemic injustices (Gone, 2014; Whitbeck et al., 2004b). Therefore, we must be sensitive to this experience, encourage cultural healing on a community-wide scale, and increase Indigenous voices in public health and policy.

This strengths-based project was built on a foundation of love and respect for Indigenous World-views, and for Elders as the carriers of these teachings. “Breaking the cycle” of poverty, violence, and addiction are common expressions of healing. This study was grounded in the belief that Indigenous peoples maintain the cultural and spiritual capacity to restore a new cycle of health: a cycle of love, culture, and connection. The Elders that participated provided us with endless tools to access wellness – for example, visiting with Elders, offering asemaa, seeking out traditional teachings, and learning the language. They have taught us that by simply being in the process of pursuing traditional Indigenous teachings and lifestyles, we initiate this new cycle and connect with boundless spiritual energy, thus deepening our access to the ways that guarantee a good life.

**Conclusion**

While there is a growing body of literature exploring the relationship between culture and health, this study takes a step back to examine how health itself is defined in a culturally specific, Indigenous context. Through interviews conducted in Anishinaabe, and thus grounded in an Anishinaabe epistemology, this study offers a model for understanding what it means to be well within an Anishinaabe worldview. The model presented aims to broaden the field’s understanding of Indigenous health and well-being, as well as highlight the importance of defining such concepts in ways that are grounded in the values, belief systems, and the lifeways of Indigenous communities. This model may be used by health researchers and practitioners to work with Indigenous communities in ways that are culturally responsive. It may also be adapted or expanded upon to better fit the needs of other Indigenous communities.

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