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## Culture and Identity in Relation to Mental Wellness for the Haudenosaunee Community

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Education

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## **Abstract**

Since the arrival of European settlers, Indigenous peoples have experienced immeasurable adversities. The intergenerational trauma caused by colonization and legislation aimed at cultural desecration has contributed to mental health concerns. Assimilation policies that made cultural practises illegal pushed knowledge and ceremonies underground and led to cultural and spiritual disconnection. The effects of colonization are as pervasive today as they were in the past. Western models of psychological intervention are antithetical to Indigenous worldviews and ways of knowing. As a result, mainstream mental health services have had limited effectiveness. Existing mental health literature on Indigenous peoples is largely rooted in a deficit framework, identifying individual psychopathology and social problems. There is a need for culturally responsive care that integrates the inherent strengths and resources within Indigenous nations. Namely, Haudenosaunee healing models are holistic and attend to the emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual domains of wellness. The Good Mind model embodies harmonious living with all life and grounds the Haudenosaunee way of being. This qualitative project explores the experiences of Haudenosaunee peoples in the context of cultural revitalization and collective meaning-making of cultural identities, in relation to mental wellness.

*Keywords:* Indigenous, Haudenosaunee, culture, identity, mental wellness, holistic

## **Summary for Lay Audience**

The long history of systematic desecration of Indigenous culture has led to cultural discontinuity within Indigenous communities. The intergenerational effects of oppression and ongoing colonial discrimination impinge on cultural identity formation, contributing to rising mental health concerns among Indigenous peoples. Western interventions assume mental health difficulties are inherent to the individual, negating the immeasurable effects colonization has on mental wellbeing. Most mental health interventions used in Canada are grounded in an individualistic and medicalized perspective that is discrepant with Indigenous values and knowledge. Indigenous healing, however, underscores relationality and implements a holistic lens that focuses on the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual elements of wellbeing. Services steeped in Indigenous cultural practices engender community engagement and facilitate strong cultural identity formation and mental wellness. The current study explored how culture and identity impact the mental wellness of Haudenosaunee people by interviewing participants from the Firekeepers cultural program. Several participants reported experiencing a felt sense of belongingness and cultural pride from learning about their heritage and historical legacies. The cultural program fostered a sense of community, equipping youth with positive mentors and healthy coping mechanisms.

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## **Culture and Identity in Relation to Mental Wellness for a Haudenosaunee Community**

Indigenous peoples have experienced profound changes to their social, economic, and cultural systems (Wexler, 2009a). Forced assimilation policies, such as residential school systems and the Sixties Scoop, led to the extensive disconnection of knowledge, language, tradition, and spirituality within Indigenous communities (Good et al., 2020). The historical and contemporary effects of colonization have resulted in increasing rates of mental health concerns among Indigenous peoples (Burnett et al., 2022). Despite structural barriers that create widening disparities Indigenous peoples face to accessing mental health resources, intrinsic and community strengths continue to support mental wellbeing (Carrier et al., 2022). There is a need for mental health interventions to go beyond Western approaches and integrate Indigenous ways of knowing (Lavallee & Poole, 2010). In particular, the cultural revitalization of Indigenous traditions has gained recognition for the ability to improve mental health and support the development of positive cultural identities among Indigenous peoples (Lavallee & Poole, 2010; Mental Health Research Canada, 2023).

An enduring effect of colonization is the exclusive privileging of Western ways of knowing and disregarding Indigenous knowledge systems (Blackstock, 2008). Western Academia has an oppressive history of undermining the knowledge of Indigenous peoples and thwarting advancements, leading to a paucity of Indigenous knowledge in dominant mental health models (Katapally, 2020). Promoting a “one-size-fits-all” approach failed to capture the contextualized experiences of Indigenous peoples and unique needs of Indigenous communities (Katapally, 2020). Unlike Western worldviews, Indigenous epistemologies are relational and focus on holistic models of health (Bennett, 2004). From an Indigenous perspective, mental



health considers the person as a whole and restore the balance between the physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual aspects of wellbeing (Blackstock, 2008).

Research has demonstrated the positive effects of reconnecting to cultural traditions to promote wellbeing (Goodman et al., 2019; Chandler & Lalonde, 2008; Arslanbek et al., 2022). Good et al. (2020) asserted that connection with cultural practices is imperative to healing the effects of cultural desecration and forced assimilation. Traditional activities are powerful means through which to connect with cultural teachings (Arslanbek et al., 2022). Indigenous song and dance programs promote positive cultural identity and community bonding (Good et al., 2020). Additionally, the reconnection to Indigenous heritage is a protective factor for the wellbeing of First Nation youth (Snowshoe et al., 2017). Specifically, the involvement of communities in maintaining and teaching cultural traditions supports the mental health of First Nation youth (Snowshoe et al., 2017).

Although there are a few studies on Indigenous mental health, the literature is also wanting on the effects of culture and identity on the mental wellness of the Haudenosaunee peoples. Collaboration with the Haudenosaunee community highlights the need for a strengths-based approach that integrates Indigenous ways of knowing and cultural practices to promote wellbeing.

## **Literature Review**

### **Historical Trauma**

Prior to contact with colonizers in North America, Indigenous communities were self-governing economically, politically, and culturally (Hart, 2002). There were over 500 Indigenous nations with wide-ranging differences in “language, art, government systems and architecture” (Hart, 2002). In many Indigenous communities, both men and women had social responsibilities

and decision-making power and were sources of cultural knowledge—men and women were equally valued (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004). Since the arrival of colonizing groups, Indigenous communities have suffered endless attacks (Bombay et al., 2014). Colonial subjugation first involved taking control over Indigenous economic and political systems and, eventually, the imposition of colonial worldviews (Hart, 2002). The social and cultural structures of Indigenous peoples were desecrated over the beliefs that colonizers were superior and the Indigenous were primitive (Hart, 2002). The long history of aggressive colonization processes and oppression has resulted in transgenerational trauma across Indigenous communities (McQuaid et al., 2017). Specifically, forced assimilation and erasure of Indigenous cultures through government mandates have created disconnections between culture, identity and community (Goodman et al., 2019).

The Indian Residential School (IRS) system is recognized as the most detrimental to Indigenous people (Wilk et al., 2017). Residential schools were a coercive system where children were forcibly removed from their families and assimilated into Euro-Canadian ways of life (MacDonald & Hudson, 2012). These schools were created to “kill the Indian in the child” (Bombay et al., 2014). Around 150,000 children attended residential schools, with almost 80,000 survivors today (Wilk et al., 2017). Many of the students of residential schools experienced psychological, physical, and sexual abuse, and most of the residential schools were underfunded, which led to malnutrition, illness, and death (Wilk et al., 2017).

Residential schools ran for over a century, contributing to social issues, health inequalities, and lower education success across generations (Restoule, 2015). Individuals with two or more generations of family members attending residential schools experienced higher levels of psychological distress (Wilk et al., 2017). For instance, individuals with a family

history of residential schooling were more likely to have suicidal thoughts than those without (McQuaid et al., 2017). Moreover, traditional Indigenous ways of parenting were lost as children grew up in residential schools (Hart, 2002). The children were shaped to believe that Indigenous traditions were shameful and those who practiced those traditional customs were severely punished (McQuaid et al., 2017). The parental norms derived from residential schools, as a result, were abuse, emotional unresponsiveness, and parental neglect—these norms affected generations of Indigenous peoples (Hart, 2017). Consequently, the high prevalence of mental health issues among Indigenous people may be recognised as one residual effect of attending residential schools (MacDonald & Hudson, 2012).

The Sixties Scoop was a period from 1950s to the 1980s when Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their homes and placed in the child welfare system under the merest pretext (Fast & Collin-Vézina, 2010). This was another political ploy aimed at disempowering Indigenous communities and eradicating cultures (Fast & Collin-Vézina, 2010). More often than not, Indigenous children were placed in primarily non-Indigenous homes, which added to their experiences of perpetual cultural disconnection (Fast & Collin-Vézina, 2010; Barker et al., 2019). Indigenous children were displaced due to claims of parental neglect, such as poverty and substance abuse—these factors, however, were systemic issues caused by racial inequalities and colonial legacies (Fast & Collin-Vézina, 2010; Barker et al., 2017). To this day, there is an overrepresentation of Indigenous Children in the Canadian child welfare system (Barker et al., 2017). The high child welfare involvement may be attributed to historical and ongoing trauma (Fast & Collin-Vézina, 2010; Barker et al., 2017). Specifically, First Nation children are at greater risk of child welfare apprehension compared to non-Indigenous children (Barker et al., 2017).

The report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples was released in 1996. The report covered recommendations for extensive changes to the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada (Erasmus & Dussault, 1996). The report highlighted the need to recognize Indigenous communities as sovereign nations in Canada (Erasmus & Dussault, 1996). The goal was to foster a relationship built on mutual respect and plan for a better future (Erasmus & Dussault, 1996). The Indigenous commissioners were determined to develop a space in Canada that celebrated diversity and acknowledged Indigenous peoples as “Canada’s First Peoples”. The commissioners articulated four tenants of the new relationship: (1) treaties, (2) governance, (3) lands and resources, and (4) economic development (Erasmus & Dussault, 1996). Treaties have been used to negotiate intergovernmental affairs between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (Erasmus & Dussault, 1996). Indigenous peoples have the right to self-government and have never consented to be governed by the Canadian government (Erasmus & Dussault, 1996). The commission also provided recommendations for the land claims process (Erasmus & Dussault, 1996). Lastly, the economic development chapter detailed how Indigenous nations can become more self-sufficient (Erasmus & Dussault, 1996). The report received a lack of response from the government until April 1997, when the Assembly of First Nations organized a protest, followed by the Gathering Strengths: Canada’s Aboriginal Action Plan issued by the government in 1998 (Hurley & Wherrett, 1999). Despite these calls for action, the recommendations from the report were largely disregarded by the Canadian government (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

In 2015, the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement organized the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). The commission outlined 94 Calls to Action to rectify the destruction caused by residential

schools. Reconciliation means “coming to terms with events of the past in a manner that overcomes conflict and establishes a respectful and healthy relationship among people, going forward” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Reconciliation also entailed the dissemination of historical knowledge. Many Canadians are unaware of the colonial history and impact on Indigenous peoples today. This lack of knowledge translates to poor public policy in government systems and the perpetuation of racism in the broader society (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). The recent nationwide discoveries of unmarked burial sites near residential schools have given impetus to Canada to atone for its history (Hopper, 2021). In order to move forward, Canadians must learn from the past (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

### **Indigenous Women**

The subjugation of Turtle Island by European settlers inflicted patriarchy on the Indigenous community (Baskin, 2020). European culture was deep-rooted in misogyny and patriarchy, where women were considered the property of men (Baskin, 2020). In contrast, Indigenous women were greatly esteemed in their community for holding roles as leaders and teachers (Hart, 2002). Women were centred around spirituality (they are live-givers); thus, violence against them was discrepant with Indigenous values and resulted in severe punishment (Baskin, 2020). From the advent of European colonization, Indigenous women were dehumanized and their imperative roles were undermined (Baskin, 2020). In order to infiltrate the community, Indigenous women, who were at the centre of Indigenous economic, spiritual, and governing systems, were targeted (Hart, 2002). Moreover, the Europeans enforced legislation echoing their patriarchal hegemony (Klingspohn, 2018). Colonial legislation, such as the Indian Act of 1876, was designed to destroy the social structures of many Indigenous nations

by superseding the matrilineal tradition and imposing the patriarchal lineage on family systems (Baskin, 2020). This Act stripped Indigenous women of their identity and alienated them from their culture (Baskin, 2020).

Objectifying stereotypes entertained by European colonizers are just as prevalent today as they were then (Baskin, 2020; Moeke-Pickering et al., 2018). The sexualized portrayals of Indigenous women in our society have condoned the violence against them (Baskin, 2020; Moeke-Pickering et al., 2018). Colonial ideologies inform the social construction of these discourses and sustain this dangerous dominant narrative (Moeke-Pickering et al., 2018). In particular, media depictions of violence against Indigenous women often attribute the onus on the victim, and overlook the racialized and gendered motives behind the attack (Baskin, 2020; Moeke-Pickering et al., 2018). Additionally, structural violence places Indigenous women in precarious situations, which then reinforce existing stereotypes (Baskin, 2020). For example, systemic issues, such as homelessness and poverty may coerce Indigenous women into prostitution, revoking their free will to consent (Baskin, 2020). Subsequently, the media disseminates the narrative, either covertly or overtly, that Indigenous women are responsible for the violence perpetrated against them due to their “poor choices” (Baskin, 2020).

The overrepresentation of Indigenous women who are victims of abuse sheds light on the internalization of patriarchy within the Indigenous community (Baskin, 2020; Moeke-Pickering et al., 2018). However, the available interventions for domestic abuse are grounded in Western values and fail to provide a culturally safe environment for Indigenous women to heal (Klingspohn, 2018). Indigenous women have less access to services, and those living in urban areas, especially, have trouble finding culturally competent service providers (Klingspohn, 2018). Culturally-informed care involves attending to the spiritual, emotional, and physical

components of healing (Klingspohn, 2018). Services that incorporate culturally responsive care in communities can reduce the occurrence of domestic violence and accompanying mental health concerns (Klingspohn, 2018). Western services for domestic abuse often reflect a White-feminist perspective—women who are victims of domestic violence are encouraged to leave their abusive homes and gain self-reliance skills to support themselves and their children (Klingspohn, 2018). The problem with this mainstream model is that, traditionally, Indigenous women do not entertain thoughts of leaving their husbands. Through healing interventions, they aspire to work on the intergenerational trauma that has infiltrated their lives and how they can reunite their family (Klingspohn, 2018). Services that focus on providing outcomes that accord with clients' values and circumstances and embodying culturally responsive care are imperative in fostering change within the community (Klingspohn, 2018).

### **Indigenous Research Framework**

Positivism, post-positivism, critical theory and constructivism are the four main Western research paradigms (Wilson, 2008). Positivism entails the notion that there is only one true reality and that through objective research, this true reality can be quantified (Wilson, 2008). Many traditional sciences are built on this framework and use controlled experimentation to discover this reality. Post-positivism, although similar in ontological views, believes that objective research is unattainable since research and researchers are flawed (Wilson, 2008). Therefore, studies grounded in post-positivism attend to the potential environmental and situational factors that may affect the results (Wilson, 2008). The reductionist approach of positivism is aberrant to the views of relationality in Indigenous epistemologies (Márquez, 2022). Specifically, positivism asserts that empirical research is objective, negating the influence of relationships with participants, the environment, and the surrounding systems. Positivism

entails studying concepts in isolation and fragmenting complex systems, whereas Indigenous research paradigms underscore holism and interconnectedness (Márquez, 2022). Failing to understand the culture-specific values inherently present in positivism paradigms contributed to the imposition of Western research frameworks on Indigenous communities (Márquez, 2022). Critical theory posits that reality is shaped by numerous factors such as culture, political and social structures, and economics (Wilson, 2008). The researcher believes that reality is subjective and works alongside disenfranchised communities to unpack power imbalances in socio-political structures—promoting social change is the goal of critical theory methodology (Márquez, 2022). Constructivism transcends critical theory by offering an alternate view that reality is shaped by lived experiences of people and is contingent on the social locations they hold (Wilson, 2008). This research paradigm’s axiology is similar to that of critical theory in that empowerment and change for the research participants are at the forefront (Wilson, 2008). Moreover, similar to critical theory and constructivism, Indigenous epistemologies revolve around empowerment, applicability, and social change (Márquez, 2022). These three paradigms share the concept that reality and knowledge are subjective and that individuals’ lived experiences influence their construction of reality (Márquez, 2022). Indigenous epistemologies differ, however from critical theory and constructivism, in that spirituality is underscored and “knowledge is perceived to belong to the cosmos and researchers are only the interpreters of this knowledge” (Wilson, 2008).

Research that uses an Indigenous perspective differs from research that uses an Indigenous paradigm (Wilson, 2008). An Indigenous perspective can be adapted into Western research paradigms at an attempt to decolonize methodologies, albeit grounded in Western epistemology. In contrast, research that follows an Indigenous paradigm is built on Indigenous



epistemology, ontology, and axiology (Wilson, 2008). Imperative to the Indigenous paradigm is upholding relational accountability (Wilson, 2008). The relationship between the researcher and research participants must be mutually beneficial, in which positive change is facilitated within the community (Wilson, 2008). For instance, talking circles may be used in place of focus groups in research that allow participants to share their experiences and engage in open discussions (Wilson, 2008). Talking circles exude respect for all participants—all participants have the opportunity to share, and all thoughts/stories are valued (Wilson, 2008).

Research studies around Indigenous communities had covert underpinnings of colonialism—there was a lack of consideration for Indigenous ethical standards and community relationship-building practices. Universities held the hegemonic power of knowledge and were perceived as “experts” (Bird-Naytowhow et al., 2017). In Indigenous community-based research, ethical relationships and responsible engagement with community members are underscored (Bird-Naytowhow et al., 2017). Studies must incorporate Indigenous members as research collaborators rather than just as subjects—this is also germane to studies involving youth. In particular, when youth are engaged in knowledge generation and are engaged as research equals, study findings are more applicable and significant to the population (Bird-Naytowhow et al., 2017). Following these principles, the Youth Resilience Project was developed in collaboration with urban Indigenous youth—positioning them as co-researchers—in the cities of Saskatchewan (Bird-Naytowhow et al., 2017). The youth reflected on their chronic experiences of adversity, such as poverty, racism, and structural inequalities. They conceptualized resilience as an ongoing, nuanced process that they were navigating as they faced adversities (Bird-Naytowhow et al., 2017).

### **Indigenous Healing**

For centuries, Indigenous communities have practiced healing methods (Moodley & West, 2005). The medicine wheel, in particular, is one symbolic model for conceptualizing the universe (Moodley & West, 2005). The concepts of the medicine wheel promote a cyclic understanding of life and represent harmony, unity, and interdependence—it is the central symbol for many healing models in the Indigenous culture (Moodley & West, 2005). Variations of the medicine wheel are found throughout several Indigenous nations (Hart, 2002). The foundational concepts in Indigenous healing include wholeness, balance, and harmony. Healing is viewed as a continuous process in life that involves taking responsibility for one's growth (Hart, 2002). Mino-pimatisiwin (the good life) is only reached when an individual takes responsibility for their growth and learning—the goal to achieve a good life involves both the family and community (Hart, 2002). Furthermore, storytelling is one way of including Indigenous values in the helping process (Moodley & West, 2005). Storytelling is a non-coercive method of sharing knowledge, which helps individuals navigate difficulties in their life and accept responsibility for their actions (Moodley & West, 2005). Participation in ceremonies is also another healing method (Moodley & West, 2002). Through ceremonies, individuals can develop strong interpersonal relationships, reconnect with nature, and learn about traditional practises (Moodley & West, 2002). The reconnection with traditional practices can be therapeutic in itself (Moodley & West, 2002).

Present-day colonization and structural racism continue to impact the mental health of Indigenous peoples (Gould et al., 2021). Many mainstream mental health services, however, fail to recognize Indigenous cultural realities, leading to inadvertent pathologizing and ineffective psychotherapy (Gould et al., 2021). Indigenous knowledge on mental health is overlooked or presented as new knowledge by colonizers (Blackstock, 2008; Hart, 2002). Additionally, the

epistemological differences between Indigenous and Western worldviews directly impact the practice of mental health services (Ninomiya et al., 2020). For example, in the Western culture, ancestral knowledge is disregarded, and new expert knowledge is privileged. In contrast, Indigenous cultures value the knowledge of previous generations with an emphasis on collective wellness (Blackstock, 2008).

### **Haudenosaunee History**

Haudenosaunee (hoe-dee-no-show-nee) translates to “people of the Longhouse” (National Museum of the American Indian [NMAI], 2009). The Haudenosaunee confederacy was unified by The Kayanere'ko:wa (The Great Law) (Turriff, 2020). Stories of the origin of The Great Law was passed on through generations, an oral tradition of the Iroquois (Turriff, 2020). The alliance was between six nations: Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga and Tuscarora (the Tuscarora nation joined later in the 18<sup>th</sup> century) (NMAI, 2009). Mohawk translates to “People of the Flint”; Oneida translates to “People of the Standing Stone”; Onondaga translates to “People of the Hills”; Cayuga translates to “People of the Swamp”; Seneca translates to “People of the Great Hill”; and Tuscarora translates to “The Shirt Wearing People” (NMAI, 2009). The nations are unique in their own Iroquoian languages and culture (NMAI, 2009).

The Mohawk, Seneca, Oneida, Onondaga, and Cayuga nations implemented The Great Law during a dark time of war and disharmony (Turriff, 2020). Hiawatha was a chief from the Onondaga nation who was notable for establishing the Haudenosaunee confederacy (Turriff, 2020). To cope with the grief of his daughters who were killed by a warlord named Tadadaho, Hiawatha created the Condolence Ceremony—this ceremony is still conducted today to process grief by the Haudenosaunee (Turriff, 2020). The peacemaker was a man who wanted to bring harmony to the Haudenosaunee territory and inspired Hiawatha with his message (NMAI, 2009).

Hiawatha travelled to the other nations with the Peacemaker to end warfare, forming the united confederacy (Turriff, 2020). Each chief from the five nations brought together pieces of Wampum, which were sewn to create the Hiawatha Belt (Turriff, 2020). Peace and strength are the main pillars of The Great Law and work as guidelines for how Haudenosaunee people should engage with one another (Brant, 2009). It entails “being thankful every day, keeping a good mind, respecting others, being at peace, following the path of the creator, respecting life, showing consideration of future generations, and having the responsibility to stay healthy” (Brant, 2009; NMAI, 2009). The Great Law is an integral part of the Haudenosaunee culture and represents the interconnectedness of spirituality and politics (Brant, 2009).

The Haudenosaunee confederacy comprises Clans in each nation—Clans are groups of extended families that are matrilineal (NMAI, 2009). Historically, Clans entailed the harmonious inhabiting of parents, grandparents, sisters, brothers, cousins, aunts, and uncles in one home, referred to as a longhouse (NMAI, 2009). The men of the Clan were responsible for building the longhouse, and community members also contributed (NMAI, 2009). At the head of each Clan is a Clan Mother, who traditionally was the eldest woman in the Clan, but today is appointed to a community leader devoted to the Haudenosaunee (NMAI, 2009). Clan Mothers had an imperative role in the governing system. They were in charge of choosing the Clan’s Hoyaneh, who was the chief of his Clan and “caretaker of the peace” (NMAI, 2009). The Hoyaneh had to prioritize the needs of the nation, and if he had acted out of line, Clan Mothers had the power to revoke his position (NMAI, 2009).

### **Haudenosaunee Healing and The Good Mind Model**

The narrative of Creation in the Haudenosaunee culture entails the story of the Skywoman (White, 2018). There are many versions of this story as it was passed on orally, and

this is the version as shared by White (2018). The Skywoman was released from the Skyworld by her husband—the “Guardian of the Celestial Tree of Light in the Skyworld”—to explore a water-covered world that he dreamed of. While falling from the Skyworld, she was accompanied by a being often referred to as Panther. Together, they embarked on the journey to this world. The beings of creation in this world heard of her descent and sent out waterfowl to support her arrival. The water beings had to council together to determine how best to accommodate her in this world as she is not meant to live in a water-covered environment. The question arose of who among the beings of creation could bear the weight of the world that the Skywoman could dwell on. Many animals offered, but no one could bear that weight as the Turtle, who agreed to take on the world. This is the Creation story behind what the Haudenosaunee call Turtle Island (White, 2018).

Albeit similar in worldviews and experiences of colonial violence, Indigenous nations are unique in culture (Wilson, 2008). In the Haudenosaunee culture, ceremonial circles have been around for hundreds of years (Brant, 2009). The circle represents equality among all participants and the absence of a hierarchy of power. Everyone in the circle is given the opportunity to speak if they wish to do so and their ideas are considered as a group. There are many functions to circles, such as those used for healing, decision-making, and teachings (Brant, 2009). Smudge ceremonies are also common in circles; smudging entails burning medicinal herbs to clear negative energy and thoughts, and is emblematic to cleansing the space. To help with grounding, some participants may hold on to objects in circle ceremonies (Brant, 2009). Additionally, healing circles enable delving into emotional issues at a deeper level. They are usually held more than once with the same participants—they are a safe space built on trust, respect, genuineness, honesty, and nonjudgement (Brant, 2009). Similar to healing circles, sweat lodge ceremonies are

held to foster healing (St-Denis & Walsh, 2016). A sweat lodge ceremony takes place in a dome-like tent made with willow branches and covered in blankets, centred with a fire pit. The Fire Keeper is the person who manages the fire in the sweat lodge and tends to the hot rocks (grandfathers), bringing them into the sweat lodge as needed. The heat and steam from the ceremony enable clarity and the cleansing of negative energy (Brant, 2009).

The ‘good mind’ was a concept introduced to the Haudenosaunee during the time of the Peacemaker and as such, is connected to The Great Law (Brant, 2009). Achieving balance and harmony with all life is key to having a ‘good mind’. The good mind model entails the mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional components of holistic well-being—the homeostasis of all four elements is essential to have a good mind. (Brant, 2009). These four components are intertwined and reflect how Haudenosaunee people view the world. Specifically, the circle is an omnipresent symbol in the culture that represents the cyclical nature of life and how the four elements cannot be separated into parts (Brant, 2009). When individuals can maintain this balance, they are able to engage in “stories, singing, dancing, laughing, praying, restful sleeping, community events, and ceremonies” (Brant, 2009).

The ‘good mind’ and spirituality are closely intertwined (Brant, 2009). Indigenous spirituality entails the interconnection and relationship with the physical environment and all living things (Baskin, 2016). Within this worldview, there is no dichotomy between people and land (Baskin, 2016). Specifically, the Haudenosaunee culture underscores the importance of spirituality in connecting with oneself, the land, the environment, and the creator (Brant, 2009). Engaging in spiritual ceremonies enables individuals to maintain balance and “connect to the Creator” (Brant, 2009). Baskin (2016) interviewed a Cree Elder from Toronto, who described the meaning of spirituality:

*“There is a sense or connection to community through spirituality. Spirituality brings people together which is wanted and needed by all people. It is a way of expressing the self. Spirituality can create a bigger trust of the self. It is a process of going inward to look for answers. Spiritual practices are designed to heal in many cultures of the world. It is humanity's quest to seek things spiritual; to have something outside of the self to believe in, to help explain things that happen”.*

### **Indigenous Youth Mental Health**

Almost 40–50% of the Indigenous population in Canada is under the age of 25 (Etter et al., 2019). The intergenerational effects of historical trauma have left this population experiencing a disproportionate amount of mental health concerns relative to other Canadians (Etter et al., 2019). The lack of belonging in school life and poor family relationships put Indigenous youth at risk for mental health concerns. Indigenous youth also face the pressures of acculturation—the degree to which they are influenced by the mainstream culture (Snowshoe et al., 2017). Additionally, historical traumas may be provoked by discriminatory acts from the dominant population (Snowshoe et al., 2017). The resulting mental health issues from historical trauma and oppression are boxed into mental health labels, which further negate the negative experiences of Indigenous youth (Snowshoe et al., 2017). The social problems they experience reinforce stereotypes that maintain oppressive policies and engender ostracism (Snowshoe et al., 2017).

Although research highlights both resilience and adversity in the Indigenous community, most often, media portrayals of Indigenous peoples are negative, which contributes to

discrimination (Fast & Collin-Vézina, 2010). In particular, the wider society upholds many assumptions about Indigenous youth. Stereotypes of Indigenous youth around gang affiliation, drug use, and violence persist in the dominant discourse (Bird-Naytowhow et al., 2017). These negative assumptions may create an environment that perpetuates these behavioural patterns. Such overgeneralization of Indigenous youth as ‘delinquents’ must be critically deconstructed (Bird-Naytowhow et al., 2017).

The burgeoning rates of suicide among Indigenous youth are alarming (Barker et al., 2017). The suicide rate among First Nation youth is five times that of non-Indigenous youth (Barker et al., 2017). Historically, Indigenous peoples did not take their own lives, so there was no word for “suicide” in the language; however, the endless injustices experienced have contributed to the high rates of suicide (Barker et al., 2017). The Western frameworks used for suicide prevention are ineffective at mitigating these cases. Most Western interventions used for suicide prevention are based on individual behaviour, disregarding the socio-political factors that play a role in suicidality (Barker et al., 2017). These interventions also contradict Indigenous healing methods and knowledge and overlook the importance of interconnectedness and spirituality (Chandler et al., 2008).

Incorporating youth in the research process can improve the applicability of the findings from research studies (Liebenberg et al., 2017). Youth engagement in research can reduce the gap between researchers and knowledge users. Moreover, tokenism in research involves cursory efforts to incorporate minority individuals in research studies. Research on Indigenous youth remains tokenistic as there is a lack of research on initiating meaningful youth engagement (Liebenberg et al., 2017). The incongruence between youth needs and academic research highlights the need for collaborative research relevant to the population of interest (Liebenberg et



al., 2017). Indigenous youth have unique lived experiences and needs, and using them solely as participants is not beneficial to their community. Information from these collaborative studies can provide valuable insight into how to respond to youth needs and what changes are necessary for policies and services (Liebenberg et al., 2017).

In two studies in Canada, the benefits of incorporating youth in the research process were explored. The first study by Goodman et al. (2019) conducted a collaborative study with Indigenous youth using Photovoice, allowing them to capture their experiences and community strengths. Indigenous youth who participated in this study mentioned that the systemic racism they experienced hindered their ability to develop positive relationships and led them to participate in risky behaviours. Many also noted that engaging in cultural activities fostered a sense of wholeness and improved their confidence. The use of a collaborative approach in this study provided information on the need for holistic interventions to facilitate community healing and mental wellness (Goodman et al., 2019). The second study by Bustamante et al. (2015) reflected on the significance of embracing youth voices in research: “Youth appreciate research projects that welcome their voices in processes that are fun, transformative, and rewarding, and researchers learn at least as much as the young people do in the process...”. Youth voices were honoured, and they were given the space to retell their stories without researchers imposing their own agendas (Bustamante et al., 2015).

### **Indigenous Cultural Identity**

Connection to the land is central to Indigenous cultures and the shaping of cultural identity (Wilson & Peters, 2005). Wilson and Peters (2005) interviewed First Nations people of Odawa and Ojibway heritage on their perspectives of land and its relationship to health. The

Anishinabek people residing in urban areas felt connected to their land by adapting some of their traditional practices to the city environment. A respondent stated:

*“I can go outside, take my tobacco outside every day and lay it by a tree. That keeps me connected to Mother Earth. It keeps me connected to who I am as an Anishinabek, connected to the community. I think it's very possible to be a native growing up in the city and really feeling you are native without hurting people, without hurting yourself” (Wilson & Peters, 2005).*

The re-conceptualization of urban areas as ‘home’ challenge the stereotypical discourses around the misconception that supporting wellness through fostering cultural identity involves reconnecting with traditional rural lands (Hatala et al., 2019). Additionally, relationships with land are conducive to the balance of the four elements of life: the emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual—as such, reconnection to land improves well-being and self-esteem, and alleviates mental health difficulties (Hatala et al., 2020). The natural environment and land-based connections are crucial to the wellbeing of Indigenous peoples and are considered an Indigenous determinant of health (Hatala et al., 2019).

Identity formation is integral to the healthy development and mental wellness of adolescents (Wexler, 2009b). It entails the development of a sense of self that is contextualized with various meanings across settings (Wexler, 2009b). Identity formation relies heavily on the adolescents’ community and the wider society they are situated within (Wexler, 2009b). For Indigenous youth, identity formation is impinged by colonial discourses that hinder their ability to form a strong cultural identity around their Indigenous heritage (Wexler, 2009a). Cultural identity involves acknowledging the “beliefs, values, practices, norms, traditions, and heritage”

of one's culture and understanding how these factors influence one's sense of self (Wexler, 2009b). Indigenous youth experience challenges navigating the messages from their heritage culture and those from the dominant culture (Wexler, 2009b). The development of a strong cultural identity is particularly crucial for Indigenous youth who experience racism—it serves as a protective factor against mental health challenges and the stressors of daily racism (Wexler, 2009b). Additionally, Indigenous youth can use their heritage culture to position themselves relationally to the community and its history, fostering feelings of connectedness and belonging—this forms the foundation for the associations between cultural affiliation and mental wellbeing among Indigenous youth (Wexler, 2009b). Moreover, many Indigenous youths are unaware of their community's historical trauma and attribute their adversities to personal and collective deficits (Wexler, 2009a). This may be attributed to the effects of modern colonization in their daily lives that prevent them from positioning their hardships within a historical context (Wexler, 2009a). Without comprehensive historical and cultural knowledge, Indigenous youth may be unable to make meaning of their collective experiences and feel uncertain about their heritage (Wexler, 2009a).

### **Mental Wellness**

Mental wellness is a positive psychology concept that refers to holistic wellbeing, strengths, and functioning (Restoule, 2015). Mental wellness through an Indigenous lens involves the balance between the “mind, body, emotion, and spirit” (Restoule, 2015). The incorporation of family and community and the connection to land, language, spirituality and ancestry are central to mental wellness among Indigenous peoples (Restoule, 2015). Furthermore, mental wellness strategies focusing on culture, community development, and collaboration with partners offer a promising framework for Indigenous communities to build on

strengths (Ninomiya et al., 2020). Mental wellness programs consistent with and embodying Indigenous ways of knowing can be used as a preventive measure for ongoing mental health concerns in the community (Ninomiya et al., 2020).

Earlier studies on the wellbeing of Indigenous peoples underscored pathology, blinkering researchers' understanding with a deficit discourse (Askew et al., 2020). The deficit model negated the oppressive practices that impinged the lives of Indigenous peoples and blamed them for their disadvantage (Askew et al., 2020). These deficit approaches enabled the pathologization of the Indigenous community (Bryant et al., 2021). In place of the deficit model, there was a recent shift towards a strengths-based approach. However, the move toward a strengths-based framework in research has led to an “epidemic of strengths-based rhetoric” (Askew et al., 2020). Many studies that used a strengths-based approach had varying ill-defined conceptualizations of the framework and neglected Indigenous understandings of the model (Askew et al., 2020). In essence, researchers from the settler population valorized the strengths-based approach of the Indigenous community. It appeared that researchers waited to provide endorsement for the effectiveness of strengths-based practice, contributing to the appropriation of the Indigenous concept (Askew et al., 2020). Within Indigenous worldviews, the strengths-based approach is not conceptualized as a method but rather an inherent way of looking at things and as a relational practice. For example, a participant in an interview about the Indigenous meaning of strengths-based approaches stated, “strengths-based approach is just looking from a positive way at a person or a community and identifying what all the strengths are that person has, or that community has and building on that” (Askew et al., 2020).

The underpinnings of the strengths-based approach should align with Indigenous ways of knowing and their holistic conceptualization of wellbeing (Bryant et al., 2021). The approach

should avoid disregarding the structural policies that cause inequity and masking deficit models with strengths-based language (Bryant et al., 2021). In particular, ‘resilience’ is frequently mentioned in the strengths-based model of wellbeing (Bryant et al., 2021). Conventional concepts of resilience are centred around Western worldviews that draw on “individual traits, behaviours, attitudes, and problem-solving skills” that foster resilience (Bryant et al., 2021). The notion is that individuals lacking resources can be supported to develop resilience skills to augment their wellbeing. However, this individualistic focus does not capture the relational experiences of Indigenous peoples (Bryant et al., 2021). The focus on individual traits may support the idea that fostering resilience skills in the Indigenous community can absolve mental health inequality—this further disseminates the racialized deficit narrative (Hadjipavlou et al., 2018). In contrast to the Western model, the Indigenous conceptualization of resilience is based on the connections between community, culture, ancestral history, and collective trauma (Njeze et al., 2020). Cultural continuity is a tenant of resilience within the Indigenous perspective. It entails rebuilding Indigenous identity through relations with the “land, language, and spiritual practices” (Njeze et al., 2020). For example, a First Nation community in southern Canada described resilience as the ability to prosper and revitalize culture despite the effects of historical and contemporary colonial violence (Hatala et al., 2016). Additionally, the revitalization of culture fosters resilience by developing connections with Elders in the community, preserving traditional languages, and participating in spiritual practices (Njeze et al., 2020).

### **Cultural Revitalization**

Mental health interventions that incorporate family, culture, nature, and community as part of the healing process may be more effective for Indigenous peoples (Gould et al., 2021). Cultural approaches promote healing from trauma and foster wellbeing from within (Barker,

2017). The focus on interconnectedness and the revitalization of cultural practices can facilitate community and individual healing (Barker, 2017). Indigenous communities that were more attuned to their culture, through “self-governance, art, and language,” experienced fewer suicides than communities that did not have these positive cultural markers (Barker, 2017). Moreover, MacDonald et al. (2013) claimed that Indigenous adults believed that providing cultural activities and education can promote positive cultural identity and community wellbeing. Individual and collective cultural identity is a protective factor against current stressors (Chandler et al., 2008). Indigenous individuals that participated in cultural-based healing programs also developed strong social relationships and collective cultural identity (Jayne et al., 2019). However, individuals and communities devoid of cultural identity may feel like they do not own their past and, as a result, experience disconnection from their past and future (Chandler et al., 2008).

Connection is the fulcrum of “healing, cohesiveness, and transformation” (Hill, 2006). Belonging refers to an individual’s ability to develop and maintain connections with others and plays a significant role in cultural identity formation—it is an unnegotiable human need (Hill, 2006). A sense of belongingness enables feelings of security and promotes well-being, whereas a lack of belongingness is associated with depression and loneliness (Hill, 2006). Belongingness to a community and connection to culture and spirituality are associated with positive mental wellbeing among Indigenous peoples (Burnett et al., 2022; Richmond & Smith, 2012). A recent study on the relationship between community engagement and mental wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrates that Indigenous individuals with a weaker sense of belonging to their community experience greater mental health difficulties (Burnett et al., 2022). As social isolation was mandated to mitigate Covid-19 cases, it compounded the mental health disparities

within the community (Burnett et al., 2022). For many Indigenous peoples, social connection means more than simply connecting with others, it encompasses spiritual connection with everything around (Burnett et al., 2022). During the pandemic, there was limited access to spiritual ceremonies and cultural practices, highlighting the need for culture-based interventions led by Indigenous leaders to promote mental well-being within the community (Burnett et al., 2022).

Individuals' beliefs and values are co-created through their interactions with others and the community they reside in, and these dominant narratives affect identity formation (Liebenberg, 2019). Youth may pursue a sense of belonging through negative avenues when community systems inadvertently or advertently ostracize them and lack spaces for community engagement (Liebenberg, 2019). Thus, youth who have stronger ties to their community experience positive outcomes such as a strong cultural identity (Liebenberg, 2019; Good et al., 2020) and cultural pride (Dubnewick et al., 2018). Freeman (2015) worked with Haudenosaunee youth who participated in a spiritual practice called the Unity Run, where they travelled through traditional Haudenosaunee territory to seek cultural reconnection. The participants of the run were exposed to their cultural history, stories of Creation, and the land in which their ancestors inhabited and this collective experience of the run fostered a sense of belonging and support (Freeman, 2015). One of the Indigenous mentors from the program explained:

*“The question of identity for youth is not so much the individuality or distinctiveness of a person. Those individuals who were not socialized in the cultural environment of the Longhouse expressed that they felt as if they were on a journey*

*seeking to (re)connect to their soul and to their Native culture and identity” (Freeman, 2015).*

Similarly, a study by Dubnewick and colleagues (2018) demonstrates that Indigenous youth who participate in cultural sports experience increased confidence and belongingness through learning more about their traditional values and practices. The cultural games the youth participated in were embedded in historical stories and were passed on through several generations, and now these games offer youth the opportunity to learn about those legacies (Dubnewick et al., 2018).

Culturally-safe interventions such as art-based healing strategies may be effective at promoting mental wellness among Indigenous peoples (Good et al., 2020; Arslanbek et al., 2022; Hatala & Bird-Naytowhow, 2020). These interventions promote cultural reconnection, enabling personal and cultural expression (Good et al., 2020). Community programs that incorporate art-based interventions engender strong cultural identity, self-esteem, and belongingness through positive community engagement (Good et al., 2020). In particular, Good et al. (2020) collaborated with a First Nations community in Yukon Territory to explore the effectiveness of dance and song programs in fostering wellness among youth. The findings from this study indicate that participation in the traditional dance and song program consolidated cultural identity and cultural pride. Similar findings were described by Hatala and Bird-Naytowhow (2020) who interviewed Cree and Métis youth about their experiences participating in a community-based theatre. Youth described how the program allowed them to explore multiple identities and break free from the limits imposed on them by negative stereotypes pervasive in the broader society—the program was effective at strengthening community bond and



encouraging collective meaning-making. Thus, theatre is a transformative art that allows Indigenous youth to rewrite their stories and frame their experiences contextualized in historical and ongoing injustices (Hatala & Bird-Naytowhow, 2020).

Elders can strengthen connections to cultural identity and deconstruct internalized oppression experienced by Indigenous peoples (Hadjipavlou et al., 2018). The title of “Elder” is given to community leaders who have dedicated their lives to healing and are keepers of vast knowledge on cultural, historical, and spiritual practices—this position can be achieved irrespective of age (Hadjipavlou et al., 2018). A recent study by Hadjipavlou et al. (2018) explored the positive outcomes of connecting Indigenous peoples to community Elders. They interviewed individuals who participated in a mental health program that connected with Elders in an urban city. Several participants voiced that after searching desperately for programs aligned with their values, connecting to Elders helped them learn more about themselves. One responder, in particular, mentioned:

*I've gone through counselling before and as I was telling you people look down on the Native people as dirty or useless or not up to par with the other communities... I've always found that that kind of counselling was very detrimental to my mental, emotional well-being. Just being able to sit down with somebody that recognizes you as a human being and also has the cultural education of sage and cedar and the natural medicines that biologically are part of the universe has made a huge difference for me.*

The Elders fostered a safe space, free of judgement and prejudice, enabling healing and spiritual restoration (Hadjipavlou et al., 2018). In addition, Elders' teachings revolve around

leveraging the inherent strengths of the Indigenous community to promote collective well-being (Kennedy et al., 2022). This would entail upholding Indigenous values and an Indigenous frame of reference, while raising critical consciousness around the dominance of Western models in mental health interventions (Kennedy et al., 2022).

In contrast to Western models of treatment that approach health in isolated parts, Indigenous models recognize the harmony of individuals as whole persons (Rowan et al., 2014). Within an Indigenous framework, substance addictions are treated with traditional practices such as sweat lodges, teachings, and nation-specific interventions (Rowan et al., 2014). These programs are grounded in holistic conceptualizations of wellness and address areas of emotional, mental, physical and spiritual health (Rowan et al., 2014). A meta-analysis by Rowan et al. (2014) indicated that culture-based interventions were effective in healing problematic substance use in communities. Indeed, there were differences in the interventions used between Indigenous nations; however, there was an overarching similarity across all nations, with culture-based interventions strengthening cultural identity and spirit (Rowan et al., 2014). Moreover, Indigenous interventions may promote healing among sexual abuse survivors (Reeves & Stewart, 2014). Sexual abuse among the Indigenous community has its roots in colonization processes and is a complex form of trauma. In many instances, Indigenous women who have experienced sexual abuse describe a sense of spiritual disconnection (Rowan & Stewart, 2014). For this, interventions that underscore spirituality may be effective, and working on rewriting their story to attribute feelings of shame and anger as caused by systemic issues (Rowan & Stewart, 2014).

### **Current Study**

The research on mental wellness and the Haudenosaunee is wanting. In an effort to expand Haudenosaunee literature on culture-based interventions and healing, the current study

explores how culture and identity affect the mental wellness of Haudenosaunee people. The research team consists of non-Indigenous academics, Haudenosaunee community partners, and Haudenosaunee participants. The community partners include an advisory committee and an Indigenous consultant from a community agency. The participants engaged in a program called “Firekeepers” which consisted of 12 events of Indigenous cultural learning activities. The cultural events ran once every month for a year and were led by Indigenous knowledge keepers and mentors. These events included basking weaving, cornbread making, ceremonies, and Haudenosaunee art and seed songs. The summer programs were held in-person, while the others were run online via Zoom due to Covid-19 restrictions—the non-Indigenous academics joined the cultural programs virtually. The program was funded by Mental Health Research Canada (MHRC) and the Centre of Excellence (COE).

### **Research Question**

How do culture and identity affect the mental wellness of the Haudenosaunee community?

### **Research Method**

Research frameworks are worldviews, assumptions, and values that comprise a researcher’s view of reality and knowledge (Held, 2019). Ontological and epistemological assumptions define the parameters of research paradigms, which influence the methodology of research studies (Held, 2019). Globally, most research studies have adopted Western research paradigms (Held, 2019). Western research paradigms manifest colonial values, maintaining oppressive conditions within the Indigenous community. Decolonizing research, however, means incorporating Indigenous worldviews and knowledge into research frameworks (Held, 2019).

### **Rationale for Participatory Action Research**

Participatory action research (PAR) is a qualitative methodology that seeks to facilitate social change (McTaggart, 1991). Mutual engagement between researchers and community members forms the backbone of PAR. It is a relational process that values culture and fosters empowerment, increasing autonomy in the communities collaborating in the research. PAR emerged on the basis that dominant research methodologies are insufficient and oppressive to subjects and exploit disenfranchised groups (Tandon, 1981). Conventional research frameworks are grounded in notions of objectivity and researcher expertise, positioning participants as objects of research—efforts to challenge these standards and privilege marginalized voices precipitated the development of PAR, which favoured subjective constructions of truth (Bennett, 2004; Hoare et al., 1993). Within the PAR paradigm, the problem is perceived as originating from the community, and the community has the ability to define and solve the problem (Bennett, 2004). The research is solely conducted to benefit the community rather than the researchers (Bennett, 2004). The community members become co-researchers, enabling authentic inquiry into social reality (Bennett, 2004).

PAR has been used as a framework for research with Indigenous communities as it is congruent with Indigenous knowledge and research perspectives (Hoare et al., 1993; Lucier et al., 2020). PAR integrates the four core values of Indigenous research outlined by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and relevance (Lucier et al., 2020). Government affairs are notorious for creating conditions of disadvantage in Indigenous communities; however, through PAR, Indigenous communities can take control over local problems and collaborate with researchers to develop strategies that align with their worldviews (Hoare et al., 1993). Community members are informed of the results, and knowledge translation is prioritized (Lucier et al., 2020). As discussed in the literature review, a

history of deficit-based research on Indigenous peoples has contributed to negative stereotypes (Lucier et al., 2020). Therefore, approaching studies with a strengths-based framework defined by community partners can foster change (Lucier et al., 2020). It is important to note, however, that although PAR aligns with Indigenous ways of knowing, it is not an Indigenous research paradigm in itself. Indigenous research paradigms are rooted in Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies, and axiology (Wilson, 2008), whereas, PAR research method falls within the critical theory research paradigm (Márquez, 2022).

### **Procedure**

This study was shaped by ongoing active collaboration with a community advisory committee, Clan Mothers, Indigenous community members, and non-Indigenous university researchers. It was determined that a study on the mental wellness of the Haudenosaunee community was necessary based on the burgeoning rates of mental health concerns. A research method that improves the quality of life and facilitates social change is imperative, so participatory action research was chosen. The Haudenosaunee community was integrated into the entire study process, from generating the research question to knowledge translation. The community owns the project, in which they had a voice in topic choice and how the data was analysed. The community advisory committee meetings took place weekly, and they decided how the study unfolded and which programs to run. This collaborative process allows for the decolonization of research by adopting a relational and transformative methodology.

The youth and adults from this study were recruited through the Indigenous consultant from a community agency. Nineteen participants, including four youth between 9–18 years of age and fifteen adults, took part in this study. Participants were purposefully selected by the Indigenous consultant if they participated in the “Firekeepers” program, either during the time of

study or in the past summer. The researchers contacted the community members interested in participating in the study through email. Youth under the age of 16 received a parental consent form and an assent form, and youth ages 16 and older and adults received a consent form. These forms outline the purpose of the study and the risks/benefits associated with participating in the study. When consent was obtained accordingly, the individuals were contacted, and an interview was set up on a mutually agreed upon date.

Semi-structured interviews were used to solicit contextualized details of the experiences of community members and their perspectives on the cultural program. It afforded participants' the flexibility to explore and reflect on their viewpoints, while also maintaining some structure to preclude veering entirely off course (Dubnewick et al., 2018). The interviewer used open-ended questions on culture, identity, and mental wellbeing. For example, questions such as "what have you learned about your culture and identity?" were used as guidelines to conduct the interviews (See Appendix A). The interviews were led through an online video-conferencing service, 'Zoom', and were audio-recorded. On average, the interviews ranged from 15–30 minutes.

### **Planned Analyses**

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the participants' responses following the six steps commonly used to analyse qualitative data (Creswell, 2015). These steps include: (1) organizing the data for analysis, (2) coding the data, (3) using codes to develop themes, (4) building a representation of the findings, (5) making interpretations of the findings, and (6) validating the qualitative findings (Creswell, 2015). The interviews were audio-recorded and was transcribed by the researcher.

The database was hand analyzed and reviewed over multiple occasions to gain a deep understanding of the participants' experience (Creswell, 2015). The interviews were transcribed

digitally, through the use of an online transcribing software. While organizing the content of the interviews, content-specific notes were written along the transcript. The data was then narrowed down into emerging themes. This was done by filtering through the text segments to gather meaning units that were pertinent to the research question. A single code or phrase was used to reflect each meaning unit (Creswell, 2015). After the meaning units were coded, all the codes were listed and screened to aggregate themes (Creswell, 2015). Meaning units that did not fit with any of the themes (outliers) were discarded. The data was interpreted by comparing the findings with past studies and existing literature (Creswell, 2015). Lastly, to ensure the interpretations of the data are accurate, the credibility of the findings was established by discussing trustworthiness and biases that may have shaped the trajectory of the study (Nowell et al., 2017).

### **Study Rigor**

Maintaining methodological rigor in qualitative research allows researchers to gain confidence in findings and improve consistency in methodology (Nowell et al., 2017). Trustworthiness entails credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Nowell et al., 2017). Credibility speaks to the integrity between the respondent's experiences and the interpretations derived by the researchers (Nowell et al., 2017). In this study, the advisory committee had the opportunity to member check the results. They reviewed the findings and trusted that the interpretations of the results accurately reflected the experiences of the respondents. Transferability involves the generalizability of the research findings (Nowell et al., 2017). It is the researcher's responsibility to provide as much detail as possible of the results, so users of the knowledge are able to make informed decisions regarding transferability (Nowell et al., 2017). The overarching theme of cultural-based interventions to promote mental wellness can

be applied to the Indigenous community as a whole. Although Indigenous Nations have many similarities relative to their experiences of colonial violence and cultural desecration, Nations cannot be homogenized into one group (Hart, 2004). Thus, special cultural considerations must be taken when working with various Indigenous communities. To reach dependability, researchers are required to be transparent with their research process and clearly outline the measures undertaken to obtain the results (Nowell et al., 2017). This can be achieved by creating an audit trail which concerns systematically noting the decision-making process around the theories and methodologies used and the ongoing reflexivity of researcher positionality (Nowell et al., 2017). As the primary investigator, I articulated my situatedness and reflected on my own worldviews and biases that I bring into the study. I am aware of my positionality and reviewed my emotions and feelings throughout the study. This process ensured dependability, which furthered the trustworthiness of the study. Lastly, confirmability is achieved when researchers are able to display how the data was analysed and describe how they reached the conclusions (Nowell et al., 2017). During the data analysis stage of the study, I had regular consultations with my supervisor, and reviewed the codes and the derived themes throughout the study.

## **Results**

Study participants were sought from the advisory group, community, knowledge keepers, staff and youth. The focal question was: How does knowing your culture and identity help you be healthy mentally? There were 81 meaning units that were described by 32 codes. Six themes emerged from responses to the question. The themes included: (1) Culture gives my life purpose and meaning that fosters mental well-being, (2) Knowing who I am as an Indigenous person gives me a feeling of safety and a sense of belonging, (3) Practising my culture makes me want to learn more and give back to my community, (4) Spiritual connectedness is fundamental to my



holistic healing and wellbeing, (5) I learn something new that helps me understand myself better every time I receive a teaching, and (6) Pride in my culture gives me strength because I know there is so much wisdom to draw from.

***Culture gives my life purpose and meaning that fosters mental well-being***

Participants note that hands-on cultural activities serve as a distraction against daily stressors. Practical teachings such as basket weaving encourage mindfulness and promote mental well-being. Traditional teachings help community members feel grounded as reflected in these quotes from knowledge keepers and youth:

*... I really like the crafting stuff just because it does take me out of my everyday life and gives me something to focus on. Meditation doesn't really work for me. I'm not that patient of a person, I have to be kind of like hands-on or busy in some way. So the crafting really helps me to kind of escape from the hustle and bustle, busy life...  
(knowledge keeper)*

*I think like crafts and stuff. Like things to do, to entertain to. We do sometimes hear people talk so much. You smile and you do, for your well-being. Yeah, paint and things. I make blankets. And that's why I like doing that, [it's] therapeutic for you. (youth)*

Traditional teachings serve to enhance mental health. Participants described how cultural activities have replaced previous coping mechanisms. These positive practices provide meaning and give purpose. For example, an advisory group member explained that:

*Culture is an outlet. Traditional teachings, it is my beadwork, I create something...(my) outlet used to be drugs and alcohol, and going through my healing, now I know I was running away... traditional teachings are an outlet, when we can learn to do these things, use hands and minds to create something that has a huge impact on your mental health... (advisory committee)*

Recent losses of life in the community have been painful for community members, particularly youths. Engaging in cultural teachings and events support youth mental health. As a knowledge keeper expressed:

*And with all the deaths that we've had in the past couple of months, it's all. Mental health and using drugs and alcohol to cope with it in the moment and through it. And they're young...our youth are hurting so much...fortunately, this is one of the only programs that's out there...yet it's only like once a month. (knowledge keeper)*

***Knowing who I am as an Indigenous person gives me a feeling of safety and a sense of belonging***

Youth who attended the cultural programs felt connected to their culture and community. Participating in the cultural events inspired a sense of belonging, improving their mental well-being. They appreciated how everyone participated in the activities together as a community.

*Yeah, I do agree with that [chances to learn about culture are needed]. I mean, the food is good there. And you can just connect with all the people there and I think it does help your mental health being there. (youth)*

*I like how the people that were dancing. I've never seen that before...I actually, like, connected with my culture. And then I started dancing. Everyone there started dancing too. (youth)*

The cultural events brought community members together and promoted community engagement. Participants were immersed in the activities and reconnected to their culture, which supported feelings of safety and belonging.

*I liked the programming that they are engaging their community members. The young ones out there, variety of activities they do, nice to see that our people are into it as much as they are. (advisory committee)*

*To be part of the feeling when you are a part of something...the same kind of thing. They are there for the same reasons and you just connect, the feelings that are there...it has its own goodness... (advisory committee)*

Participants also noted that the cultural events were a safe space for youth to receive the support necessary for their mental health. They were well-received by the community mentors who ran the programs fostering a sense of belonging in the community.

*And with parents that are worried about this and that or, you know, all the stuff that they're going through, they snap at their kids. And those poor babies don't know what to do with it. They think they're in the wrong, but they're not. Yeah. And because of programs like this that they get a break from that. (knowledge keeper)*

*Nice for our young people to see something good, when they look at something or see something it plays a big part in modelling. (advisory committee)*

Cultural programs facilitated positive relationships. Interconnectedness among community members forms a strong foundation for youths to rely on. Youths learned about their Indigenous ancestry with community mentors, promoting safety and belonging. A staff member described their experiences with the cultural program:

*Helpers...two sewers, shirts and skirts, watching them being made...important to be kind and gentle and patient when you teach...the teachers were very good that way... they talked about how they were taught...one had been sewing for 40 years and had a mentor who showed her...to have a sense of pride in what you are doing, that the clothing is well made. (staff)*

***Practising my culture makes me want to learn more and give back to my community***

Youth noted that learning about their culture encouraged them to seek more knowledge outside of the program. They enjoyed learning about who they are and cultural ways.

*I do really like learning about my culture...as soon as the program ended, I wanted to do it again. (youth)*

*It's nice to get out there for once and quietly, learn about my culture, but, I haven't learned about it at all. (youth)*

*I guess I just like learning about it...everything...I just love learning about, everything about it. I just love my culture. (youth)*

*I learned like a lot of new things when I went to the lodge, I'm pretty sure... I learned about my culture and stuff. (youth)*

Each time participants hear a teaching, they learn something new and valuable that can be applied to their life. They develop new meanings from the teachings and refer back to them. A knowledge keeper, who was asked how learning about culture is important, commented:

*It's really my job because I'm a teacher so also that's learning and teaching about the culture but sometimes I feel like I become like this empty vessel and then having these sessions really helps fill up my spirit or my whatever it is I need. It helps fill me up when I can listen and be reminded of teachings or the lessons in life and how we're all here together to experience things, so that really helps me being a teacher you just give, give, give all the time and then sometimes I need someone...I need a teacher myself so that's what those sessions have been for me.*

*(knowledge keeper)*

Similarly, knowledge keepers explained how they would always continue to learn and that sharing knowledge is part of their life. They shared their knowledge and teachings on cultural practices to others in the community.

*I take those back with me and share what I've learned from whoever it might be, whatever the knowledge keepers or Elders, so I pass those teachings onto youth.*  
*(knowledge keeper)*

*There are so many teachings around everything. That's why I won't stop learning about the things I already know, basically, because there is, like I said, it goes so much more in depth that the more you learn, the more you want to learn kind of thing. It's not a religion, it's a way of life kind of thing. (knowledge keeper)*

### ***Spiritual connectedness is fundamental to my holistic healing and wellbeing***

Youth expressed mental health as a “broken spirit” and how the cultural program supports individuals with mental health challenges.

*I think mental health means people can have like a really bad mental health, it can make you sad or it can, like, make a broken spirit... and the group really helped with that, with mental health. (youth)*

Participants shared how they conceptualized mental well-being with a holistic lens. They explained that mental well-being encompasses emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical health. For example, a knowledge keeper, who was asked what good mental health means, shared:

*Have you ever heard of the word Skaná? I mean, sort of like peace in our language. Like, how are you? Like, but, I mean, like, how are you all together? It's Skaná. Physically, mentally, spiritually, everything. Like, how are you? (knowledge keeper)*

Spiritual rebalancing is necessary for healing and balance leads to good mental health. Mental health concerns are associated with the disconnection and neglect of one's spirit. Reconnecting with traditional practices and cultivating a strong cultural identity supports the healing of a broken spirit.

*Traditional healing, mental health is common and you hear it all the time now, to me this is a label a common one getting normalized among our young people, they are using it and it doesn't do any good for them, we've evolved to this point on a worldly level, amongst our people that mental health part was always there but because we always took care of our spirit, daily things to their spirit, maybe it is their spirit is not being engaged, nurturing, taking care of that's why we have become to this point where it is normal to have a mental health issue and that's why we've evolved to this because we forgot to take care of our spirit, a simple solution but needs an education piece, re-educated and relearn who they are, identity is a key to strengthening our young people, moving forward, rebuilding, traditional taking care of your spirit used to be a way of life, a big*

*chunk has been taken from them, the key is to return to the spirit teachings. (advisory committee)*

*... feel the presence of our ancestors there, sang songs, to doctor our spirit, clean it up, that's the power of the lodge, rebalancing our spirit, to become holistically well, they call it a rebirth, rebalanced, felt really good having been isolated for so long from other people and culture, such an amazing experience to help ourselves this way, we had a very good teacher. (staff)*

*Go to your community and connect with an Elder, arts and crafts that connect you to your culture...connect with yourself spiritually when you're struggling with yourself. (staff)*

*You're just there in the moment and concentrating, listening to what the speakers are talking about, trying to apply the teaching to our personal lives, whether it be emotional or even like a spiritual healing or awakening outside the teachings that we saw and try to incorporate it into everyday life as well. (knowledge keeper)*

***I learn something new that helps me understand myself better every time I receive a teaching***

Teachings and knowledge-sharing events help community members learn more about themselves and who they are as Indigenous peoples. Learning about culture and ways facilitates strong identity formation. An advisory group member noted:



*The things that teachings events and sharing that have happened are needed so much...those kind of things are needed over and over and over, you're not going to get it one time, that's part of our culture, that's how we share knowledge, hearing the same thing over and over and the different stories we heard...every time you hear it you get something different out of it, this brings our culture back to life, trying to plant those seed over time, time to relearn who we truly are. (advisory committee)*

Through the cultural program, community members participated in traditional ceremonies and teachings and were able to pass them to their children. Passing down the knowledge is a way of keeping the culture alive, enabling youth to connect with their Indigenous identity.

*Ceremony, teachings, identity and lost identity in the web of what is going on around us...we have to give it to them as children and I would encourage young parents and young families...so young families have to learn so[they] can pass on to their kids... (advisory committee)*

*... they tried to take the culture away and kill the culture — the fact that we are still here and we know the songs — they don't have to let the ways die — as long as we're alive it will be here — the more youth see that they will follow. (advisory committee)*

*We are told that we are supposed to pass this stuff down — our language and identity are our existence. Language learning is so important, to me that was a great way to reach out to the kids, amazing project. (advisory committee)*

*One of the reasons that knowledge keeping — whatever the participants are learning is put in the ways of a story so they can pass those teachings down. (advisory committee)*

*The Firekeepers — we want the youth to become the Firekeepers — they become the wisdom keepers and pass that knowledge along to others and learn who they are.*

*(advisory committee)*

***Pride in my culture gives me strength because I know there is so much wisdom to draw from***

In the program, participants learned about their cultural richness and strength that fosters pride in who they are as Indigenous peoples. Learning the truth enables the development of a strong cultural identity.

*What we have to do is we have to show them the good things, it is important for them to learn the history and the truth — that's their foundation — when they know the truth... we have to invest and empower our youth, empower. (advisory committee)*

*... in today's society we are faced with people that don't understand our culture. We're uncomfortable within the non-Native society and we are away from our family and community — in that different environment we get quiet — they don't understand their culture. (staff)*

*I think it is always good to have culture activities because there's a lot of people...stuck in like the Western society, I would say. (knowledge keeper)*

*Some participants commented that knowing their Indian name will help them connect to their spirit and identity.*

*Cultural identity is a really big issue... I want to know their Indian name — you'd have to go to Longhouse to get those — spiritual connections too...prayers and ceremonies you need Indian name for creator to help you... (community member)*

*...my own native name. Yeah. I like my language, and I like it just like... my culture... my language. They're just all my identity. (youth)*

### **Discussion**

This study explored the perspectives of the Haudenosaunee community members on the positive impacts of cultural reconnection on identity and mental well-being. Previous studies on Indigenous peoples underscored pathology, were seldom beneficial to the community and were exploitive in nature (Wilson, 2008; Gould et al., 2021). Community members were rarely included in the research process and had limited to no input on the topics of study (Wilson, 2008). Thus, this study intended to reflect the strengths and knowledge within the community and acknowledge the historical legacies to promote holistic wellness. The researchers worked alongside the Advisory Committee during the entirety of the research and knowledge mobilization processes.

The interviews that were conducted centered around the following research question: How do culture and identity affect the mental wellness of Indigenous individuals from the Haudenosaunee community? The interview excerpts maintain the essence of the participant's experiences, but were moderately modified to improve readability. Six main themes emerged

from the interviews. To summarize the results, each participant took something away from the cultural program and learned more about who they are as an Indigenous person, including curiosity about culture and reframing their life experiences in historical context.

### **Culture gives my life purpose and meaning that fosters mental well-being**

Participants noted that engaging in cultural activities distracts them from daily stressors. One participant mentioned that mediation does not work for them and that hands-on activities such as crafts help them escape from their busy life. Similarly, Hatala & Bird-Naytowhow (2020) describe that for Indigenous youth in cities, cultural programs are avenues for “escape”. Indigenous youth may experience racial profiling, substance use, or the daily effects of marginalization. The youth in their study participated in a cultural theatre program and expressed the relief they experienced in the theatre environment. Participating in the theatre program gave them a sense of control and a chance to break free from any unfavourable settings or social restraints (Hatala & Bird-Naytowhow, 2020). Moreover, art-based cultural activities have been expressed by participants as being therapeutic and promoting well-being. Traditional rhythmic art practices such as knitting or beadwork can be soothing and meditative in nature (Arslanbek et al., 2021). As these practices are grounding, they may help with emotional regulation and the disclosure of traumatic events, such as abuse (Arslanbek et al., 2021). Additionally, traditional crafts may carry deeper connections and meanings within the community as they are passed on for generations (Arslanbek et al., 2021). Community programs that include art-based activities foster holistic healing and a sense of safety through community engagement (Arslanbek et al., 2021). Specifically, engaging in traditional Indigenous art practice may facilitate communities in reclaiming their cultural identity and addressing historical and ongoing trauma through reconnection to their heritage and spirituality (Arslanbek et al., 2021).

Traditional teachings and cultural activities have helped some participants replace unhealthy coping mechanisms. They described how culture is a positive outlet to foster mental wellbeing and healing. For some, alcohol and drugs were means to deal with mental health difficulties, and by practising cultural activities, they were able to find purpose and meaning in their life. Research demonstrates that cultural connectivity and spirituality are protective factors against alcohol abuse and addictions (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008; Rowan et al., 2014). Indigenous mental health interventions that incorporate culture and spirituality facilitate substance abuse healing (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008). Fleming and Ledogar (2008) posited that youth with a strong cultural identity reported less problematic substance use than those with a weak cultural identity. Furthermore, a knowledge keeper expressed that the cultural program provides youth with a safe space to grieve and process the recent losses of life in their community. To cope with the pain of loss, some youth turn to alcohol and drugs and engage in problematic substance use. However, the teachings and cultural practices from the Firekeepers program allowed youth to reconnect to their heritage and learn traditional ways and healthy avenues to cope with loss.

**Knowing who I am as an Indigenous person gives me a feeling of safety and a sense of belonging**

Belongingness encompasses relating to and being accepted by others and is integral to maintaining mental wellbeing (Hill, 2006). Many interviewees spoke to the feelings of belongingness and safety they experienced through participating in the Firekeepers cultural program. The program connected youth to their heritage and afforded them the opportunity to engage with other community members. Feelings of belongingness are central to developing a positive cultural identity and inspire a sense of security (Hill, 2006). Youth are impressionable to the messages, values, and beliefs of the people around them and the communities they inhabit,

which all play a role in how they feel about themselves (Hill, 2006). The youth who participated in the Firekeepers program described feelings of interconnectedness and sharing a collective experience with other community members. The engendering of belongingness and security through cultural practices has been found in previous studies with youth (Freeman, 2015; MacDonald et al., 2013). Additionally, the program provided youth a safe space to reconsolidate their cultural identity. They were able to build positive and meaningful relationships with Indigenous mentors in their community. The mentors fostered a learning environment where youth were taught about their cultural practices with patience and care. Moreover, having a strong social network is imperative to mental wellbeing, for youth in particular, as they provide emotional resources, security, and encourage health-promoting behaviours during transition periods (Goodman et al., 2019; Richmond & Smith, 2012). Social supports, in the form of positive family, peer, and community ties, work as protective factors for vulnerable youth (Goodman et al., 2019). Communities with positive social network markers and active engagement experience fewer mental health concerns (Richmond & Smith, 2012).

Community engagement was another component that contributed to a sense of solidarity among participants. The program, open to all community members, encouraged cohesiveness. Learning about their Indigenous identity informed participants about their connectedness to the universe, land, and the relationships with themselves and their community—this connection is often symbolized as a circle within the Indigenous worldview (Hill, 2006). Fontaine (1999) described a circle as “a symbol of infinity and interconnectedness...when people come together in a circle, there is a spirit of oneness and a sense of sacredness”. This was commensurate to the experience of some participants who described how transformative the program was when community members came together for the same reasons and took part in cultural revitalization.

For some participants, the Firekeepers program was the first time they had shared a collective experience with their community. This program brought to fruition the possibilities of community-based interventions to promote wellness and community strength. Kral et al. (2009) claim that culture-based practices that bring communities together work towards alleviating mental health concerns and enable positive outcomes for individuals. The sense of belonging that arises from these relational cultural activities can be a protective factor for at-risk individuals (Goodman et al., 2019).

### **Practising my culture makes me want to learn more and give back to my community**

Many youths who attended the Firekeepers program expressed that they were encouraged to learn more about their culture outside of the program. For some, it was the first time learning about their history and traditional practises. By connecting youth to Elders and familiarizing them with the traditional teachings, they are able to pass on their knowledge to the next generations, promoting cultural continuity (Dubnewick et al., 2018). Moreover, a knowledge keeper, who is an elementary school teacher, shared that they apply the knowledge they gain from traditional teachings to their classroom, passing on knowledge to the youth and incorporating Indigenous knowledge into the school environment. They appreciate being able to listen to teachings and gaining information from the program, enabling the reconnection and healing of their spirit. This type of learning is a way of life and is an inherent part of the Indigenous culture (Brant, 2009). This idea was also described by another knowledge keeper in the study:

*“There are so many teachings around everything. That's why I won't stop learning about the things I already know, basically, because there is, like I said, it goes so much more in*

*depth that the more you learn, the more you want to learn kind of thing. It's not a religion, it's a way of life kind of thing.*

This response also suggests that learning about culture encourages delving deeper and finding meaning in the teachings. The Firekeepers program inspired participants to continue to learn about their culture and pass it on to future generations.

### **Spiritual connectedness is fundamental to my holistic healing and wellbeing**

An Indigenous worldview conceptualizes social connectedness as both connection to others as well as to spirituality (Burnett et al., 2022). Spirituality goes beyond an inward journey and permeates all aspects of one's life (Baskin, 2016). Ceremonies, healing circles, and teachings can be used to promote spiritual wellbeing (Marsh et al., 2015). Participants elucidated a rounded concept of mental wellbeing that included physical, mental, and spiritual health. All the aggregates of wellbeing are equally important and cannot be attended to in isolation. Previous literature has described this holistic understanding of wellbeing with an Indigenous conceptual framework, such that the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual parts play an equally important role in balancing the whole-self (Hunter et al., 2006; Blackstock, 2008). Similarly, the Haudenosaunee 'good mind' epistemological model underscores the holistic nature of wellness and the imperative role of spirituality in healing and regaining balance (Brant, 2020). The equilibrium of the four pillars of health contributes to a 'good mind' (Brant, 2020). Overlooking any one of these components impinges on the wellness of the individual (Moodley & West, 2005). Indigenous models of counselling are centered around "balancing the sacred aspects of the self", in which the self is a relational construct (Reeves & Stewart, 2014). In contrast, Western interventions for mental health revolve around individualist notions and distinct differences between the mind and body (Reeves & Stewart, 2014). When these Western notions



are deep-rooted in counselling provisions, it may impede the healing journey of Indigenous peoples (Reeves & Stewart, 2014).

“Broken spirit” was a phrase used by a youth to describe the meaning of mental health. This consolidates the holistic understanding of mental health rooted in spirituality. Partaking in the cultural program helped heal participants’ spirits, ultimately promoting mental wellness. The term “broken spirit” has been noted in previous studies (Reeves & Stewart, 2014). Reeves & Stewart (2014) collaborated with Anishnawbe Health Toronto to explore Indigenous healing processes in relation to the recovery from trauma. Participants commented on spiritual wounding after experiencing abuse and feeling disconnected from their spiritual health (Reeves & Stewart, 2014). Another Indigenous healer from Reeves’ & Stewart’s (2014) study made the connection between a “broken spirit” and substance abuse. Some individuals felt they had lost direction in their life after suffering from spiritual wounds (Reeves & Stewart, 2014). As the sense of self is contextualized and relational, those with spiritual disconnection can no longer relate to the environment around them (Reeves & Stewart, 2014). Moreover, Lavalley & Poole (2009) contended that healing interventions must address the ‘broken spirit’ caused by colonization through the revitalization of cultural and spiritual practices. This was also described by a youth from the present study, who mentioned that the cultural program augmented healing of the ‘broken spirit’ and improved their mental health.

Several participants described the necessity for spiritual rebalancing to maintain mental wellness. In particular, spirituality is a part of the self that requires daily engagement—it is through this continuous maintenance that promotes mental wellbeing. A member of the advisory committee posited that re-education of spiritual teachings is imperative to mitigate the mental health disparities of future generations. Research has found that cultural continuity and the

incorporation of spiritual healing in healing interventions promote wellness (Kirmayer et al., 2000; Hatala & Bird-Naytowhow, 2020). Furthermore, participants mentioned the positive impact sweat lodges had on rebalancing their spirit and supporting holistic wellness. This was in accord with St-Denis & Walsh (2016), who describe the spiritual awakening they experienced from attending sweat lodge ceremonies. They were able to connect to their ancestors and the Creator, feeling more attuned to the environment around them.

***I learn something new that helps me understand myself better every time I receive a teaching***

An advisory committee member noted that traditional teachings are a compulsory part of their Indigenous heritage. Through teachings, Indigenous peoples learn about their cultural identity and inherent strengths in the community. Traditionally, knowledge is transmitted orally and is passed onto generations by Elders and knowledge keepers (Brant, 2009). Indigenous individuals learn more about themselves and feel empowered by the teachings, and are then able to disseminate the knowledge to others (Hunter et al., 2006; McIvor et al., 2009). Without the oral custom of passing on teachings, Indigenous ways of knowing will be lost, and youth will not have access to Indigenous knowledge (Kennedy et al., 2022). Additionally, a participant in the current study mentioned planting seeds for the next generation to promote cultural revitalization and continuity. In order to keep the culture alive and retain Indigenous knowledge, communities engage with Elders to spread teachings to others. This was also described by a participant in a study by Kennedy et al (2022), who described:

*“The beauty of listening and then explaining is the gift of sharing knowledge. We need to see where this comes from and sprinkle culture back into our landscape like seeds that will grow. We can all be helpers.”*

Moreover, an advisory committee member from the present study elaborated on the custom of receiving the same teachings throughout one's life and gaining something new from it each time. This practice of repeating oral teachings promotes cultural continuity and bolsters cultural identity. The lifelong learning of Indigenous ways of knowing and teachings upholds the legacy of Indigenous peoples' way of life (Kennedy et al., 2022).

Providing opportunities for youth to receive traditional teachings was discussed as imperative to promote positive identity construction by several advisory committee members. The Firekeepers program allowed young families and individuals unaware of their traditional practices to learn about who they are and their history legacies. This ensures that the youth are then able to gain something from the program and pass it on to the next generation, strengthening the culture. Research demonstrates that youth are able to reframe colonized constructions of cultural identity by reconnecting with their intergenerational teachings and learning about the truth of their history (Fast et al., 2021). This enables youth to situate their adversities in the context of the historical and ongoing effects of colonialism and construct an identity based on collective experiences and strengths (Wexler, 2009a). Additionally, an advisory committee member discussed the importance of passing down their traditional language to the next generations. The traditional language is intertwined with their cultural identity, and preserving it is necessary to keep the culture alive. Youth, in particular, should be exposed to their traditional language as it is at risk of extinction and is fundamental to healthy identity development. This is commensurate with the literature demonstrating that traditional language serves as a protective factor to promote wellness in the Indigenous community (McIvor et al., 2009). Indigenous

communities with greater levels of traditional language knowledge had fewer cases of suicides than communities without this marker (McIvor et al., 2009).

**Pride in my culture gives me strength because I know there is so much wisdom to draw from**

Attending the Firekeepers program elicited feelings of pride and strengthened cultural identity among those who participated. Some participants mentioned that the program informed them of the myriad strengths present in the Indigenous culture—they were empowered by learning the truth. When youth learn about their heritage and spiritual practices, it fosters positive cultural identity development and engenders Indigenous pride (Lavalley & Poole, 2009). Njeze et al. (2020) claim that youth who had opportunities to engage in community cultural programs and dress in traditional clothing felt a sense of cultural pride for their Indigenous heritage. Similarly, a participant mentioned that the Firekeepers program allowed community members—who were heavily influenced by the Western culture and feeling disconnected as a result—to reconnect to their culture. Engaging in cultural traditions with a sense of pride encourages holistic healing and spiritual awakening (Lavelle & Poole, 2009). This was supported by the participants' experiences of empowerment from attending the Firekeepers cultural program.

A lack of understanding of the history and culture of Indigenous people was noted by a participant. The construction of a valued identity is thwarted when Indigenous individuals live in a society where they are discriminated against and pathologized for mental health discrepancies. This is commensurate with the research that describes how pervasive stigma and racial stereotypes associated with being Indigenous are detrimental to the mental wellbeing of Indigenous peoples (Lavalley & Poole, 2009; Reeves & Stewart, 2014). The depiction of Indigenous peoples in the dominant discourses of media also affects the mental health of the

community (Kirmayer et al., 2011). Furthermore, the history of a community impacts the meaning-making and identity-development processes, which are directly linked to mental health outcomes (Wexler, 2009b). An individual's historical background and heritage provide a framework for curating a sense of purpose, belonging, and self-worth (Wexler, 2009b). In particular, youth may be unaware of historical and contemporary effects of colonialism and, thus, internalize the oppressive messages prevalent in society; without opportunities for collective meaning-making, they may experience more significant mental health disparities (Wexler, 2009b). Reframing the health inequalities experienced by the Indigenous community from a socio-structural framework and as directly linked to colonisation is imperative to replace the discriminatory discourses (Kennedy et al., 2022). Moreover, receiving traditional teachings can facilitate healing by increasing cultural pride and encouraging collective meaning-making (Reeves & Stewart, 2014). In the current study, a participant mentioned the importance for community members and youth to learn about the historical legacies. Learning about the truth can empower youth and provide a strong framework for positive identity development.

## **Conclusion**

### **Implications**

Western values and worldviews permeate all aspects of counselling and psychotherapy (Bedi, 2018). There are hidden assumptions that Western counselling practices since empirically validated, can be generalizable across cultures. However, it is erroneous to assume that Western views are universal truths rather than culturally-influenced objectives (Bedi, 2018). Negating the roles of culture in the manifestation and healing of mental health difficulties perpetuates the marginalization of disenfranchised groups (Bedi, 2018). In particular, the imposition of Western psychological interventions on Indigenous communities minimizes service accessibility and

further augments mental health disparities (Bedi, 2018). Indigenous healing practices are undergirded in holistic wellness and target the emotional, spiritual, physical, and mental aspects of health (Hart, 2004). Indigenous ways of knowing are embedded in relationality and collective worldviews; in contrast, Western epistemologies are grounded in individualistic notions, focusing on individual behaviour and change (Hart, 2004). To improve the applicability of mental health interventions to the Indigenous community, researchers and healthcare professionals can adopt a stance of cultural humility and understand how Western epistemologies govern the global discourse around mental health (Bedi, 2018).

The historical and ongoing effects of colonialism and cultural desecration have frustrated the development of a strong cultural identity among Indigenous individuals (Goodman et al., 2019). Mental health interventions that underscore cultural revitalization promote mental wellness and healing within the community (Barker, 2017). Cultural practices such as healing circles and sweat lodges have been traditionally used to promote mental wellness and to maintain the spirit of the Haudenosaunee people, while the daily tending to one's spirit promotes harmony and connection to the creator (Brant, 2009). Moreover, there is a burgeoning rate of suicides among First Nations youth in Canada (Barker et al., 2017). As described in the literature review, Indigenous youth benefit from cultural programs that foster a sense of belonging and bolster positive community connections (Liebenberg et al., 2019). Youth who engage in cultural practices and learn about their history are able to construct meaning from their collective experiences, situating hardships within a colonial violence context (Wexler, 2009a). Mental health practitioners can apply this when working with Indigenous youth to promote mental wellbeing and for suicide prevention.

There are over 600 bands of First Nations in Canada (Rowan et al., 2014). Albeit similar in their experiences of colonialism and epistemologies, they all have unique cultural practices (Wilson, 2008). Hence, the findings from one study with an Indigenous nation cannot be generalizable to all the other Indigenous communities (Rowan et al., 2014). This would be antithetical to the culturally responsive framework, as it fails to highlight the distinctive characteristics that compose each group. Nonetheless, researchers and mental health professionals can work with community leaders to identify how Indigenous practices that accord with the community's traditions can be implemented in the interventions to facilitate mental wellbeing. More attention can be drawn to broader concepts, such as the importance of enhancing collective cultural identity and spiritual connections, rather than specific traditions (Rowan et al., 2014).

### **Researcher Positionality**

Positionality entails the worldviews, ontological and epistemological assumptions of researchers, and are also influenced by their intersecting cultural identities such as age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and social class (Holmes, 2020). Discussing the positionality of the researcher is crucial in qualitative studies as it inevitably shapes the interpretation of data and the meaning-making process (Creswell, 2015). Wilson (2008) asserts that the self-reflection of researchers is a prerequisite when working with Indigenous communities. As relationality is at the forefront of Indigenous knowledge (Wilson, 2008), the consideration of multiple perspectives and ways of knowing is crucial. This reflexivity is an ongoing process in research and enables researchers to articulate and evaluate their situatedness (Holmes, 2020).

I should preface by clarifying that I am not of Indigenous descent. I am a South Asian woman, and I was born and raised in Canada. My parents fled their native country, escaping civil

war, and sought refuge in Canada. Despite the hardships my family experienced, we remain beneficiaries of genocide against Indigenous peoples. Our complicity in settler colonialism allowed us to invest in stolen land and reap the benefits at the expense of violence against Indigenous peoples. Moreover, as a person of colour, I have experienced discrimination, however, my experiences are inherently different from the racism experienced by Indigenous peoples—the discrimination towards Indigenous peoples subjected them to the forced acquisition of their land and the desecration of their culture. Settler privilege, therefore, transcends racism in which even non-Indigenous people of colour can experience this privilege.

Prior to this project, I had a smattering of Indigenous history and culture that I gained from school. I began to notice the cursory efforts in the school system to acknowledge our dark past and how this was reflected daily in our structural and political systems. I felt that some of the efforts taken towards reconciliation were rhetorical and an impression of settler fragility prevailed in the discourses around truth and reconciliation. When my supervisor presented the opportunity to work alongside the Indigenous community, I trusted it was an invitation to learn more about Indigenous ways of knowing and how I, as a researcher and counselling student, can unpack colonialism in the field and facilitate reconciliation. It is my responsibility to ensure that I am capturing the inherent strengths of the Indigenous community and drawing critical attention to the discriminatory stereotypes prevalent in our society, so as not to perpetuate them further. I acknowledge that my biases and intersecting cultural identities inevitably influence the interpretation of the results, and so I delineate my positionality in this research.

Growing up within two distinct cultures (the dominant culture and my heritage culture), I was embedded in paradoxical worldviews around mental health. Learning how to negotiate the viewpoints from my two cultures was a constant challenge. In this project, it was important that I



reflected on the specific areas of the two cultures that I have differentially resonated with and how that shows up in my research. Namely, through the lens of my host culture, mental health is conceptualized with a medical model. In this paradigm, mental disorders are perceived as originating from abnormalities in brain chemistry and brain dysfunction—a fragmentary understanding of the mind and body as exclusive entities (Vukic et al., 2011). There is a greater emphasis on the biological underpinnings of the disorders and a reliance on pharmacology for treatments (Vukic et al., 2011). Contrary to the Western model of mental health, my heritage culture practices a holistic conceptualization of wellbeing. In my traditional culture, social functioning and maintaining social relationships, in particular, are markers of mental wellbeing. Thus, relationality and the wellbeing of the collective play a large role in how mental wellbeing is perceived. As it is a collectivist culture, more value is placed on supporting harmony in relationships and following social behaviours that are shaped by accepted norms. Additionally, spirituality/religion plays a role in fostering mental wellbeing in my heritage culture as it contributes to resiliency within our community. Individuals may use religious bracelets and herbal medicine to promote spiritual healing.

My undergraduate program was grounded in the neurobiological foundations of mental health. Although I spent four years delving into this domain, I believed this reductionist approach was unable to capture the totality of mental health perspectives. This framework neglected the voices of marginalized people, sustaining Eurocentric hegemony in mental health discourses and academia. Additionally, it did not attend to the nuances of contextualized living experiences and the impact of social systems on mental health. My graduate program, however, implemented a socially-just and culturally responsive framework that grounded our practice and research. This frame of reference invites curiosity and receptiveness to learn about the myriad experiences of

people and their constructions of reality and truth. I found that my values and ways of knowing aligned with those of the program. I believe in multiple truths, that socio-political factors affect reality, and that biases impact knowledge construction. Working towards equality and advocating for social justice are very important to me and are values that directly influence how I approach my research question and interpret the results.

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## **Appendix A**

### Interview Questions

#### **Phase 3 (February – April, 2022)**

##### **Individual Interview**

**Age of participants (only aggregates reported)**

**Sex of participants (only aggregates reported)**

What have you learned about your culture and identity? How does knowing about your culture and identity help you be healthy mentally?

## Curriculum Vitae

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