

Manidookewin: Exploring Community Wellness with Elders and Knowledge Keepers in
Whitesand First Nation

by

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HBA, Lakehead University, 2021
BA, Lakehead University, 2021

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We acknowledge and respect the Ləkʷwəŋən (Songhees and Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Ləkʷwəŋən and WSÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

This research explores community health and wellness guided by the wisdom of three Elders and knowledge keepers from Whitesand First Nation and is rooted in Anishinaabe ways of knowing and being. Using Indigenous research methodologies and guided interviews informed by Jo-Ann Archibald's (2008) Indigenous Storywork framework, this study examines the research question, "How do Elders and knowledge keepers in Whitesand First Nation define community wellness?". Through an Indigenized thematic analysis, the conversations with these Elders and knowledge keepers revealed four main themes along with subthemes that provide insights into our community wellness practices as Anishinaabe people from Whitesand First Nation.

These bundles of knowledge were organized in a visual representation of a medicine wheel and were placed in the corresponding sectors that represent the life cycle for us as Anishinaabe people. The first theme was Culture and it was placed in the East, Waabinong, which included the subthemes of Language, Cultural Resiliency and Resurgence, and Sense of Belonging. The second theme, Land, was placed in the South, Zhaawanang, and contains the subthemes of Medicine and Healing, and Source of Life. The third theme, placed in the West, Ningaabii-anong, was Community, animated by the subthemes of Intergenerational Learning, Taking Care of one Another, and Roles and Responsibilities. The last theme that revealed itself was Spirituality and this was placed in the North, Kiiwedinong. The subthemes within this section include Ceremony, Prayer, and Interconnection. This study provides understandings of Anishinaabe community wellness and offers insights to the roots of Anishinaabe wisdom and knowledge.

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Dedication

To nisayen, my Brother,
Anikat - Paul Johnson Willoughby III (1991 – 2018)
Miigwetch for the time you gave us together and the love you have always shown me.
This one's for you.

To My Parents,
None of this would have been possible without you.

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To the Elders and knowledge keepers who so generously shared their wisdom, this work would not have been possible without your voices, your stories, and your teachings. Miigwetch for your patience, your guidance, and your willingness to sit with me to pass down the knowledge that you carry.

To my parents, Paul and Tracey, your love, strength, and teachings have shaped the person I am today. You have always been my greatest teachers in life, showing me the importance of resilience, kindness, and living in a good way. Your constant support and endless love have given me the courage and strength to pursue this path, and for that, I am forever grateful. Chi-Miigwetch for everything, for your sacrifices, your love, and your belief in me.

To my sisters, Jade and Athena, through every challenge and every success, you have stood by me, lifting me up with your love, laughter, and belief in me. You remind me of the importance of standing strong in who we are, holding onto our traditions, and of always moving forward with love and determination. Miigwetch for always being there, for walking this path alongside me, and for being the incredible, strong women that you are.

To my nieces and nephew, Paul, Aubrey, and Paisley, my brother's greatest gifts to us, you are the future, the next generation, and light that keeps our family strong. This work is for you, for the paths you will walk, the knowledge that you will carry, and the teachings you will one day pass down. I hope that as you grow, you always know who you are and where you come from. Never stop learning and never stop dreaming. You are all capable, strong, and so deeply loved.

To my supervisor, Dr. Sarah Wright Cardinal, I am so deeply grateful for your guidance, wisdom, and unwavering support throughout this journey. Your encouragement has not only helped shape this research but has also inspired me to grow as a scholar, a thinker, and a person. To Dr. Billie Allan, my co-supervisor, I extend my deepest gratitude for your support and guidance. Your mentorship has been a source of strength and inspiration. Having both of you by my side and your mentorship during this journey has been a gift, one that I will carry with me long after this thesis is complete. Chi-Miigwetch to both of you for believing in me, for your patience, and for always offering insight, kindness, and encouragement when I needed it most.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Nimbawaadaan Akiing (I Dream a World) excerpt:

Nimbawaadaan akiing

- I dream a world

atemagag biinaagami

- of clean water

gete-mitigoog

- ancient trees

gaye gwekaanimad

- and changing winds.

Nimbawaadaan akiing

- I dream a world

izhi-mikwendamang

- of ones who remember

nandagikenindamang gaye

- who seek the truth and

maamwidebwe'endamang waabang

- believe in tomorrow together. (Noodin, 2021)

Definitions

In this chapter, I begin by offering definitions of Indigenous spirituality, ceremony, and traditional healing to help contextualize my research and the understandings that have guided it. I then introduce myself to further situate my relationship to my research in the context of who I am and where I come from. Following this, I reflect on Gashkitoon, the purpose and rationale of the research; Waadebinan, its goals and objectives; and Gitchi-apitendaagwad, its importance. Lastly, I present Nigaan, what lies ahead, by providing a brief overview of the chapters that follow.

Indigenous spirituality is a central pillar of the belief system of Indigenous people. It is deeply rooted in our holistic worldviews and encompasses the complex set of beliefs, rites, and ways of understanding the universe, all of which are closely tied to the land, our ancestors, our communities, and the natural world (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008). Spirituality is not a singular standardized belief system but rather a set of unique practices that vary widely across different nations and are often shaped by the geographical and social contexts of each group. Our spirituality can be demonstrated in activities such as meditation, prayer, and ceremonies.

Cajete (as cited in Nyman, 2014) defines ceremony as follows; “Ceremony is both a context for transferring knowledge and a way to remember the responsibility we have to our relationships with life. Native ceremony is associated with maintaining and restoring balance, renewal, cultivating relationships and creative participation with nature” (p.70-71). Just as spirituality varies across different nations, ceremonial practices are also distinct to each nation based on the localized geographical context of their community, worldviews, and teachings. Each ceremony has a specific purpose and holds an important place in various Indigenous communities (First Nations Health Authority, 2012; Kirmayer et al., 2000; Redvers & Blondin,

2020). Ceremonies seek to strengthen a person's connection to the physical and spiritual world, providing a bridge between the two, and to help provide healing, mark significant moments, or offer remembrance or gratitude to the ones that came before us (Bordor et al., 2022; Caverley et al., 2023; Nyman, 2014; Risling Baldy, 2018).

Traditional Indigenous healing is defined by Struthers (2000) as “the process of bringing together aspects of one's body-mind-spirit to a deeper level of inner knowing that leads toward integration and balance” (p. 261). Traditional healers are the ones who facilitate this healing process and often use traditional medicines to help heal the individuals who seek their help. Traditional medicine in the context of this thesis refers to “the knowledge, skills and practices based on theories, beliefs, and experiences Indigenous to different cultures, used in the maintenance of health in in prevention, diagnosis, improvement, or treatment of physical and mental illness” (First Nations Health Authority, 2012, p. 6).

Traditional medicine and healing are also reflected in our teachings of Mino Bimaadiziwin. Mino Bimaadiziwin is an Anishinaabe phrase that roughly translates to “the good life”. It signifies a concept of living in balance with oneself, our communities, and the natural world. It is a collective sense of wellbeing and being in good relationships with all of our relations that flows from doing things in an Anishinaabe way.

Starting with Self

Boozhoo, Kiisiyasobek nindizhinikaaz. Makwa nidoodem. Waabedogong nindooji. Anishinaabekwe nindoo. I begin my thesis by introducing myself in my Anishinaabe language as it sets the context on my vision for this project. My spirit name was given to me by a very important Elder in my life during a sweat lodge ceremony and it helps to keep me protected. In English it is roughly translated as Kind Star Woman. I am a part of the bear clan. I am from

Whitesand First Nation, an Anishinaabe community in northern Ontario. My community is located on the northern shores of Lake Nipigon, about 230km north of Thunder Bay which is where I grew up. I am a very proud Ojibwe woman. I am extremely privileged to have grown up participating in ceremony and receiving traditional teachings from various Elders and knowledge keepers in my life as many of us were stripped away of this right due to colonization. I am a traditional crafter and powwow dancer. I have been dancing and crafting for as long as I can remember. I've danced almost every woman's style that there is, starting with fancy when I was very young. I transitioned to dancing jingle when I was about 12 years old and danced that style up until I had a life changing spinal cord injury when I was 15. I took a few years off of dancing and somewhat got lost in a dark place as so much was taken from me following that injury.

When I decided it was time to get back into the circle and pick up my bundle once again, I could no longer dance jingle due to mobility issues from my accident. I now dance women's traditional, in which I have found a new love for in the gracefulness and beauty of the style. My mother taught me how to bead when I was very young, at about 9 years old. Since learning this, beading has become a powerful form of therapy for me. Intertwining creativity, culture, and connection, beading has become a pathway of healing, self-discovery, and cultural empowerment for myself. When I am going through a rough time in my life, picking up a needle and thread helps to calm my mind and ease my worries. It helps to ground me and my thoughts. Throughout my life, I have continued to bead and learn new skills from sewing, to quillwork, to basket weaving, to feather work, to drum making and more. Continuing to hold my culture close to my heart is what I attribute to taking me out of the dark place that I was in and bringing me back onto this beautiful life journey.

My own spiritual journey has been an ongoing lifelong one. I am still learning new things every day and with every new experience that I have. Growing up, spirituality has always been a predominant aspect of my life, sometimes without even realizing it. As children, myself and my siblings were introduced to Anishinaabe ceremonies at a very young age because my parents were adamant about us having a strong sense of identity. This included taking us to ceremonies and instilling in us what it meant to be a proud Anishinaabe. For as long as I can remember, I have been attending different types of ceremonies, sending prayers out for those in my life that I knew and also for those I did not know. Ceremonies such as: Doctoring ceremonies, where those who were sick are healed; ceremonies of gratitude and connection, where we came together and celebrated this beautiful life we were gifted; and ceremonies of transformation and growth that guide us through the moments of change in our lives. With each of these ceremonies I have attended in my short lifetime, I have learned profound lessons on life, interconnectedness, and most importantly, myself. Each time I attend any of these ceremonies it brings me closer to who I am and helps to feed my spirit. Growing up in these environments has taught me more about myself than any type of formal education ever could have. I have learned what it means to be an Anishinaabekwe (an Anishinaabe woman). The beat of the drum resonates with my soul. The sweet smell of smudge with our sacred mashkiki (medicines) provides me with a calmness when nothing else can. The feeling of holding an eagle feather in my hands helps to ground me in this world. I can feel deep in my heart and spirit that attending these ceremonies has helped me become the person I am today and without them, I would continue to be lost in this colonial world.

I would like to say chi-miigwetch (thank you very much) to my parents and especially my mother for always making sure we knew who we are and where we come from and to take

the utmost pride in that. I would also like to say chi-miigwetch to Elder Kenny Kakeway for providing me with the teachings that have brought me mino-bimaadiziwin and for always being there to answer our questions. I am grateful for all the experiences I have had that has led me up to this point in my life journey.

One of the most honourable responsibilities that has been gifted upon me thus far in my life journey has been becoming a pipe carrier. This spiritual responsibility is not a role that can be easily set aside, as it is a spiritual duty tied to my identity and purpose in life. I have been entrusted with the sacred task of using my pipe to offer prayers to Creator, the ancestors, and the spirits, and I believe that this research work is simply another form of performing this task.

My experience of learning from various Elders and knowledge keepers has not been linear or purely intellectual. This process of learning is cyclical and has been spanning over many years. It has been a deeply immersive, experiential journey. In Anishinaabe culture, Elders and knowledge keepers hold a high honour of respect and an essential place in the community. Their role is not only as teachers, but also as the protectors of sacred knowledge, spiritual traditions, and cultural practices. These individuals, often rich in wisdom passed down through generations, are central to the way knowledge is learned, understood, and transferred within our communities. Learning from these Elders has required me to engage in all aspects of my being – mind, body, soul, and spirit – because ceremonial knowledge is not just about facts or information but about embodying this sacred way of life. The teachings that I have received throughout my life have been learned through participation and practice rather than just being told and dictated. The spiritual meanings behind these teachings or ceremonies are revealed through personal experience and not through abstract instruction. This approach ensures that the knowledge that we are being taught becomes deeply ingrained, shaping our character and

worldview rather than being absorbed merely through intellectual understanding. My experience with learning from Elders and knowledge keepers has not a singular event, but rather an ongoing relationship that continues to grow and flourish.

Central to this learning process is the idea of respect. These Elders and knowledge keepers hold the key to many sacred teachings and therefore, learning from them requires a deep sense of respect for their role, their time, and the knowledge that they carry. Throughout my life journey I have been taught many of the key principles and values of the Anishinaabe way of life including: The Seven Grandfather Teachings; the sacredness of the land and nature; spirituality and connection to the Creator; the cycle of life and the Four Sacred Directions; and balance, harmony, and reciprocity.

Thinking back in my life, the teaching of reciprocity is one of the first that I can remember being taught. Being a young girl at powwow and ceremony my mother would give me a little handful of tobacco to offer to the Elders, the altar, and to the drums. This symbolized the thanks that I was giving to these beings for sharing their life with us. Tobacco, one of our four sacred medicines is often given when asking for knowledge or when we ask a question. This connection was also shared when going on to the land to harvest. We would offer tobacco to the land to give thanks for the life that they provide us with and when we are asking for the use of their medicines.

This knowledge transfer from Elders is extremely important as many of our Elders within the community are being called home and with that, they take their stories and experiences along with them. There is so much to learn from them and many of them have a limited amount of time left here on Mother Earth. With this in mind, the time to gather these stories and listen to what they have to share is now, before Creator calls them home.

One of the roles I have within my community and in the greater Indigenous community in Ontario is being a youth representative for my community. I have been in this role for about roughly 7 years, taking this on after my older sister aged out of the youth category. As one of the two youth representatives of my community I sit on the Independent First Nations Youth Working Group which is made up of two youth representatives from each of the IFN communities. In Ontario there are currently 12 First Nations that are not politically affiliated with any of the Provincial/Territorial organizations and these First Nations communities have come together to form the Independent First Nations (IFN). IFN has established its purpose to work together to unify matters that are important to them, jointly access funding holistically, and to combine their expertise to benefit all of their community members while respecting the independent autonomy of each community.

Sitting at this table and being a part of this youth working group has brought me the beautiful experience of meeting and creating meaningful relationships with many like-minded Indigenous youth from all over Ontario. In this role we meet quarterly to help plan our annual conferences, build many different skills for our youth and working group members, and learn about the different ways we can advocate and work constructively on issues of mutual concern within our communities. For our conferences, we work to put on different types of workshops and bring in many different speakers. Our workshops can range from traditional crafting, cooking, and games, to financial literacy and career skill building. The purpose of these workshops is to create opportunities to build life skills that each of our youth can utilize in their communities and to better their own lives. The response that we get at the end of the conferences is always phenomenal and appreciated as many of these youth may not have access to these types of opportunities.

Another amazing opportunity and table that I have been fortunate enough to be a part of and sit at is the Ontario First Nations Young Peoples Council (OFNYPC). This youth council is considered the next step above the IFN youth working group and is comprised of two representatives from each of the six Political/Territorial Organizations (PTO) in Ontario.

Although IFN is not officially a PTO as each of the First Nation communities work independently from each other, it is put into the same category for ease of identification. The OFNYPC is the official youth voice for the 133 First Nations in Ontario that come together to discuss, address, and provide a unified voice on regional and national priorities affecting First Nations youth in the communities. The OFNYPC takes leadership roles in the advocacy of issues affecting First Nations youth across the province, to all levels of governing bodies. My experience of working with the OFNYPC was an extremely powerful and meaningful one. The ability to engage, empower, support, and advocate for First Nations youth from the communities all across the province of Ontario has shown me that our voices matter and can create change.

This research is meant to further empower and support my community in their healing. My community, like many others across Canada, has had a difficult time in coping with the effects of the colonization process. Many community members, including our youth, deal with mental health issues, substance use, and cultural disconnection. My decision to return to school and pursue a master's degree is solely for the betterment of my community. I can see clearly the destruction that colonization has had on us as a people and I wanted to find a way that I could contribute to the healing and revitalization of our culture in my community. Through this research I would like to create a meaningful piece that could help our community members through these hard times that they face, and especially for the youth as they are our future. This

research project is for the next seven generations, for them to prosper and thrive in this colonial world that we now live in.

In returning to university, I have had the privilege to work on a beautiful community-based project named Sharing Medicine Bundles with Sarah Wright Cardinal and Billie Allan. This project is in collaboration with four nations and seeks to collect wisdom and knowledge on land-based healing and wellness practices. The aim is to help restore the roles and responsibilities of youth within four communities weaving together land, language, culture, and ceremony. Being a part of this project has shown me how practices like these can help revive and strengthen Indigenous knowledge, traditions, and values while fostering a sense of pride and identity among First Nations communities. It has also shown me the value of learning across generations and how the wisdom of Elders and the energy of youth can come together to create powerful change. Being a part of this research project has helped to guide me in coming up with my own research project and has shown me how to engage with Indigenous communities in a meaningful way.

As an Indigenous youth and pipe carrier committed to bettering my community and my people, this research will help me to reach my goal and exercise the responsibility I have to my community. I have a responsibility for preserving and sharing this knowledge. Helping to build a future for our youth is one of the goals I have with conducting this research and writing this thesis all while keeping my values at the forefront of this work. Engaging in Indigenous research makes me feel connected to something deeper, as I am part of a long tradition of knowledge-sharing. It sparks feelings of gratitude for being able to contribute something that can bring real change within my community and for the youth. At the same time, it brings feelings of privilege to witness the strength, resilience, and beauty of our culture and teachings. This thesis is a

perfect example of how I am seeking to better understand and contribute to Anishinaabe approaches to community wellness and Indigenous health research.

Gashkitoon – Purpose and Rationale

My community, Whitesand First Nation, like many Indigenous communities across Canada, has faced the significant challenge of losing traditional ways of life due to colonization, forced assimilation policies, and environmental changes. The outcome of this loss has deeply affected the cultural practices, connection to the land, and the intergenerational knowledge transfer to the younger generations. To help support the process of revitalizing this way of life and highlighting the stories of wellness practices in community, I will be drawing on Jo-Ann Archibald's (2008) Indigenous storywork methodology to explore the community wellness practices that Whitesand First Nation has. This research topic is derived from my personal journey with my spiritual wellness and as a master's student on the CIHR funded Sharing Medicine Bundles and Pathways to Community Wellness project led by my supervisor Dr. Sarah Wright Cardinal.

In recent community meetings that I have been attending, Elders have voiced their concerns about their need and want to share their stories. They are asking for community members to come and listen to their stories and hear about the wisdom and experiences that they have to share before they are called back to the spirit world. With this in mind, this research project will gather knowledge and stories on approaches to spiritual and community wellness by investigating holistic wellness practices and ceremony with Elders and knowledge keepers in Whitesand First Nation. Engaging in holistic wellness practices and ceremony is essential for nurturing the interconnectedness of mind, body, spirit, and community which emphasizes how these practices promote healing and resilience (Gray & Cote, 2019; Hill, 2009; Kirmayer et al.,

2003). When we view wellness through a lens of land, language, culture, and ceremony, it becomes clear that the land is not only a source of physical sustenance but also a spiritual foundation deeply tied to self-determination (Corntassel, 2012). The land holds the wisdom of generations and through its preservation and the revitalization of Indigenous languages and ceremonies, individuals and communities can reclaim autonomy over their health, culture, and future (de Finney et al., 2020; Redvers, 2020; Robbins & Dewar, 2011; Tobias & Richmond, 2014). Indigenous people globally are calling for ‘land back’ as they seek to address the ongoing structures of colonialism and revitalization as self-determining nations (Nightingale, 2022). In this framing, to reclaim wellness is also to reclaim the land, a key step toward restoring cultural and spiritual practices that affirm the right to live in harmony with one’s environment.

In McCormick’s (2000) journal article *Aboriginal Traditions in the Treatment of Substance Abuse*, he explores the relevance of land and culture when it comes to Indigenous people healing from traumatic experiences, addictions, and mental health. In his work, he includes the historical reality of the impact of colonization on the Indigenous people of this land and its devastation to the ancestors’ ability to maintain their spiritual connection to the land. He argues that as spiritual people, we need to return to our connections with nature, our culture, and each other to heal from the impact that this has had on us as a people. Since 2000, there has been a growing movement within the Anishinaabe community and other Indigenous nations to reclaim and revitalize traditional wellness practices, recognizing the integral role of land, language, culture, and ceremony in healing (Hill; 2009; Nyman, 2014; Redvers & Blondin, 2020; Tobias & Richmond, 2014). Anishinaabe knowledge keepers and community leaders have been at the forefront of this resurgence, weaving together traditional teachings with contemporary understandings of health and wellness. This movement has led to an increased emphasis on land-

based healing, where youth are encouraged to reconnect with traditional practices like hunting, gathering, and ceremony as part of their journey toward positive mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being (Lines & Jardine, 2019; Snowshoe et al., 2012).

Recent Indigenous research, especially in the Anishinaabe context, has focused on the importance of incorporating cultural teachings into wellness programs, acknowledging the healing power of the land and the role of ceremony in restoring balance (McGuire-Adams, 2023; Nightingale & Richmond, 2022; Robbins & Dewar, 2011; Redvers et al., 2020; Tobias & Richmond, 2012). This shift is not only about improving our physical health but also about reclaiming self-determination, recognizing that true wellness for Indigenous people is rooted in the ability to access and care for the land, to speak and learn their traditional language, and to practice their ceremonies in a way that supports both individual and collective resilience. As these efforts continue to grow, the connection between land, culture, and wellness is becoming central to understanding how Anishinaabe communities can thrive in the face of historical and ongoing challenges.

Waadebinan – Goals and Objectives

In this research project, I will engage with Anishinaabe knowledge keepers and Elders in Whitesand First Nation to help identify holistic wellness frameworks that are rooted in the knowledge systems of our nation. The primary focus is to gather knowledge on meanings of wellness within the community in relation to community wellness and ceremony as a conduit to restoring our knowledge systems in a modern context. My research question for this thesis is “How do Elders in Whitesand First Nation define community wellness” and sub-questions are “What teachings are important for personal and community wellness?” and “How did our community traditionally stay well?”. These research questions have been deeply guided by the

principles and goals of the Sharing Medicine Bundles project, which focuses on revitalizing land-based healing practices and strengthening youth roles within Indigenous communities. Through this project, I have been encouraged to explore how traditional knowledge, cultural practices, and ceremony can be integrated into contemporary wellness frameworks. The questions I have developed are shaped by a desire to understand how these practices can support the holistic well-being of individuals in my community, especially in the context of reclaiming cultural identity and self-determination.

I have articulated three research goals to help increase my capacity to make a meaningful contribution to knowledge, policy, and programming addressing community perspectives on wellness: 1) Gain sources and meanings of spiritual and community wellness from Elders and knowledge keepers in community; 2) Support healing from colonial disruptions to Indigenous identity by nurturing the sharing of knowledge; and 3) Engage ceremony as a traditional health system by creating the opportunity for intergenerational knowledge transmission with knowledge keepers and Elders. It is through this research that we will be working to heal the impacts of colonialism through nurturing cultural continuity, a social determinant of Indigenous people's health (Reading & Wien, 2009).

Each of these goals will be achieved by: 1) Centering the voices of Elders and knowledge keepers by examining the revitalization of cultural teachings and stories as a means of regaining confidence, wellness strategies, and identity; 2) Gathering stories through the reconnection to traditional wellness practices with knowledge keepers and Elders on healing and ceremonial practices before colonial disruptions; and 3) Supporting Indigenous knowledge exchange by enhancing the intellectual property rights of Whitesand First Nation to determine which outcomes will be shared publicly and which outcomes will be help privately within community.

Gichi-apiitendaagwad – Importance

The importance of gathering stories of the revitalization of our health systems through our spiritual and ceremonial practices lies in the critical role these stories play in reconnecting us to our cultural, spiritual, and holistic systems of wellness. For generations colonization, forced assimilation, and the imposition of Western medical models have marginalized Indigenous knowledge systems and disrupted traditional healing practices. However, through the sharing of stories and the oral transmission of knowledge, communities are able to reclaim and revitalize their health systems, asserting their autonomy and reaffirming the spiritual and cultural foundations of wellness.

Through this research, I will be working to heal the impacts of colonialism through cultural continuity, a social determinant of Indigenous health (Reading & Wein, 2009), and by creating a pathway to community wellness. Within the context of this research, I will be framing ceremony within culture. Connection to land, geography, and physical environments is another social determinant for Indigenous people's health (Caverley et al., 2023). This determinant focuses on First Nations relationship to land, people and place, including how geography influences where and how First Nations and our families access culturally relevant health care.

In an AFN report by Caverley et al., (2023) titled *Our Right to Health: First Nations Perspectives across the generations*, recommendations are provided to address the social determinants of health and practice to achieve holistic improvement in First Nation physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. Recommendation #1.2 is to “support First Nations-led initiatives to determine effective ways that cultural knowledge systems can be revitalized, continued, expanded or promoted” (p. 70). This study will help to determine the ways that

Anishinaabe cultural knowledge can help communities achieve spiritual and community wellbeing while supporting the rebuilding of these cultural knowledge systems.

This study contributes to the current decolonization and reconciliation movement in reclaiming Indigenous knowledge systems, future public policy development, and will help inform health practitioners on practices toward healthy community development. Weber-Pillwax (2021) argues that decolonization will not be attained through discussion, discourse or critical theory and rather that sharing narratives and receiving narrative are acts of decolonization. These stories of community wellness that are gathered will begin to replace the colonial narratives that have been set upon us. One of the challenges in health research with Indigenous peoples is that Indigenous people and the general population have differing perspectives on what health is and how it can be achieved. This study contributes to that body of knowledge concerning the health of Indigenous people. It contributes to a unique narrative which includes Indigenous perspectives through Indigenous voices and healing wounds caused by colonial systems. This study also contributes to the revitalization of Anishinaabe traditional knowledge and practices all while instilling community empowerment.

Niigaan – What Lies Ahead

Now that the stage has been set, or those familiar in Indian country might say, now that the cedar has been laid and the grounds feasted and smudged, Chapter 2 reviews and summarizes the historical and current landscape of Indigenous knowledge pertaining to spiritual and community wellness. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology used in this project, highlighting the use of storytelling as the methodology for this research. Chapter 4 describes each of the Elders and knowledge keepers along with excerpts of their stories shared throughout the interview process. This is also where the findings and identified themes found throughout the

interviews will be discussed. Chapter 5 provides suggestions and recommendations based on these findings along with my closing thoughts and reflections.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is to explore and understand Indigenous perspectives on community wellness, ceremonies and healing practices so that we may gain insights into the cultural, spiritual, and historical contexts that shape Indigenous approaches to healing. In compiling the literature for this review of Indigenous approaches to healing, I focused on sources that provide a deep understanding of Indigenous wellness practices, cultural resilience, and community empowerment. I began by identifying foundational works and key texts authored by Indigenous scholars and community voices from the year 2000 to 2024 throughout Canada and the United States, ensuring that the literature reflected Indigenous perspectives and cultural knowledge systems. I used academic databases and recommendations from respected scholars in the field to select the literature used in this review (Tynan & Bishop, 2023). Throughout the process I also engaged with traditional stories and life-experience stories shared by knowledge keepers and Elders as these perspectives are central to the cultural context and themes of this thesis project.

In this literature review, I will begin by discussing Canadian health promotion and the place of spirituality within health promotion. I will then lead into the disruption that colonization has had on us as a people, including assimilation policies and frameworks, mistreatment of Indigenous peoples within the Western health system and the impacts of the Potlatch ban. Lastly, I will discuss the resurgence of our holistic health systems including the impacts on youth and our connection to culture. These topics were derived from themes I have identified within the literature that I chose to include in the review. The following analysis of the literature provided insights into holistic approaches that address the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health

of Indigenous peoples that helped to set the tone of this thesis. The language used when discussing the sources found is that which is used within the articles and may vary throughout the review.

DISCUSSION OF CANADIAN HEALTH PROMOTION

As an academic field of study, health promotion in Canada has inherently operated within institutional frameworks and have disregarded other epistemologies that could provide valuable insights for the future and have a positive impact (Gerhardt-Strachen, 2022). Mainstream health promotion has typically excluded spirituality as an intervention model due to the lack of empirical evidence yet, many cultures and groups of people around the world understand spirituality to go hand-in-hand with health (Mundell & Chapman, 2010).

The field of health promotion advocates for a socioecological approach to health that addresses a variety of physical, social, environmental, political, and cultural factors (Carroll & Hills, 2015). The socioecological approach is “a view of health that arose following the endorsement of the Ottawa Charter for health promotion and conceptualizes health as a resource for daily life, emphasizing its role in health as a positive concept encompassing social, personal, and physical resources” (Carroll & Hills, 2015, p. 8). At the core of the socioecological approach is the creation of supportive environments which involves creating conditions that allow individuals to have safe, stimulating, and enjoyable living and working conditions.

Despite advocating for a socioecological approach, mainstream health promotion remains deeply rooted in a Eurocentric secular epistemology that privileges quantifiable research (Gerhardt-Strachen, 2021; Kirmayer et al., 2003). Traditional public health approaches to health promotion exhibit two negative consequences: firstly, state-run programs follow strict rules and procedures without considering the unique needs of local communities which can lead to a lack

of community involvement and empowerment. Secondly, these programs often rely too heavily on scientific methods and evaluation tools that come from academic settings, further enforcing formal rationality (Carroll & Hills, 2015; Carroll, 2017).

Epistemologies that include spirituality challenge the dominant Eurocentric, Western ways of knowing and knowledge production. The Western knowledge paradigm tends to adopt a utilitarian approach to life that prioritizes materialism, using people and natural resources for their economic value while disregarding the inherent dignity and sacredness of life. In contrast, an epistemology that allows for spirituality understands emotions, intuition, metaphysical, and ancestral connections to be valid forms of knowing. This contrast underscores the need for a more inclusive approach to health promotion that acknowledges diverse epistemologies and worldviews. Incorporating these worldviews will require a restructuring of how health promotion and the academy currently understand and do research (Gerhardt-Strachen, 2022; Kirmayer et al., 2003).

Spirituality within Canadian Health Promotion

Spirituality has been identified as one of fourteen First Nations derived determinants of health (Greenwood et al., 2015; Kim, 2019; Nesdaole et al., 2014). This determinant includes First Nations spirituality and connections to, or reconnection with, our ancestors and the spirit world. Despite its significance, numerous scholars have indicated that spirituality and spiritual health have been ignored within health promotion (Carroll, 2017; Gerhardt-Strachen, 2021; Greenwood et al., 2015; Kim, 2019; Kirmayer et al., 2000; Nesdaole et al., 2014; Reading & Wien, 2013). Much of the research on spirituality in other disciplines have focused on what spirituality might be rather than what it might do.

The topic is acknowledged in articles pertaining to Indigenous health promotion and within this literature the spiritual connection to land, nature, and environment is highlighted (Kim, 2019). At its core, spirituality is underpinned by a holistic understanding of health and the factors that affect health individually and collectively. Mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual health intermingle and impact each other, requiring us to understand health in a much more complex and interactive way.

Spirituality influences health promotion on individual, collective, and structural levels (Mundel & Chapman, 2010). On the individual level, spirituality involves the personal process of finding meaning and purpose in one's life within the world. At the collective level, the language of human rights and social justice reflects an understanding of our shared humanity which embodies the universal nature of spirituality. On the structural level, the relationship between social dimensions of health and spirituality highlights the need for advocacy not only for changes in societal systems, but also for transformation in the physical environments where we live and work (Kolahooz et al., 2015).

In Gerhardt-Stachen's (2022) article *Exploring the place of spirituality in Canadian health promotion*, leading scholars examine the role of spirituality within the context of health promotion in Canada. This article highlights the increasing recognition of spirituality as an essential aspect of wellbeing, exploring the challenges and complexities of integrating spiritual practices into mainstream health promotion frameworks. Emphasis is placed on the need for a more holistic approach that incorporates spiritual health into the traditional, often secular, approaches to health promotion that primarily focus on physical and mental health.

Spirituality can be an important tool for healing and coping, particularly for Indigenous and marginalized communities where traditional spiritual practices and worldviews often

intersect with health and healing (Bordor et al., 2022; Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Robbins & Dewar, 2011; Watts, 2016). Gerhardt-Strachen (2021) argues that health promotion strategies in Canada often fail to adequately address or respect diverse spiritual beliefs, particularly those outside of mainstream religious practices. There is a call for greater inclusion of spirituality in health promotion policies and programs, advocating for an approach that recognizes the cultural and spiritual needs of individuals especially within Indigenous communities. The creation of health promotion models that are inclusive, culturally sensitive, and capable of addressing the spiritual dimensions of health alongside physical and mental well-being is needed.

Including spirituality in a deeply meaningful way requires a radical transformation of health promotion. A reorientation of health services is required since throughout the world, health services remain medically dominated, characterized by a cure and treatment focus, often with an individualistic perspective (Carroll & Hills, 2015). This includes an openness to multiple ways of knowing and being, including non-Western perspectives. Health services need to embrace an expanded mandate which acknowledges and respects cultural needs. Spirituality within health promotion could be an opportunity to critique the current status quo as these perspectives take a broader, more structural view of the factors that impact people's health, including the influence of social determinants of health (Kim, 2019).

Current ways of thinking and understanding the world are not sufficient enough for both human and planetary wellbeing. Restoring right relations with Indigenous peoples and allowing their perspectives to be recognized and valued is one way in which we can begin to create a new paradigm. Restoring these right relations with Indigenous peoples is a critical first step for the path forward. Key principles such as acknowledging the land's significance and undertaking

the process of decolonizing our minds and hearts and shifting away from Western knowledge paradigms are essential components of this transformative journey.

Many studies on Indigenous peoples have historically been conducted using Western research paradigms which may not fully capture or offer complete respect of Indigenous worldviews, values, or knowledge systems (Cajete, 2000; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). There is a dominance of Western epistemologies and methodologies within research which can result in incomplete or distorted representations of Indigenous experiences, knowledge, and realities. This has led to a lack of recognition of Indigenous ways of knowing, a knowledge that is rooted in centuries of experience, practice, and relationship with the land. Western paradigms of research, with their focus on objectivity, quantification, and individualism often fail to account for the holistic, relational, and community-centered ways of knowing that are foundational to Indigenous cultures (Struthers et al., 2004). This prioritization ultimately leaves Indigenous epistemologies marginalized. As many communities' view knowledge as deeply embedded in the land, oral traditions, spirituality, and collective experiences, Western scientific methods cannot always accurately capture these experiences. More research needs to incorporate Indigenous methodologies such as storytelling, oral history, or other culturally relevant approaches to health (Absolon, 2011; Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021). This gap not only limits the scope of Indigenous research but also reinforces the idea that Indigenous knowledge is secondary or irrelevant in addressing contemporary issues faced by Indigenous communities.

Although health promotion can be understood as a field made up of research, policy, teaching and practice, there were articles specifically calling for physicians and other healthcare providers to better collaborate with traditional healers and also calls for health "systems" to better coordinate and work with Indigenous medicine systems and associated practitioners

(Gerhardt-Strachen, 2022; Kirmayer et al., 2003; Kollahdooz et al., 2015; Mundel & Chapman, 2010). One participant in Gerhardt-Strachen's (2022) study proposed looking at the core competencies through a spirituality lens, suggesting that there could be a gap in that regard. Multiple sources from the reviewed literature also suggest this is true (Kirmayer et al., 2003; Kollahdooz et al., 2015; Mundel & Chapman, 2010). If spirituality is about heart-opening experiences of nature, beauty, and relationships that contribute meaning and purpose to people's lives, this requires recognizing a much wider spectrum of experiences and activities that promote health. Despite this, the role of spirituality in health promotion and wellness is still seen as uncomfortable for many allopathic and mainstream healthcare providers. The importance of ensuring traditional Indigenous healing practices is accessible and available must be prioritized in order to promote health equity amongst Indigenous people. We need to encourage the development of healing places and opportunities to learn about ceremony and spirituality. If we organize the space to support our traditional healers working with us, eventually more and more of our people will begin on the path to their own personal healing.

INDIGENOUS HEALTH SYSTEMS

Indigenous Understandings of Spirituality

Spirituality within Indigenous cultures is not merely a set of abstract beliefs or customs but rather a profound and holistic way of living that saturates all aspects of life. Our Indigenous worldviews recognize a deep and sacred connection between people, the land, our ancestors, and the natural world. Unlike many Western concepts of spirituality that often view it as a personal and internal journey, Indigenous spirituality is fundamentally relational and communal (Robbins & Dewar, 2011). It is about balance, interconnectedness, and the understanding that all living beings such as humans, animals, plants, and even the elements are part of a larger network of our

existence. To understand the full depth of Indigenous spirituality, one must recognize the ways in which it informs not just our beliefs but also our actions, relationships, and the very essence of our being.

In most Indigenous cultures, spirituality is a relational force that is rooted in the relationships in our lives. At its core, spirituality is about connection and the recognition that every being in the universe is interdependent. This includes our relationships with our family, community, ancestors, the natural world, and the spiritual forces that guide and shape our existence. There is no separation between the physical and spiritual realms but rather they coexist and continuously influence each other. This can be seen in Aki, Mother Earth, in many Indigenous traditions the earth is not seen as an inanimate object to be exploited but as a living relative that has her own spirit and agency. It is understood that us as humans have a responsibility to maintain a balanced, respectful relationship with the land and all the beings that inhabit it, as well as with the unseen forces that guide the natural world (Redvers, 2020; Robbins & Dewar, 2011). For example, we as Indigenous people understand that plants, animals, and the land itself possess their own unique spirits and these beings are to be treated as equals. Our Indigenous spirituality teaches us that humans are just one small part of a much larger ecological and spiritual system. This interconnectedness can be seen and emphasized in our ceremonies and everyday practices where the health of the land, community, and the individual are seen as inseparable (Struthers et al., 2008). To live a healthy balanced way of life is to live in harmony with all these relationships.

Holistic Wellness

In Indigenous worldviews, spirituality is often intertwined with the concepts of health and wellness. At the heart of our Indigenous wellness system is a holistic understanding that

human beings are part of a greater interdependent system of life. This worldview puts forth the idea that the body is not separate from the mind, emotions, or our spirit. All these aspects must work together in harmony to achieve a true well-being. Health is not just the absence of disease but a holistic state of balance encompassing the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the individual (Reading & Wien, 2013). For example, in Anishinaabe culture wellness is traditionally viewed as a circle often referred to as the “Circle of Life”, where each of these aspects of a person’s life is interconnected. A person’s wellbeing is also directly tied to their relationships with family, community, land, and everything sacred. This belief leads to practices that engage the entire person in mind, body, and spirit in the healing process. Therefore, healing is not merely about treating symptoms but restoring balance and harmony within the person and their environment.

Indigenous healing practices are inherently restorative and focus on returning a person to a state of balance and harmony whether that balance has been disrupted by illness, trauma, or imbalance in the relationship with the world around them. Greenwood et al. (2015) note that Indigenous peoples experiencing health disparities around the world have consistently identified colonialism as “perhaps the most important determinant of their (ill) health” (p. xxii). Healing through spirituality can take many forms from prayers and offerings to the use of sacred plants and rituals. For example, in Anishinaabe culture we use the four sacred medicines, sage, cedar, sweetgrass, and tobacco, to help purify the body, mind, and spirit. In addition to this we perform sacred songs and dances that are used to restore balance and invite healing energy into ourselves or our community. The spiritual aspect of healing is not limited to these acts alone but it also involves cultivating an ongoing relationship with the Creator, the ancestors, and the land. These

relationships are maintained through practices such as daily prayers, offerings, and acts of gratitude which serve to strengthen our connection between the spiritual and physical worlds.

One common feature of Indigenous healing is the use of ceremony. Ceremonies are viewed as sacred acts that restore balance and align the individual or community with the natural and spiritual realms (Bordor et al., 2022). The use of ceremony in healing can involve practices such as sweat lodges, fasting, drumming, singing, or talking circles. These ceremonies are done to cleanse, purify, and renew the spirit, mind, and body often with the support of the community (Struthers & Eschiti, 2005). The healing process also extends beyond the individuals encompassing the collective as well. In many Indigenous communities including the Anishinaabe, health is viewed as something that is shared by all members. If one person is suffering, then it can affect the whole community. Healing then often involves restoring the wellbeing of the community as a whole through practices that encourage collective responsibility and support (Struthers et al., 2004; Struthers et al., 2008). Elders, as the knowledge keepers and spiritual leaders, play a key role in this process offering guidance and wisdom to both individuals and the community.

Ceremony and Healers

Ceremony is the living embodiment of Indigenous ways of knowing and being, as teachings, worldviews, relationships, stories, and languages are all incorporated into ceremonial experiences; moreover, ceremony is viewed as essential to health and healing (Border et al., 2022). It is well understood in Indigenous communities that strengthening cultural identity, community integration, and political empowerment contributes to the improvement of wellbeing of our communities (Hill, 2009).

One of the main reasons we are struggling to cope with traumatic experiences in our lives is because of the disconnect from our spirit, ceremony, and ourselves. (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008; Gray & Cote, 2019; Nyman, 2014; Robbins & Dewar, 2011; Struthers et al., 2004). Many of our people have lost the ability to return to a place of balance. Recommendation #1.3 from the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) report *Our Right to Health* articulates the need to “harmonize local First Nations cultural values, customs and beliefs, healing ceremonies, and teachings into the continuum of care” (Caverley et al., 2023, p. 70). The Regional Health survey reveals that a significant majority, 76.4% of First Nations adults residing on reserves, place great importance on traditional spirituality in their daily lives (Reading & Wien, 2009). In an article by Kading et al. (2019) on living a good way of life from First Nations youth perspectives, the authors put out a recommendation to further illuminate sources and meanings of wellness from Indigenous community perspectives.

Struthers et al., (2004) discuss some of the many factors contributing to the scarcity of formal research into healing ceremonies. These factors include concerns of misuse of information if revealed, fear of ridicule, and that healing may be considered a private matter and is considered sacred. The westernized scientific community often regards formal education and empirical evidence as the ultimate standard of truth. In contrast, traditional Indigenous medicine, with its emphasis on natural elements and knowledge passed down through generations, is seen as outside the accepted boundaries of modern science and education, largely due to lack of formal academic credentials.

Watt’s (2016) critically examines the ongoing effects of colonialism and assimilation policies on Indigenous spirituality highlighting how these policies have systematically marginalized Indigenous spiritual practices and ceremonies, portraying them as inferior or

incompatible with mainstream Canadian society. These practices hold a great significance for Indigenous communities yet there is still tension between state-approved forms of cultural expression and traditional Indigenous spiritual practices. Watt's points out that while the state may support certain forms of cultural expression that align with mainstream values, ceremonial practices such as smudging are often restricted or viewed with suspicion. In the face of systemic erasure and cultural appropriation, Indigenous communities continue to maintain and revitalize their spiritual practices. Through these acts of spiritual expression, Indigenous peoples assert their rights to exist outside of the confines of state-approved cultural norms, reasserting their spiritual sovereignty and resisting the ongoing pressures of assimilation.

Countries are beginning to shift away from a dependence model that relies solely on Western medicine towards a model that allows people to take ownership for their health and using a multidisciplinary approach to health (Hill, 2009; Nyman, 2014; Redvers & Blondin, 2020 Robbins & Dewar, 2011). With this change comes a need for cultural competence among healthcare providers and mutual respect between Indigenous health practices and Western medicine. Indigenous healers note that western practitioners often don't understand or respect the efforts of traditional healers because of their lack of understanding and their difficulty to understand (Struthers et al., 2008, Stuthers et al., 2004; Struthers & Eschiti, 2005). Through the sharing of healing stories, traditional healers have communicated some of the power that traditional Indigenous ceremonies have to provide healing to those who need it. These accounts of healing show the importance of respect that healthcare practitioners should have towards the gifts that these healers were given (Nyman, 2014; Struthers et al., 2004; Struthers et al., 2008; Struthers & Eschiti, 2005).

The main argument shared throughout the literature is that ceremony and our spirituality play an important role in the overall wellbeing of Indigenous people. The role of ceremony in Indigenous healing is profound and multifaceted, encompassing spiritual, cultural, and holistic dimensions. Through the literature discussed we can see that Indigenous ceremonies are deeply rooted in traditional knowledge, cultural practices, and a profound connection to the land. Ceremonies and traditional teachings were shared communally before contact and are now being revived as we are embracing the cultural practices of our ancestors across this land. Participating in ceremony has been shown to positively impact spiritual and emotional wellbeing throughout the literature (Bordor et al., 2022; Gone, 2011; Gray & Cote, 2019; Kading et al., 2019; Redvers et al., 2021; Struthers et al., 2004; Struthers & Eschiti, 2005). Ceremonial practices address the holistic wellbeing of individuals, encompassing physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects. They are employed as a means of healing from historical traumas and addressing the collective wounds of colonization by providing a safe space for acknowledging and processing the impact that these historical injustices had and still have on us today as individuals and communities. This includes addressing imbalances caused by illness, disharmony in relationships, or disruptions to the natural order which can be seen through the experiences shared by the healers within the sources. Indigenous ceremonies are conducted in a natural setting which reinforces and heals the connection between individuals and the land. This connection is essential for Indigenous people's health as the land is viewed as a source of strength, wisdom, and healing energy. As Redvers and Blondin (2020) point out;

Bringing people 'back' to practicing ceremonial ways is seen as a healing process from the trauma encountered by First Nations peoples in Canada, as well as a way to both maintain our connection to the land and water, and to keep that same land and water safe

for future generations. The implication in this is that by restoring our connection to the land through ceremony, other structural issues will again come into balance. (p.10)

DISRUPTION THROUGH COLONIZATION

Colonialism in Canada has fundamentally altered the social, cultural, economic, and political landscapes of Indigenous peoples, shaping our lived experience in profound and devastating ways (Paradies, 2016). Central to the colonization process was the systematic dispossession of Indigenous lands. Treaties negotiated such as the Royal Proclamation of 1763 and subsequent treaties were nation to nation agreements that included responsibilities to protect Indigenous lands and rights (Kirmayer et al., 2000). In reality, these legal agreements were not upheld and often resulted in the loss of traditional territories as European settlers encroached further onto Indigenous land for agriculture, mining, and settlement.

The legal and political frameworks imposed during colonization further marginalized Indigenous people. Policies such as the Indian Act of 1876 imposed governance structures on Indigenous communities, restricting their autonomy and disregarding Indigenous rights and sovereignty. The health of Indigenous people has suffered as well with disparities in health outcomes such as higher rates of chronic illnesses, mental health issues, and substance abuse (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Gone, 2011; Kirmayer et al., 2000; Paradies, 2016; Reading & Wien, 2009). These disparities are rooted in the historical trauma, ongoing socio-economic challenges, and systemic barriers to accessing culturally appropriate healthcare and resources. Despite these challenges, Indigenous peoples have demonstrated remarkable resilience and strength in preserving their cultures, languages, and traditions. Indigenous communities continue to assert their rights and sovereignty, seeking justice for historical wrongdoings and striving for self-determination in governance and resource management.

Alongside the legislation in Canada, one of the most grievous chapters in this colonization process was the implementation of assimilation policies. Colonial policies such as the establishment of residential schools, day schools, and the 60's scoop aimed to assimilate Indigenous children into Euro-Canadian society, causing deep trauma and severing connections to traditional knowledge and practices (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, 2019; Paradies, 2016; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 2000; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). This cultural disruption continues to reverberate through generations, contributing to ongoing challenges in identity and cultural revitalization efforts.

The influence of colonialism on Indigenous people's relationship with the environment truly began with the dispossession and displacement from their traditional lands. Several Indigenous authors contend that the historic trauma experienced by many Indigenous peoples is rooted in this dislocation (Hill, 2009; Reading & Wien, 2009; Redvers, 2020; Redvers et al., 2021; Robbins & Dewar, 2011; Tobias & Richmond, 2014; Wilson, 2008). This has resulted in diminished self-determination and a lack of influence in policies that directly relate to Indigenous individuals and communities.

Colonization has been named as one of the determinants of Indigenous peoples' health (Greenwood et al., 2015; Kim, 2019; Kolahdooz et al., 2015; Nesdole et al., 2014; Reading & Wien, 2009). This determinant includes the history of colonization, racism, oppression, marginalization, intergenerational trauma, and health inequities. The main premise is that health inequities, the unjust and avoidable differences in health outcomes, must be addressed and eliminated as they represent systemic inequalities in access to resources that promote health. The people and communities affected by these inequities not only face additional health challenges but are often denied the resources necessary to help improve their conditions (Kim, 2019;

Reading & Wien, 2009). Through a socio-political context, the history of colonization within Canada is one of the most impactful determinants of Indigenous peoples' health (Allan & Smylie, 2015; Koladouz et al., 2015). The political agenda of the colonial system was to assimilate and acculturate Indigenous people into dominant culture. This agenda is evident in legislation and social policies that reward assimilation, through resources and opportunities, while punishing the preservation of Indigenous cultures, thereby creating and perpetuating inequalities (Greenwood et al., 2015; Kim, 2019). The result has been dramatic and devastating socio-cultural change among all Indigenous peoples within Canada, including disengagement by many from their ancestry and culture.

Impacts of Colonization and The Potlatch Ban

The Potlatch Ban, which was implemented by the Canadian government from 1885-1951, is a key chapter in the history of colonialism that had a devastating impact on Indigenous cultures including our land-based healing and wellness practices. The Potlatch was a central social and cultural ceremony for many Indigenous peoples, particularly those in the Pacific Northwest and served as a way to affirm identity, community, and connection to the land (Noakes, 2023). The ban of the Potlatch was part of a broader attempt by the Canadian government to undermine Indigenous social, cultural, and spiritual practices and was driven by the belief that Indigenous ways of life needed to be replaced with European Christianity and governance (Noakes, 2023). The Indian Act of 1876 was the legal framework that enabled such policies and it explicitly targeted cultural practices including the Potlatch, the Sun Dance, and other spiritual ceremonies central to Indigenous health and governance systems (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 2000). By banning the Potlatch and other ceremonial practices, the government sought to eradicate Indigenous governance systems and to sever the

connection between Indigenous peoples and their land-based practices including our medicines and ceremonies (McRae, 2018).

One of the most immediate impacts of the Potlatch ban was the severe disruption of Indigenous cultural practices and social structures resulting in cultural suppression and identity loss. This cultural suppression led to the loss of knowledge, language, and traditions associated with the Potlatch. Elders, who were often the primary holders of this cultural knowledge were discouraged or punished for practicing their traditions, leading to a disruption of intergenerational knowledge transfer (Norman, 2024). Younger generations grew up without the ability to participate in these crucial cultural ceremonies which had an impact on their sense of identity and connection to their culture. The Potlatch was not only a cultural and spiritual event but also an important social gathering where people came together to share resources and strengthen community relationships (Noakes, 2023; Norman, 2024). When the Potlatch was banned, it stripped communities of a vital social institution, weakening their ability to heal, govern, and support one another.

The impacts of colonization on Indigenous health systems have been profound and long-lasting often leading to significant disruptions in our traditional ways of healing and well-being. Some of the key areas where colonization has impacted Indigenous health systems include the disruption of our traditional healing practices, loss of language and cultural practices, and forced displacement and loss of land. Despite centuries of colonial repression, many Indigenous communities still retain traditional healers, medicine people, and rich health knowledge that has been passed down through generations. However, due to this colonial violence, forced assimilation, and the criminalization of Indigenous practices, much of this knowledge went underground for decades leaving our healers and knowledge keepers to practice discreetly or in

secret to avoid punishment or persecution (Norman, 2024; Risling Baldy, 2018; Wabie, 2019). The survival of these knowledge systems is a testament to the resilience of Indigenous cultures and our capacity to heal through a holistic approach, but the erosion of these systems combined with the ongoing trauma of colonization has left many Indigenous peoples without consistent access to their traditional health systems.

Mistreatment within Western Health Systems

One of the central challenges Indigenous people face today is the tension between their traditional health systems and the dominant Western medical model which is often fragmented and reductionist in its approach to wellness (Carroll & Hills, 2015). The Western medical system is built on a scientific and clinical model that tends to focus on diagnosing and treating specific physical symptoms of illness. It is primarily concerned with the individual body and often compartmentalizes health into different systems without considering the broader social, cultural, or spiritual context. In contrast, as discussed earlier, many Indigenous health systems are holistic, recognizing the interconnectedness of mind, body, spirit, and the environment. Thus, healing often involves more than just physical treatment as spiritual and emotional healing is just as important. Traditional healers might use plant medicine, storytelling, or rituals and ceremonies to address not just the symptoms, but also the root cause of the illness. (Struthers & Eschiti, 2004; Struthers et al., 2005; Redvers, 2020). For many Indigenous peoples, being forced to engage with the Western medical system which may feel dismissive of their cultural practices, creates a profound sense of disconnection (Turpel-Lafond, 2020; Mundell & Chapman, 2010). The treatment of illness in a fragmented, symptom-based way can feel disempowering for those who view health in a more interconnected, community-centred way.

Many Indigenous peoples are now caught in a difficult position as the health systems that were once central to our communities and cultures are no longer easily accessible. As a result, many Indigenous people have either never learned about traditional healing methods or have had difficulty reconnecting with them in a meaningful way. Furthermore, the imposition of Western healthcare systems such as hospitals, clinics, and standardized medical practices, often undermine the role of Indigenous healers (Gerhardt-Strachen, 2022; Hill, 2009; Turpel-Lafond, 2020; Watts, 2016). For example, healers or medicine people have faced legal challenges or were outright prohibited from practicing (Norman, 2024; Noakes, 2023; Watts, 2016). This disconnection between generations and loss of access to traditional systems has compounded health inequities, particularly in remote or rural areas where Western medical infrastructure may be limited or culturally set apart. The inability to access culturally relevant and holistic care leaves many people to navigate health issues without the comfort or knowledge of their ancestral practices.

Navigating a medical system that is not holistic often presents a profound disconnect between our health needs and the care provided. Indigenous people may enter a healthcare setting where their concerns are not fully understood or respected and where the care provided not does align with their holistic worldview. On top of this, many Indigenous peoples experience systemic racism in healthcare settings. The *In Plain Sight* (Turpel-Lafond, 2020) report discusses and recognizes the widespread Indigenous-specific stereotyping, racism, and discrimination that exists in the BC healthcare system through listening to the stories of thousands of Indigenous voices who have been impacted by the health system and healthcare practitioners. Findings include that the stereotyping, racism, and discrimination of Indigenous people is common and widespread in the health care system and as a result Indigenous people are experiencing harm,

poorer quality of care, and even death. Many times, this leaves Indigenous people with mistrust and ultimate avoidance of the healthcare system all together as it serves negative impacts on Indigenous people's health and wellbeing,

As noted in works like *The Science of the Sacred* by Dr. Nicole Redvers (2019), healthcare institutions often have ingrained biases against Indigenous people, leading to discriminatory treatment and misunderstandings. Indigenous patients may face dismissive attitudes from medical professionals who are uneducated about their culture or who view traditional healing methods as 'inferior'. This can lead to misdiagnosis, inadequate treatment, and a sense of isolation making it even more difficult to seek care. The racism and discrimination within the healthcare system increases the challenges of navigating a system that does not properly recognize Indigenous health needs. This creates an ongoing tension that Indigenous peoples must often choose between adhering to their cultural health practices in secrecy or navigating a healthcare system that is both culturally unresponsive and fraught with prejudice. As seen through these articles and reports, many Indigenous people do not feel safe accessing mainstream health services due to systemic racism and discrimination, and a limited understanding of spirituality in Indigenous healing.

RESURGENCE OF OUR HOLISTIC HEALTH SYSTEMS

In Canada, the integrity of existing Indigenous healing systems was interrupted when the government outlawed First Nations traditional medical practices and ceremonies. This interruption was seen in policies like the amendment to the Indian Act in 1884, which banned ceremonies such as the Sundance and the Potlatch. When discussing Indigenous knowledge systems and spirituality, a focus on Indigenous healing is important because of the large-scale suppression of Indigenous cultural expression during the colonization process.

The need for improved spiritual wellness among Indigenous communities in Canada is fundamental and highlighted in the following articles of the United Nations Declaration to the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP):

Article 11: Indigenous peoples have the right to practise and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs; Article 12: Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practise, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions; and Article 31: Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage. (p. 11-12, 22)

These rights show the importance of ceremonial and cultural knowledge transfer in Indigenous populations for the future of Indigenous communities.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (2015) reinforces these rights through Call to Action 22 which “calls upon those who can effect change within the Canadian health-care system to recognize the value of Aboriginal healing practices and use of them in the treatment of Aboriginal patients in collaboration with Aboriginal healers and Elders” (p.3). Section 35 of the Constitution Act on the Rights of the Aboriginal Peoples of Canada “recognizes and affirms the existing Aboriginal and treaty rights of Aboriginal peoples”, recognizing spiritual practices as integral to Indigenous identity and wellbeing (para.1). By honouring these rights, the intrinsic value of cultural and spiritual traditions in fostering resilience and wellness among Indigenous communities is acknowledged and reinforced. Recognition and affirmation of the importance of these traditional healing practices for Indigenous peoples has helped to accelerate a reversal of the historic efforts to eradicate Indigenous traditions and healing efforts.

Traditional knowledge and Indigenous spirituality rely on the maintenance and renewal of relationships to the land (Robbins & Dewar, 2011; Redvers et al., 2021; Redvers, 2020). For

Indigenous communities, land is not just a physical space. It is a sacred, living entity that we share a deep, spiritual, and cultural relationship with. This connection is rooted in thousands of years of history and is integral to Indigenous identity, community, and wellbeing. The land is seen as a source of life, wisdom, and sustenance, providing everything that is necessary for our survival like food, shelter, medicine, and spiritual guidance. Factors such as loss of land, resource mining, and urbanization have greatly affected Indigenous knowledge systems and spiritualities (Kirmayer et al., 2003; Redvers, 2020). Despite this significant loss, Indigenous communities maintain continuity of their relationships to their lands and traditional knowledge systems by reviving the cultural practices of our ancestors.

The revitalization of holistic wellness through Indigenous spirituality is a powerful response to the historical and ongoing impacts of colonization. By reclaiming and integrating traditional healing practices, Indigenous communities are not only addressing physical health but also the emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being of individuals and communities. This process of healing is deeply rooted in our belief that true wellness is achieved through balance and interconnectedness. Since time immemorial, ceremony and traditional practices have been a way for Indigenous people to connect with the environment and connect with themselves. They are employed as a means of healing from historical traumas and addressing the collective wounds of colonization by providing a safe space for acknowledging and processing the impact that these injustices have had and still have on us today (Bodor et al., 2022). As more communities and healthcare systems recognize the importance of Indigenous knowledge and spiritual practices, the path toward holistic wellness becomes one that honours the past, embraces the present, and builds a healthier future for our people. Restoring our traditional healing practices and

community ceremonies is the beginning of the path towards both empowerment and healthy communities.

Impacts/Opportunities for Youth

Resurgence projects rooted in sharing traditional knowledge and learning from the land offer cultural continuity for community wellbeing and can be a protective factor in preventing youth suicide (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998). We need to continue claiming back Indigenous knowledge systems so the future generations can understand the importance of cultural continuity and traditions. A recommendation identified in the literature includes finding ways to restore balance in all areas of life for Indigenous people, by incorporating traditional knowledge and education as a means of increasing self-esteem; reclaiming identity and asserting dignity; learning traditions, customs, and spiritual teachings; and letting go of the pain (Hill, 2009; Kirmayer et al., 2003; Nesdole et al., 2014). To reclaim healthy Indigenous identities that enliven holistic aspects of self within kinship, it is critical we have opportunities to engage the teachings of respective nations within our natural laws, family systems, and the land (Corntassel, 2012; Gray & Cote, 2019; Hill, 2009; Kading et al., 2019).

In Canada, Indigenous kinship and governance systems have been devastatingly impacted by colonial policies enforcing assimilation, genocide, and Indigenous child removal (de Finney et al., 2020). Long term impacts of colonialism that Indigenous communities face present in low rates of high school completion, high rates of suicide among children and youth, youth addictions and behaviours to cope with trauma and an overall loss of healthy Indigenous identity (Barker et al., 2017; Gray & Cote, 2019; Reading & Wien, 2009; Snowshoe et al., 2017; Wright Cardinal et al, in press). Many communities have expressed concerns about younger generations

lacking the relationships, skills, and knowledge of land use resulting in consequences for both cultural continuity and wellness (Tobias & Richmond, 2014).

In an article by Lines and Jardine (2019) titled *Connection to the land as a youth-identified social determinant of Indigenous peoples' health*, youth emphasized the significance of relationships with the land, including practicing cultural skills, receiving traditional knowledge from Elders, and sustaining themselves through traditional land use. They envisioned future health research to integrate youth leadership and incorporating on-the-land activities to foster culture, community cohesion, and intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge. This exemplifies how Indigenous youth value their connection to the land as fundamental to their health and well-being. Emphasizing identity, maintaining traditions, and nurturing spirituality, cultural connectedness emerged as a pivotal factor in promoting resilience and well-being among Indigenous youth (Snowshoe et al., 2017). By strengthening cultural ties and supporting Indigenous youth in maintaining their cultural practices, communities can enhance resilience and mental well-being. This approach not only validates Indigenous perspectives but also enriches health interventions with culturally relevant.

Connection to Culture

Many articles discuss how the strengthening of cultural identity through connection to culture is a vital part of traditional healing (Gone, 2011; Gray & Cote, 2019; Kirmayer et al., 2000; Kirmayer et al, 2003; Redvers & Blondin, 2020; Redvers, 2020; Robbins & Dewar, 2011). For example, in an article by Gray and Cote (2019) titled *Cultural Connectedness protects mental health against the effect of historical trauma among Anishinaabe young adults*, the authors sought to evaluate whether cultural connectedness plays a pivotal role in the mental health of descendants of Indian Residential School (IRS) survivors. Among participants without

a family history of IRS attendance, the study found that cultural connectedness did not show a significant association with improved mental health. In contrast, among participants with a family history of IRS attendance, a strong connection to their culture was significantly linked to a 31% higher likelihood of reporting high mental health levels. These findings highlight the critical role of cultural connectedness as a robust protective factor against the intergenerational impacts of IRS on the mental health of Anishinaabe people. By fostering strong cultural ties, communities affected by residential school can potentially alleviate the enduring psychological effects of historical trauma, affirming the importance of cultural revitalization in promoting resilience and well-being among Indigenous populations in Canada (Gone, 2011; Gray & Cote, 2019; Robbins & Dewar, 2011).

In *The mental health of Aboriginal peoples: transformations of identity and community*, Kirmayer et al. (2000) highlight the profound social origins of mental health issues among Indigenous populations, deeply rooted in the legacy of colonization. The breakdown of cultural connections and ongoing systemic oppression due to colonization is closely associated with increased levels of depression, substance abuse, suicide, and violence, although many communities have shown strength and resilience in facing these challenges. The authors highlight the importance for the need of further research to identify factors that effectively support wellness in Indigenous communities. By embracing culturally relevant interventions and acknowledging the historical and cultural contexts of mental health issues, health services can better address the unique needs and challenges faced by Indigenous communities (Gerhardt-Strachen, 2022; Kirmayer et al., 2003; Kolahdooz et al., 2015; Mundell & Chapman, 2010).

Indigenous communities are increasingly turning to cultural revitalization as a comprehensive, community-centered approach to suicide prevention and treatment (Chandler &

Lalonde, 1998; Hill, 2009; Redvers & Blondin, 2020; Robbins & Dewar, 2011). This approach challenges the conventional wisdom by viewing culture not just as a backdrop but as a potent form of treatment itself (Gone, 2011). By prioritizing interconnectedness and the restoration of traditional values, such initiatives aim to foster community wellness and resilience, empowering our Indigenous relatives to navigate and heal from the multifaceted impacts of trauma.

Embracing and revitalizing Indigenous cultures and practices assists communities in reclaiming agency over their health and well-being, forging a path towards more effective and culturally grounded responses to this national crisis (Bordor et al., 2022; Corntassel, 2012; Gerhardt-Strachen, 2022; Kirmayer et al., 2003).

The First Nations Health Authority (2012) provides a report on the *Traditional Healers Gathering* with an overview of a significant event where Indigenous healers, knowledge keepers, and community members gathered to discuss and celebrate traditional healing practices. The report emphasizes the importance of integrating traditional Indigenous healing practices with Western healthcare approaches to provide holistic and culturally relevant care for First Nations peoples. Ill health in our communities has been identified as being created from the loss of culture/tradition, values, family, knowledge, and safety. Though this loss has been vast, the creation of good health and healing within Indigenous communities is continuously being improved. The healers identified culture and tradition as creating health and healing in the people. To support the traditional healers in community, the report identifies what is needed to assist them. This includes practicing our ceremonies, youth and Elder involvement, knowledge transfer, integration with medical systems, and resources such as language and culture programs.

Rationale for My Study within Sharing Medicine Bundles

While there is growing research on Indigenous health disparities, there is still a significant gap in research specifically focusing on Indigenous mental health including culturally relevant frameworks for healing. As discussed above, Western models of health and trauma do not adequately address the unique experiences of Indigenous peoples, especially considering historical trauma, loss of land, cultural disruption, and the impacts of colonization (Gone, 2011; Hart, 2010; Kirmayer et al., 2000). While many Indigenous communities have relied on traditional healing systems for millennia, Western medicine often disregards or marginalizes these approaches. Much of the existing research tends to focus on disparities rather than solutions or preventative measures that are culturally relevant and community driven. Many studies neglect the role of traditional healing practices and their potential to work in conjunction with or even complement Western medicine (Redvers, 2020; Redvers & Blondin, 2020; Struthers et al., 2008). The dominant biomedical framework focuses on treating individual symptoms rather than understanding the holistic nature of health which includes mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical wellbeing.

Therefore, as the momentum for cultural resurgence grows more, Indigenous scholars are collaborating with their home communities and nations to reclaim and revitalize traditional health systems. This effort is rooted in the understanding that sacred knowledge is not always meant to be written down or shared indiscriminately. Instead, the focus is on uplifting the core principles of holistic wellness that have been practiced for generations. These principles go beyond the mere treatment of illness. They encompass the interconnectedness of physical, emotional, spiritual, and community health, ensuring the sustainable and harmonious existence with the land, ancestors and each other.

In this context, my own work aligns with the ongoing efforts to restore and affirm Indigenous health practices starting with the Elders of my nation. By gathering stories and teachings I am deepening the understanding of Anishinaabe wellness and exploring how these traditional practices can be integrated into contemporary community life. Specifically, I seek to learn from Elders about the essential elements of wellness such as the roles of family, community, spirituality and ceremony, our relationship to the land and how these can be woven back into the fabric of modern life to better support our youth and community members. Through this process, I will make recommendations that foster greater connection to our traditions, build resilience, and create pathways for young people to engage with and carry forward our sacred knowledge.

Summary

In the opening chapter, I feasted the grounds and laid the cedar for this study by weaving the threads of my own journey into the fabric of this study, clarifying my perspective and role as a researcher and acknowledging how my background and personal experiences influence the research process. The purpose, goals, and importance of the study have been articulated, emphasizing not only the motivations behind the research but also its broader implications within the realm of Indigenous health research.

In Chapter 2, I journeyed through the landscape of literature that holds the knowledge and stories of those who have walked before me to help us gain a better understanding of existing approaches in the topic of Indigenous health and wellness. I began by exploring the complex terrain of Canadian health promotion where I examined the intersection of health and spirituality. From here, I dove deeper into Indigenous health systems, uncovering the understandings of spirituality embedded in Indigenous ways of knowing, where wellness is not

confined to the body alone but rather holistically, where it extends to the spirit, mind, and our community. I then confronted the disruptions caused by colonization, an uninvited force that fractured Indigenous health systems and sought to erase our very foundations of wellness through political frameworks and assimilation policies. Despite these wounds, there is a growing resurgence, a powerful reclaiming of Indigenous health systems, where the wisdom of our ancestors is rising again. Our youth are reconnecting with their heritage and cultural practices as a source of strength and healing, breathing life into holistic health systems and incorporating culture and ceremony into modern health practices.

What follows in Chapter 3 is an explanation of the methods and the methodology that guide this study. I will discuss my research design, data collection methods, and data analysis method which reflect a commitment to Indigenous ways of knowing and understanding. This chapter is where the heart of the study takes shape. It is the space where theory meets practice, where the sacred act of knowledge sharing begins, and where the methodology becomes a bridge between the past and the future.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This methodology chapter outlines the approach I have taken in exploring community wellness with Whitesand First Nation Elders and knowledge keepers emphasizing a framework that honours the cultural values, traditions, and holistic principles that are integral to our Anishinaabe worldviews. I begin with a discussion of Indigenous health research, bringing forward my use of a strengths-based approach to conducting research. I then discuss the use of the Sharing Medicine Bundles approach and framework which is central to this work, guiding the research in a way that respects the balance and wholeness of life. Next, I discuss my own nation's teachings such as Mino Bimaadiziwin and the Seven Grandfather Teachings that also inform the research process, in addition to weaving in my own values that have been brought into this work. I then begin to discuss the methods and methodologies that have been utilized in my research. I start by introducing the relatives that have shared their knowledge with me and proceed to talk about sacred approaches to research and knowledge, looking at research as ceremony and discussing Indigenous research methodologies including Indigenous storied research (Archibald, 2008) which I draw on for my own research. Lastly, I talk about the Indigenous thematic analysis that I employ to help understand and make meaning of the stories and knowledge that was shared, then briefly discuss the study limitations.

INDIGENOUS HEALTH RESEARCH

To engage with Indigenous health research, one must first understand that diverse Indigenous knowledges exist. Indigenous knowledges are reflected in the holistic approaches to health, wellbeing, and life. When considering the social dimensions of health, I place great emphasis on the interconnectedness of individuals with our community and environment. In

Indigenous health systems, individual wellbeing is the product of the community's health (Greenwood et al., 2015; Kim, 2019; Kolaheedooz, 2015). The social fabric of the community, including its shared values, collective responsibilities, and social ties, all play a central role in sustaining and promoting health (Mashford-Pringle et al., 2023). This collective approach is reflected in the way I have engaged with the Elders and knowledge keepers throughout my research, viewing their stories and experiences as part of a larger collective understanding of health and wellness. This interconnectedness between individual and community also highlights the importance of relationality in Indigenous health research (Absolon, 2022; Kovach, 2008; Wilson, 2008). It is not enough to simply study health outcomes in Indigenous communities, rather, it is crucial to understand the relationships that shape those outcomes (Nesdole et al., 2014). In my approach, I have prioritized building strong, trusting relationships with community members recognizing that healing and wellness are a relational process. Every interaction has been viewed as an opportunity to build a reciprocal, respectful relationship, and every piece of knowledge shared is recognized as part of a larger, ongoing conversation about our wellness.

My approach to Indigenous health research has been rooted in a strengths-based approach. Traditional approaches to Indigenous health have often been framed through a deficit model which focuses on the gaps, challenges, and inequalities that Indigenous communities face (Bryant et al., 2020). While this lens has highlighted important issues, it tends to perpetuate negative stereotypes and oversimplifies the complexities of Indigenous peoples experiences and realities (Hyett et al., 2019). This deficit lens often portrays Indigenous peoples as victims of colonization and its ongoing consequences on health, failing to acknowledge the full breadth of Indigenous peoples' experiences. Instead of seeing communities as dynamic agents of their own

health and healing, the deficit model reinforces an image of Indigenous peoples as passive recipients of assistance or as people in need of saving (Gaudry, 2011; Tuck, 2009).

This transformative shift towards strength-based approaches highlights the resilience, agency, cultural wisdom, and community-driven solutions that are central to Indigenous health and wellbeing (Bryant et al., 2020; Hyett et al., 2019; Kennedy et al., 2022). This approach to my research recognizes the cultural resilience of Indigenous people, acknowledging how our culture, spirituality, and community connectedness acts as protective factors against the social determinants of health (Absolon, 2022; Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Kirmayer et al., 2003; Kennedy et al., 2022; Reading & Wien, 2009; Smith, 2012). The concept of cultural resilience is crucial in this strengths-based framework as it acknowledges that despite systemic challenges, Indigenous communities have maintained and revitalized our traditions, which continue to play an essential role in health and healing (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008; Kennedy et al., 2022).

Centring a strengths-based approach in Indigenous health research has significant implications for the methodology used in such studies. Bryant et al. (2020) suggest that research methodologies should be co-constructed with Indigenous communities, ensuring that they are active participants in the design and execution of the work. This participatory and community-driven methodology honours the knowledge system of Indigenous peoples, recognizing them as collaborators rather than subjects of research (Wilson, 2008). By valuing the agency and resilience of Indigenous communities, research can be a tool for empowerment, self-determination, and cultural revitalization rather than a means of perpetuating harm or reinforcing stereotypes (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021). Ultimately, this shift towards strength-based Indigenous health research in my work aligns with broader efforts to decolonize research and honour the contributions of Indigenous people. We recognize the many pathways to healing and

wellness they carry within and between them, and acknowledge the path to healing and wellness. Through this paradigm shift, we can help ensure that Indigenous peoples not only survive but thrive with our cultural practices and knowledge systems at the heart of our health and wellbeing (Absolon, 2022; Cajete, 2000; Kennedy et al., 2022; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008).

SHARING MEDICINE BUNDLES FRAMING AND APPROACH

The Sharing Medicine Bundles and Pathways to Community Wellness framework is a multifaceted approach to understanding Indigenous health and wellbeing. Grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing, this framework extends beyond traditional models of health by recognizing the holistic dimensions of life. The Sharing Medicine Bundles framework is a collaborative and community-centered approach that seeks to reclaim and revitalize the roles and practices that have been central to Indigenous knowledge systems for millennia. It has named land, language, culture, and spirituality/ceremony as the key components in nurturing health and healing. This approach has identified ancestral knowing and community love as the way in which our Elders, grandparents, and other knowledge keepers nurture knowledge. They do so out of love for their whole community or nation. Kinship family systems are identified as very important, as kinship systems in Indigenous cultures are not just familial structures, they are intricate networks of relationships that extend far beyond biological family ties. The principle of connection and belonging which has often been disrupted through the policies and processes of colonization have also been identified as important in this framework. The Sharing Medicine Bundles approach addresses this disconnect by emphasizing the reclamation of kinship systems, seeking to restore and strengthen relationships within families and communities to create a space where belonging is felt at every level. This is a necessary step in the healing process, for a sense of connection and belonging is vital to an individual and a community's wellbeing.

Reclaiming our roles and responsibilities whether it is as Elders or knowledge keepers, youth, or family members in community is another key component of the Sharing Medicine Bundles framework. This means not only revitalizing traditional practices and knowledge but ensuring that each individual understands their role within the community as this process is vital for the health and wellbeing of the community as a whole. Specific to the Sharing Medicine Bundles framework, the role of healers and helpers has been identified, seeking to acknowledge and uplift these roles as essential to the broader practice of Indigenous healing.

MY NATION'S TEACHINGS

Mino Bimaadiziwin and the Seven Grandfather Teachings

At the heart of my research lies Mino Bimaadiziwin. This philosophy, deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric of the Anishinaabe worldview, offers a profound theoretical foundation for understanding health, wellness, and spirituality in our community. Mino Bimaadiziwin is not merely a set of ideas but a way of being. It provides a lens through which we can approach Indigenous health systems and wellness practices in a manner that is holistic, relational, and rooted in cultural values (Debassige, 2010). Mino Bimaadiziwin serves as the theoretical backbone of this research, guiding its exploration of Indigenous health and wellness, spirituality, and the resurgence of traditional healing practices in the face of colonization.

In the AFN report on *The Seven Generations of Continuum Care* (AFN, 2022), Ryan McMahon presents on the journey of Mino Bimaadiziwin and centres what the fundamental tenets of health and living the good life are and how the incorporation of an Indigenous perspective is necessary to understand what true health is. Health from many Indigenous perspectives, including the Anishinaabe, emphasize the importance of wellbeing and balance in the four sectors of life, our spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical, that are woven together

and interact to support the individual's overall health and wellbeing (Bedard, 2008). Mino Bimaadiziwin is about living in alignment with natural laws, respect for all beings, and maintaining good relationships with oneself, others, and the environment. It represents a holistic philosophy and guiding principle in Anishinaabe teachings and is rooted in balance and harmony.

Mino Bimaadiziwin emphasizes a holistic view of life, one that sees health and wellness not as isolated physical conditions but as a delicate balance between the mind, body, spirit, and community (Kruse et al., 2019). In this way of living, spiritual balance is meant to maintain a balance to the Creator, the spirits, and our cultural teachings by utilizing practices such as prayer, ceremony, and our sacred teachings. Physical balance means to care for our body through healthy living which can include eating well, exercising, and seeking medical care when needed. Mental balance refers to the cultivation of a peaceful and calm mind, seeking knowledge and engaging in thoughtful reflection and learning. Emotional balance involves managing our emotions in a healthy way, fostering empathy, love and forgiveness for others, as well as maintaining a sense of inner peace. These are the aspects of living that bring us true health as an Anishinaabe.

Another core concept of Mino Bimaadiziwin is respect for all living beings, recognizing that every being on this planet, humans, animals, plants, and the natural world are all interconnected and interdependent (Debassige, 2010). This manifests in daily practices of stewardship and care for Mother Earth. The land, water, and air are sacred, and the teachings of Mino Bimaadiziwin emphasize the need to protect and nurture the environment, not only for the current generation but for future generations as well (Kruse et al., 2019). We view nature as a teacher and guide and living the good life involves learning from nature's rhythms and cycles,

understanding this interconnectedness of all living beings and striving to live in a way that doesn't harm the earth.

One of the foundational components of living the good life in Anishinaabe culture are the seven grandfather teachings. These teachings are a set of Anishinaabe guiding principles that give people the tools for how to live a good life as they provide us a framework for ethical and spiritual living (Mills, 2018). They have been passed down from generation to generation for thousands of years through stories and ceremonies. The story of these teachings goes like this:

There were Seven Grandfathers who were given the responsibility by the Creator to watch over the Earth's people. They saw that life was not good, so they sent a helper, the Oshkabaywis, to walk among the people and bring them someone who could be taught how to live in harmony with Creation. It took seven tries but eventually the Oshkabaywis brought them a baby and they were happy. They instructed the Oshkabaywis to take the baby to every corner of the earth to see all of Creation. This took seven years and when they returned, each of the Grandfathers gave the child a gift – a teaching – to share with all the Earth's people. (Benton-Banai, 2010)

The seven grandfathers are: Nibwaakaawin, wisdom, the ability to see the truth and act according to it; Zaagi'idiwin, love, having compassion and kindness for others and treating them with unconditional love; Mnaadendimowin, respect, treating all people, animals, and the earth with dignity and honour; Aakode'ewin, bravery, having the courage to face adversity and stand up for what is right even when it is difficult; Gwayakwaadiziwin, honesty, being truthful and open with oneself and others; Dbaadendiziwin, humility, recognizing one's place in the world, not placing oneself above others, and being humble; Debwewin, truth, living in accordance with truth, understanding the importance of honesty in our thoughts, words, and actions (Mills, 2018).

These seven principles are a moral steppingstone and cultural foundation for us as Anishinaabe people.

As we can see, Mino Bimaadiziwin is much more than just a phrase, it is a way of being, living, and understanding the world. It is not a destination but an ongoing process. It is about continually striving to improve oneself in all areas of life, it emphasizes personal responsibility and growth, but also acknowledges that everyone is on their own journey. Learning, teaching, healing, and evolving are all part of this beautiful process of growth and living.

MY VALUES BROUGHT INTO THE WORK

In my research, I bring a set of deeply held values that are not only rooted in my personal experiences and cultural upbringing but are also reflective of the broader principles of Indigenous ways of knowing and being. These values have guided every stage of my research process, from the ways in which I engaged with the Elders and knowledge keepers, to how I analyze and present findings. These values are shaped by the community I come from, the teachings I have received from Elders and knowledge keepers, and my ongoing journey of learning and growth in a world where traditional knowledge and academic scholarship must come into balance. Integrating my values and my community's values into this research is essential because research is not conducted in isolation, it is shaped by lived experiences, relationships, and responsibilities. By grounding this work in the principles and values that are important to my community, I ensure that the research remains relevant, ethical, and impactful. This approach also acknowledges that my engagement does not end with the completion of this study, rather, it is a part of a continuous commitment to learning, advocacy, and meaningful change.

Respect is the foundational value that I bring to my research. This speaks to a deep reverence I have for the knowledge and experiences shared with me, and the sacred responsibility I hold in protecting and honouring this knowledge. Whether I am interviewing an Elder or knowledge keeper, learning from my community members, or reflecting on the stories shared with me, I approach this knowledge with the utmost care. This respect also extends to the diverse ways that knowledge is shared. I recognize that Western research methods, which prioritize written documentation and standardized data collection, might not always align with how Indigenous knowledge is shared. Indigenous research methodologies and approaches offer an alternative to the often impersonal practices of Western research and instead prioritize the community, culture, and spiritual aspects of knowledge sharing (Absolon, 2022; Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). As a researcher, I have been open to learning from those methods that resonate with my community, be it through storytelling, art, song, or ceremony. I understand that knowledge is dynamic and context-dependent, and I have aimed to bring this perspective into my work (Archibald, 2008).

Another key value I hold is an understanding of health through a holistic view from my personal life as this is the way I grew up. In my research, I prioritize this comprehensive approach, considering how community wellbeing is shaped by cultural practices, family dynamics, spirituality, and connection to the land, as well as more conventional factors like healthcare access and social conditions. This value is also reflected in how I have engaged with the Elders and knowledge keepers, recognizing the significance of their personal, spiritual, and our community health. Rather than focusing solely on individual health outcomes, I take into account how social, cultural, and environmental factors influence wellbeing. This reflects a deeper understanding that health is interconnected with the greater entanglement of life and our

relationships (Gonzalez et al., 2023; Greenwood et al., 2015; Kim, 2019; Kolahdooz et al., 2015; Nesdole et al., 2014; Reading & Wien, 2013).

Humility is another core value I hold in my research practice. I approach every one of the Elders and knowledge keepers with an openness that allows me to listen more than I speak, to learn from the wisdom and experiences shared with me, and to recognize that I am just one part of a much larger, dynamic process of knowledge creation. In Indigenous research, humility goes hand in hand with recognizing that the researcher is not the sole holder of knowledge, but rather a co-learner alongside the community (Absolon, 2022; Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Humility also manifests in my willingness to engage with the unknown. In researching Indigenous health and wellness, there is often knowledge that cannot be captured through conventional methods or frameworks (Cajete, 2000). By embracing this uncertainty and being humble in my approach, I create space for new perspectives and ways of understanding health that might not align with mainstream academic approaches.

Going along with humility, empathy and compassion are additional core values I hold that shape my approach to this research. In listening to the experiences of the Elders and knowledge keepers and understanding the context of their health and wellbeing I have sought to engage with genuine care, compassion, and understanding. Research can sometimes be clinical, distant, or detached, but I believe that true insights arise when researchers engage deeply with empathy, seeing the person, not just the data. This empathetic approach also extends to understanding the emotional and psychological weight that many of our relatives carry due to the historical trauma and ongoing struggles they face. Compassion in this sense is about acknowledging that health is not just a physical state but an emotional and psychological one,

and myself as a researcher must engage with this complexity when studying Indigenous health and wellness.

Lastly, I bring a deep belief in the *resilience* of Indigenous communities and our capacity for healing and cultural revitalization. In my research, I seek to highlight the strengths and resilience that we as Anishinaabe people have shown over centuries of colonization, displacement, and trauma. Indigenous communities have survived and thrived through tremendous adversity, and this resilience is rooted in our culture, land, language, and ceremony. Through my work, I hope to contribute to the ongoing process of cultural revitalization, where traditional knowledge and practices are reclaimed and integrated into the community's health and wellness systems. This involves recognizing the healing potential embedded within our Indigenous cultures and supporting their resurgence through research that aligns with our community values and aspirations.

The values I bring into my research are shaped by respect for Indigenous knowledge systems, a commitment to relationality and community engagement, and a deep respect for our cultural integrity. My personal approach emphasizes humility, empathy, and resiliency, while remaining grounded in the holistic view of health and wellbeing that is central to our Anishinaabe worldview. Through these values, I strive to create research that not only produces knowledge but also fosters healing, cultural revitalization, and community strength. These values guide me to ensure that my research is not only rich in understanding but also meaningful, ethical, and aligned with the aspirations of Whitesand First Nation.

METHODOLOGY

The Relatives

In this study, three Elders and knowledge keepers from Whitesand First Nation accepted the invitation to participate in the study. The decision in asking these individuals was a conscious effort to approach those whose knowledge and lived experiences could offer meaningful contributions to the research. The selection of these specific Elders and knowledge keepers was influenced by both personal relationships and community roles, as I sought individuals within the community who were known for their deep understanding of Anishinaabe teachings, healing practices, and community history. The process of selecting Elders and knowledge keepers was shaped by a respectful and culturally appropriate approach. I was mindful of the importance of protocols and respect in this process, ensuring that each of the Elders and knowledge keepers I approached were willing to participate and comfortable with the research framework. This approach is grounded in the values of reciprocity and relationship building central to Indigenous research methodologies. In line with our traditional teachings, it was important to make the invitation to participate in the study not as an imposition, but as an offering, allowing the Elders and knowledge keepers to share their wisdom and stories in a way that felt right for them. While I had hoped to engage a larger number of Elders and knowledge keepers, the realities of community dynamics, including geographical distance and availability, made this smaller sample more feasible at this stage. Nonetheless, the Elders and knowledge keepers that accepted the invitation have shared knowledge and stories that are precious and invaluable. These Elders and knowledge keepers have opted to keep their identities anonymous and as such, this request for anonymity is respected through the use of pseudonyms or general descriptors within the research.

A Sacred Approach to Research – Research as Ceremony

In our Anishinaabe culture, the concept of ceremony is deeply rooted in the rhythms of life and is a way to honor the sacredness of the world and all that it encompasses. Ceremonies

serve as conduits for healing, learning, and connecting with the spiritual, physical, and emotional aspects of our existence (Cajete, 2000; Kirmayer et al., 2000). When applied to research, this traditional notion transforms the research process into something far more meaningful than just an academic pursuit. Research as ceremony positions the research process as an act of reverence, relationship-building, and reciprocity (Absolon, 2022; Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008). Just as in our ceremonies where people come together to create a shared space for learning, healing, or remembrance, understanding research as ceremony builds connections with the people and communities involved.

Emphasizing respect for the land, the people, and the knowledge shared transforms the entire research process as a sacred act that carries spiritual, cultural, and community significance. This framework is founded on the understanding that knowledge is not a commodity to be extracted but a sacred gift to be shared (Archibald, 2008; Smith, 2012). In many of our Indigenous cultures, knowledge is held with great reverence and shared only through careful and respectful relationships. The research process, when seen through the lens of ceremony, becomes a reciprocal exchange that honors our community's wisdom and ensures that the outcomes are beneficial and meaningful (Absolon, 2022; Wilson, 2008). Just as ceremonies help us to heal, restore, and renew, research in this framework is seen as a means of bringing about healing and positive change. The research process itself becomes an opportunity to restore balance, rebuild cultural connections, and empower the community.

Research as ceremony reimagines research as a spiritual and relational process rather than a detached, objective endeavor (Wilson, 2008). It emphasizes the importance of approaching research with respect, humility, and care, recognizing that knowledge is a living, sacred being that connects us to each other, our culture, and our land. Through this framework, research

becomes an act of honouring Indigenous peoples, our wisdom, and our contributions to the world. By engaging in research as ceremony, we not only decolonize the research process but also empower our communities to lead the way in reclaiming their stories and knowledge for future generations (Absolon, 2022; Archibald, 2008; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008).

A Sacred Approach to Knowledge – Indigenous Research Methodologies

Indigenous research methodologies represent a profound departure from conventional Western research approaches, offering an alternative paradigm that aligns more closely with our Indigenous worldviews, values, and epistemologies. Shawn Wilson (2008) states that “a paradigm is a set of beliefs about the world and about gaining knowledge that goes together to guide peoples’ actions as to how they are going to do their research” (p. 70). I was driven to develop an Indigenous research paradigm to act as the foundation of my research design because it is a better representation of who we are and how we should do research within Indigenous communities as these methodologies serve as a reclamation of knowledge, cultural practices, and self-determination for Indigenous people. By centring Indigenous research methodologies, I can ensure that the research process honours the dignity, sovereignty, and worldviews of us as Anishinaabe people while fostering relationships built on respect, reciprocity, and responsibility (Hart, 2010).

In her book *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*, Kovach (2021) puts forward the idea that from an epistemological and ontological perspective based on relationships, an Indigenous methodology emerges that encompasses a relational and tribal knowledge worldview, which can be achieved by using a qualitative approach to gathering information. One of the foundational elements of Indigenous research paradigms is its emphasis on a holistic and relational worldview (Hart, 2010). In Indigenous epistemologies, knowledge is

not static or abstract but is lived and shared in the context of relationships. Research is a process of reconnecting these relationships. Knowledge is not seen as something to be extracted, objectified, or separated from the knower, rather, it is viewed as something that exists in the relationships with other people, the land, spiritual beings, and our ancestors. It is not purely rational or scientific, it is also intuitive, spiritual, and experiential (Absolon, 2022; Archibald, 2008; Cajete, 2000; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008).

Another critical aspect of an Indigenous research paradigm is its relationship to decolonization (Baikie, 2020; Smith, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wilson, 2008). As previously mentioned, colonialism has had a profound impact on Indigenous peoples, disrupting our cultures, languages, and ways of knowing (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Gone, 2011; Kirmayer et al., 2000; Paradies, 2016). Dominant Western research methodologies have often been complicit in this process, as they have frequently been used to justify the appropriation of Indigenous lands and resources, the erasure of Indigenous knowledge systems, and the marginalization of Indigenous peoples. Indigenous research is therefore, inherently decolonial. It seeks to reclaim and revitalize Indigenous knowledge systems and practices, challenging the epistemic dominance of Western academic traditions. This process of decolonization in research involves rethinking not only what knowledge is produced but also how it is produced, for whom, and by whom (Absolon, 2022; Corntassel, 2012; Gaudry, 2011; Pedri-Spade, 2016; Smith, 2012; Tuck, 2009; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Indigenous Storied Research

I drew on Jo-Ann Archibald's (2008) Indigenous Storywork methodology for conducting my research as it reflects Indigenous ontology and supports the aim of this study of renewing cultural continuity by centering traditional practices of knowledge sharing. I believe it offers the

utmost respect and honour to the Elders and knowledge keepers experiences as it allows them to share what they want of their experiences, in the way that they want. Archibald (2008) refers to two different types of stories within her methodology. The first is life-experience stories. Most of the stories that were shared with me while visiting with the Elders and knowledge keepers fell under this category as these were stories of the individuals' experiences throughout their lifetime. The second type of story is traditional stories. These are stories that contain knowledge that is not typically for the public audience and as such, will be intellectual property of Whitesand First Nation and those who hold this knowledge. The Elders and knowledge keepers have determined if and to what extent this knowledge can be shared within and beyond this project.

Storytelling has been a means of transmitting knowledge from generation to generation since time immemorial. These stories are not merely anecdotal, they carry deep cultural, spiritual, and ecological knowledge, serving as blueprints for understanding the world and our place within it (Absolon, 2022; Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021). It is an art form that is planted deep within our cultural practices, spiritual beliefs, and everyday life. They help to explain the origins of the world, the interconnection of all beings, and the responsibilities that we as humans have to each other and the earth. Unlike the Western tradition of data-driven research, which often distances the researcher from the subject matter, Indigenous storied-research involves the narrative as a means of integrating personal, spiritual, and community into the research process (Absolon, 2022; Archibald, 2008; Wilson, 2008). In Indigenous research methodologies, storytelling is not just a method for collecting data, but a powerful way to engage with knowledge as the stories encapsulate the experiences, teachings, and wisdom of the community. Story-centred methodologies have been advocated for by a multitude of Indigenous scholars (Absolon, 2022; Archibald, 2008; Cajete, 2000; Kovach, 2021; Simpson, 2011; Smith, 2012;

Wilson 2008) as they honour the voices of Elders and knowledge keepers, our ancestors, and community members, and often contain layers of meaning that are accessible only to those who are embedded within the community and its cultural practices. The process of storytelling in research acknowledges that this knowledge is fluid and context-dependent, shaped by the experiences and perspective of those sharing it.

Indigenous storied research also offers a powerful tool for decolonizing research practices (Absolon, 2005; Archibald, 2008; Pedri-Spade, 2016; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Historically, as discussed, colonialism has shaped academic knowledge production by framing Indigenous peoples as “subjects” to be studied, often without their participation or consent. This research has frequently been carried out from an outsider’s perspective, objectifying Indigenous communities and disregarding their knowledge systems as unscientific or primitive. As a result, colonial research methodologies have often harmed Indigenous peoples, misrepresenting our Indigenous cultures, erasing our histories, and distorting our worldviews. By grounding research in oral traditions, local knowledge, and community-based perspectives, storied research challenges the hierarchical and exploitative nature of traditional academic inquiry (Absolon, 2015; Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008). It reclaims Indigenous ways of knowing and asserts that these knowledge systems are just as legitimate, valid, and valuable as Western scientific knowledge.

As an Indigenous researcher, I strive to use a decolonized methodology, creating research that is grounded in our Anishinaabe values, processes, and worldviews. Increasing Indigenous leadership in research is critical to ensuring that research respects Indigenous worldviews and addresses the real needs of communities, rather than perpetuating the deficit-oriented approaches that have historically dominated academic research on Indigenous peoples (Bryant et al., 2021;

Hyett et al., 2019; Kennedy et al., 2022). For research to be truly meaningful and impactful, it must be driven by Indigenous communities and with Indigenous peoples at the centre of it defining research questions, methodologies, and ethical frameworks (Absolon, 2022; Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008). This integration will not only improve the relevance of the research but also ensure that it contributes positively to the wellbeing, autonomy, and resilience of Indigenous communities. Indigenous storied research also emphasizes self-determination, the right of Indigenous peoples to define their own knowledge, methods, and research priorities. It is an inherently decolonizing practice as it shifts the power dynamics in the research process and ensures that Indigenous communities are the ones controlling, producing, and sharing their knowledge (Absolon, 2015; Baikie, 2020; Wilson, 2008).

Cultural Context and Importance of Our Elders and Knowledge Keepers

In Indigenous communities, Elders are not simply respected for their age, but are the living repositories of cultural, spiritual and ancestral knowledge. Elders are the foundational stewards of oral traditions, teachings, and the sacred wisdom passed down through generations. Within the Anishinaabe worldview, and many other Indigenous worldviews, Elders hold a unique and respected position as guides and advisors within the community (Gonzalez et al., 2023). Their role extends far beyond that of a traditional teacher as they are the holders of a deep, living connection between the past, present, and future. This connection, often described as the continuity of *Mino Bimaadiziwin* in Anishinaabe culture, is integral to understanding the health and wellness of Indigenous communities in both physical and spiritual dimensions (Debassige, 2010).

Incorporating Elders and knowledge keepers into research is more than just a matter of gaining knowledge, it is an acknowledgment of the sacredness of that knowledge and the

relationship with those who hold it (Archibald, 2008). They are seen as the voice of the land, the ancestors, and the Creator. They offer us wisdom that is aligned with the rhythms of nature, spiritual practices, and cultural systems that have been in place for thousands of years. In this way, their teachings are not static, but evolve with the changing needs of the community as they continue to ensure that younger generations can live in harmony with these timeless principles (Gonzalez et al., 2023). Their knowledge is a vital link to community health, and the preservation and revitalisation of that knowledge is central to the reclamation of Indigenous health systems that have been deeply impacted by colonization (Gonzalez et al., 2023; McGuire-Adams, 2023).

The value of our Elders and knowledge keepers extends beyond intellectual knowledge as they are key members who interpret the meaning of cultural symbols, stories, and practices which are often encoded in ceremony, language, and land-based activities (Hart, 2015). For example, a knowledge keepers understanding of how to live sustainably on the land, knowing when and where to harvest medicine, how to care for the land, and how to navigate the seasons, is tied not just to the land itself but to the Anishinaabe understanding of reciprocity between human beings and all our relations. This knowledge is passed on through many generations, typically through oral storytelling, teachings, and direct experience.

In research, Elders and knowledge keepers serve as the living embodiment of this cultural knowledge (McGuire-Adams, 2023). Their role cannot be separated from the spiritual and relational responsibilities they hold in the community. As such, engaging Elders and knowledge keepers in research requires more than just asking questions or recording stories, it requires an approach rooted in humility, patience, and respect (Wilson, 2008). The knowledge they share is not ‘just information’, it is a living, sacred gift that must be handled with care as it is both

powerful and transformative. Anishinaabe Elders and knowledge keepers specifically, carry teachings that span multiple areas of life, including health, governance, community relations, and spiritual practices (Bedard et al., 2008; Gonzalez et al., 2023). Within the context of health for example, Elders are often the primary sources of knowledge about traditional medicine, wellness practices, and healing ceremonies that predate Western medical systems. This knowledge, passed down through oral traditions, embodies an understanding of health that is holistic and not only addresses the body's needs but also the spirits connection to the Earth and the Creator.

To truly honour and respect Elders and knowledge keepers within the research process, it is essential to understand the reciprocal relationship that exists between them and the community. They are not simply participants in a research project, they are active partners in a larger, ongoing project of cultural revitalization and community healing. As such, research conducted with these Elders and knowledge keepers is framed not only as an intellectual pursuit but as a sacred responsibility to support the continuity of Indigenous knowledge. My goal is not to extract information for academic purposes but to create an environment that fosters the sharing of wisdom for the benefit of my whole community, including the next seven generations.

Elder and Knowledge Keeper Protocols

The ethical considerations in this Indigenous research project are of paramount importance and are shaped by the values of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility (Archibald, 2008; Hart, 2010). These values are not only theoretical or abstract as they are deeply embedded in our Anishinaabe culture, relationships, and spiritual practices within our communities. When working with Elders and knowledge keepers, these values shape the way researchers approach their work ensuring that their interactions, the gathering of knowledge, and the sharing of findings are conducted in a manner that honours the traditions, wisdom, and spiritual

significance of Indigenous knowledge (Sharma et al., 2021). In the context of this research, the ethical considerations driven by these values ensure that the work is respectful to the Elders and knowledge keepers, aligned with our cultural protocols, and are mindful of the responsibilities that I have as the researcher in handling this knowledge.

Unlike Western research ethics which frames around the protections of individual rights and the pursuit of objective truth, Indigenous ethics are centred on relations and community wellbeing (Hart, 2010). Research protocols in Indigenous communities often require that the researchers seek permission and engage in dialogue with community leaders, Elders, and other rights holders before conducting the research (Absolon, 2005; Sharma et al., 2021). Before beginning this project, I made sure to approach our leadership, the Chief of Whitesand First Nation, to ask permission to conduct this research with community members and gain his thoughts and insights on this project. He thought it was a wonderful idea and urged me to go on with the project. This protocol ensures that the research respects cultural practices and is conducted in a way that honours Indigenous peoples' sovereignty and agency.

One of the first steps I took in asking permission of the Elders and knowledge keepers to participate in this research was presenting a gift of tobacco, cloth, and a small honorarium. This aligns with the research protocols followed by many Indigenous research projects, including the Sharing Medicines Bundles and Pathways to Community Wellness project (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). In our Anishinaabe culture, giving tobacco and cloth is a profoundly meaningful gesture that is rooted in our spiritual and reciprocal practices. These offerings are not just simple gifts but are sacred acts that carry a deep significance. When asking for something such as knowledge or guidance it is important for us to give something back as a sign of respect and reciprocity. Tobacco, being one of our four sacred medicines, is often

regarded as one of the most sacred offerings of the four. It helps to bridge together the physical and spiritual worlds. When we offer tobacco, we are showing respect and humility, acknowledging the wisdom and authority that our Elders and knowledge keepers have in our communities. Because of the sacred meaning of this medicine, it also represents a spiritual communication between Creator and spiritual beings.

By offering tobacco to an Elder or knowledge keeper, we are acknowledging the spiritual connection that exists in the exchange of knowledge. The material offering such as the cloth that I presented to the Elders and knowledge keepers is often offered alongside tobacco when asking someone for something. Cloth can symbolize the wrapping of sacred teachings or gifts. It can represent an offering of protection, comfort, and care, acknowledging that the knowledge shared by the Elders and knowledge keepers is a precious gift that needs to be ‘wrapped’ in respect and consideration. In Anishinaabe spirituality, balance and harmony are central to maintaining good relationships. By offering tobacco and cloth I am acknowledging the interconnectedness of all beings and showing that we are part of a larger community that respects its Elders and knowledge keepers and upholds traditional values.

Once the initial gifting of tobacco and cloth were offered and the Elders and knowledge keepers accepted the invitation to participate in the research project, I took time to familiarize myself with their preferences regarding the setting and format for our visits. The Elders and knowledge keepers preferred to share knowledge in a more informal setting, in my home or theirs, having some tea, and even while they were doing some traditional crafting. This flexibility was important because it acknowledged that knowledge sharing is not just a cognitive process but an experiential one, deeply intertwined with the space and context which it occurs (Pedri-Spade, 2016). I made sure that I was open to whatever format the Elder or knowledge

keeper felt was best for the exchange of knowledge, recognizing that it was a privilege to be included in their sacred teachings and wisdom.

When visiting with the Elders and knowledge keepers, I recorded each conversation and made sure to ask for their permission to do this. As our conversations unfolded, I was always ensuring I was listening attentively and with an open heart. In Anishinaabe tradition, listening is as much a spiritual practice as it is an intellectual one. Knowledge is passed down through stories, and each story is a living entity that requires a certain level of respect and attention to be fully understood. I approached each story that the Elders and knowledge keepers shared as something sacred, knowing that their teachings and stories were a gift that needed to be treated with care. Listening was not just about hearing words, it was about understanding the context, the emotions, and the wisdom embedded in each narrative. Through these stories I began to see the world through their eyes, and this shift in perspective helped deepen my understandings of Anishinaabe wellness and the ways in which spirituality and health are intertwined.

Throughout the process I made it a priority to engage in continuous dialogue with each Elder and knowledge keeper to ensure that their voice remained central to the research. In traditional Indigenous knowledge systems, knowledge is not static but constantly evolving in response to the needs of the community (Absolon, 2022; Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). When we had our second visit so that I could present the findings and knowledge I have gathered, I made sure to ask each Elder and knowledge keeper if they were comfortable with the direction the research was taking, and I made sure to check in to ensure that the knowledge I was gathering was being represented accurately and respectfully. This is about maintaining ethical standards and honouring each Elder's and knowledge keeper's role as a living, active participant in the research process.

The way in which I approached the Elders and knowledge keepers and followed these cultural protocols shaped the entire research process transforming it into something far more than a study of traditional knowledge. It became a relational process, one that was deeply rooted in respect for the Elders and knowledge keepers and my community, and grounded in the shared responsibility of ensuring that the knowledge passed down through the generations would be cared for, protected, and carried forward in a manner that honoured its sacredness. These cultural protocols were not just rules to follow, they were pathways that led me to a deeper understanding of the spiritual, cultural, and relational aspects of Anishinaabe knowledge and wellness. Through this process, I was not only learning about the Elders and knowledge keepers' teachings but also learning how to hold space for knowledge in a way that nurtures, protects, and respects the integrity of that knowledge for future generations (Absolon, 2022; Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008).

Informed Consent

Obtaining informed consent within an Indigenous context, especially when engaging with Elders and knowledge keepers, is a deeply relational and culturally nuanced process (Wilson, 2008). Unlike the formal, written agreements commonly used in Western research, informed consent in Indigenous communities is not a one-time event or a simple signature on a form, it is an ongoing dialogue rooted in trust, respect, and reciprocity (Yanchapaxi et al., 2023). From the moment I began my research, I understood that consent from the Elders and knowledge keepers I would engage with was not just about acknowledging their willingness to share their stories but rather, it was about ensuring that their voices and teachings were respected, understood, and used in ways that align with their values and our community's cultural principles.

My approach to informed consent began long before the actual sharing of knowledge, it began when I reached out to our community leadership seeking their approval and guidance as the community's trust and support are equally important. Once leadership approved and offered their support, I approached each Elder and knowledge keeper individually, seeking permission to engage with them. This process, for me, was about making space for dialogue where the Elder or knowledge keeper could ask questions, raise concerns, and decide whether they felt comfortable participating in the research. In some cases, this meant visiting the Elder or knowledge keeper in their home, on our reserve, or in a setting where they felt most comfortable. I did not assume that a formal meeting in an office or other "professional" setting would be the most appropriate for them. I knew that the space in which knowledge is shared is just as important as the knowledge itself because it is through these spaces that the relationship is strengthened, and trust is built on.

One of the critical elements of informed consent in this context was ensuring that the Elder or knowledge keeper understood the scope of the research and how their knowledge would be used. I explained how the knowledge would be documented, in voice recordings, through transcripts, and how it would be used in the final research. I made it clear that this knowledge would be handled with the utmost care and respect, and that the Elder or knowledge keeper would have the right to withdraw their consent at any point in the process. I also acknowledge that not all knowledge is meant to be shared or written down. Some teachings, stories, and practices are considered sacred or too personal to be shared with outsiders (Archibald, 2008). I reassured the Elders and knowledge keepers that I respected their decision to only share what they felt comfortable with, and that their autonomy in this process was paramount.

In the process of ongoing verbal consent, with each conversation and exchange of knowledge, I continued to ask for permission and consent to participate, checking in with the

Elder or knowledge keeper to ensure that they felt comfortable and respected in the process. If they had any concerns, I made it a point to address them immediately and adapt the process accordingly. This ongoing engagement allowed the Elders and knowledge keepers to maintain agency and control over the knowledge they shared. It also ensured that the relationship remained reciprocal and that the Elder or knowledge keeper knew they had the power to guide the direction of the research at any time.

INDIGENOUS THEMATIC ANALYSIS

For my research, I employed an Indigenous thematic analysis as a way to ensure that the processes and outcomes of my work were connected to Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Absolon, 2022; Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008). I was fortunate to have been mentored as a graduate student in the CIHR funded Sharing Medicine Bundles project in performing this Indigenous thematic analysis. This approach was a deliberate attempt to respect and honour the values, perspectives, and lived experiences of the Elders and knowledge keepers I was working with, while also incorporating the relational and holistic aspects that are so vital in Indigenous knowledge systems (Absolon, 2022). The process began when gathering the stories with the Elders and knowledge keepers. These stories were not just data to me, they were sacred expressions of lived experiences, cultural practices, and worldviews that needed to be treated with reverence and respect. I was not extracting information, I was building relationships and creating a space for our community Elders and knowledge keepers to share their truths in a way that felt comfortable and meaningful for them.

As I began the thematic analysis, I approached it with an understanding that this would not be a typical, linear process. Instead, I relied on the flexibility and fluidity that comes with our Indigenous worldviews. I understood that knowledge could not be compartmentalized in the way

that traditional Western approaches might demand (Aluli-Meyer, 2006; Tuck & Yang, 2014). Everything was interconnected, each word, each story, each experience, was part of a larger, holistic understanding of my research question. So, I allowed for the themes to emerge organically, rather than imposing preconceived categories. I started by listening closely while visiting with the Elders and knowledge keepers, really listening, not just to the words being spoken, but to the emotions, the pauses, and the context that surrounded those words. I paid attention to the silences, the non-verbal cues, and the subtle ways in which the stories unfolded. Indigenous ways of knowing are not always articulated through direct language, they are embedded in the land, the culture, and in unspoken dimensions of experience (Wilson, 2008). As such, I took my time to honour those dimensions as well.

Once the stories were gathered and the transcripts written out, I generated initial codes, or what I refer to as “bundles” within my research, and began to organize the stories in a meaningful and systematic way, working through each transcript very carefully. I then started the process of identifying patterns, or what I came to see as emerging themes. Each of these themes felt like a thread that connected the individuals not only to each other but to our ancestors, our culture, and our spiritual practices. Thematic analysis, as I applied it, was not simply about categorizing or labeling data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kovach, 2021; Simard, 2020). It was about sewing together a regalia of knowledge that reflected the interconnectedness of the Elders and knowledge keepers’ lives, histories, and futures. It was about honouring the sacredness of their stories and recognizing the deep cultural significance embedded in those stories (Nowell et al., 2017).

Once the preliminary themes were identified I began to review them, modifying and discovering subthemes as they interact and relate to the main themes. Just as when I read,

carefully selecting and threading each bead, one by one, choosing colours, sizes, and patterns, I have gathered fragments of each of the stories and experiences shared from each of the Elders and knowledge keepers. Each bead, representing a piece of knowledge or insight, is placed with intention and care, creating a cohesive pattern that tells a much larger story. The thread connecting these beads representing the relationships between these elements is bound together by our culture, community, and respect. Like beading, my thematic analysis is a sacred practice of creating something beautiful and meaningful, one that reflects not only the individual beauty of each part but also the larger, interconnected story they tell when brought together with respect and purpose. Lastly, I worked with the Elders and knowledge keepers to validate and approve of my findings. The co-creation of knowledge is such an important aspect of Indigenous research methodologies, so I ensured that the community's voice was integral to my analysis (Absolon, 2022; Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008). Their insights helped to shape my interpretation of the data and ensured that I was truly honouring the stories and knowledge that was shared with me.

Study Limitations

This study has some important limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, this is a small initial study that engaged with only three Elders and knowledge keepers from Whitesand First Nation. While their knowledge and perspectives are invaluable, the scope of this research does not fully represent the diversity of experiences, viewpoints, and practices within the larger Anishinaabe community. As such, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to all Anishinaabe communities or to all Elders and knowledge keepers within the nation. This study is a beginning, a starting point, for exploring and documenting Anishinaabe knowledge related to health and wellness with the intent that it will contribute to broader

understandings and inform future research. Furthermore, as this study was conducted with Whitesand First Nation, its results may not fully capture the variations that exist in health practices and experiences across other Anishinaabe communities. Each community has its own distinct cultural context, priorities, and needs, and future research could consider a larger scope that incorporates the experiences and perspectives of multiple communities. Collaborative partnerships with Elders and knowledge keepers from other Anishinaabe nations will be crucial to ensure that the findings are representative and relevant to a wider audience.

The study also reflects my role as a youth representative of Whitesand First Nation and within the Independent First Nations, as my existing relationships within the community have allowed me to approach this work with a deep respect for the traditions and knowledge of the Elders and knowledge keepers. However, I acknowledge that my personal position within the community may shape both the process and interpretation of the research. While I strive to remain objective and respectful, the influence of my own background, relationships, and perspectives may be seen as an inherent limitation. This is mitigated through ongoing guidance from the Elders and knowledge keepers and by centring an Indigenous research methodology that emphasizes reflexivity, community involvement, and the co-creation of knowledge. Furthermore, the study's small scale and the nature of the qualitative approach means that the findings are shaped by the specific context of the research and the ways in which the Elders and knowledge keepers' stories were shared. I recognize that there may be insights that could not be captured within the scope of this initial study.

Acknowledging these limitations, I see this research as a first step that can inform future projects. With the guidance of my community and other Anishinaabe communities, this study can serve as a foundation for larger, more inclusive initiatives that explore health and wellness

from an Indigenous perspective. By centring community needs and priorities, these future efforts can expand on the insights and knowledge shared by the Elders and knowledge keepers in this research, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of Anishinaabe health and wellness practices. This study, while limited in its scope, has the potential to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing efforts of Indigenous knowledge revitalization and the decolonization of research. It emphasizes the importance of community-led research, guided by the wisdom of Elders and knowledge keepers, and honours the strengths and resilience of Anishinaabe ways of knowing and being.

Summary

Within this chapter, I have articulated the foundational principles and practices rooted in our Indigenous ways of knowing and being that have guided my research process. I outlined my approach to Indigenous health research being informed by a strengths-based lens to honour and highlight the cultural practices and knowledge that are at the heart of our Anishinaabe worldviews. Through the Sharing Medicine Bundles framework, my research has been grounded in the holistic dimensions of life, emphasizing how these elements play a pivotal role in the healing and wellbeing of Indigenous people. My research has been deeply informed by the teachings of my nation, including Mino Bimaadiziwin and the Seven Grandfather Teachings, while also being rooted in my own values brought into this work. I have discussed my methodology in this research, drawing on Jo-Ann Archibald's (2008) Indigenous Storywork methodology and centring research as ceremony within my work. The cultural context and importance of our Elders and knowledge keepers was drawn out within this chapter while also reviewing the ethics and protocols I have followed while gathering stories. I discussed the study limitations of my research and lastly, I discussed my approach to thematic analysis that I

employed in interpreting the stories and knowledge, keeping Indigenous ways of knowing and being at the forefront.

In Chapter 4, I will present the key themes and insights that have emerged from the stories and experiences that have been shared with me. It will provide a detailed exploration of my community's health and wellness as understood through the lens of our Anishinaabe knowledge systems, and how these systems of knowing and being inform a pathway to healing, resilience, and collective wellbeing. The findings will not only convey what has been uncovered through analysis but will also honour the ways in which these stories and experiences define health and wellness within my community. This chapter will tie together the core principles and teachings from the methodology chapter and present the findings as a living, interconnected narrative that affirms the strength and continuity of our Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

Within this chapter, I present the key findings from the stories and knowledge that were shared with me by the three participating Elders and knowledge keepers from Whitesand First Nation. I am extremely grateful for these individuals who took the time out of their day to visit with me and share their knowledge and wisdom. Without their participation, this research study would not have been possible and my quest for seeking out ways in which our community defines wellness would not have been achieved.

Just to remind you as the reader how this process came to be, I reached out to well-known Elders and knowledge keepers within our community and presented them with an offering of tobacco and cloth, asking them for their participation in this research project. When they accepted the invitation, I met with each of them one-on-one at either my home or theirs, where we had a guided conversation led by a few questions that I had as discussion prompts. Each of the visits lasted about 1-2 hours where the Elders and knowledge keepers shared their life experience stories and wisdom with me. I asked their permission to record our conversations and each agreed. After these visits, I listened to the voice recordings of our conversations, typed out all of the transcripts, and conducted an Indigenous thematic analysis from which emerged four main themes along with subthemes that represented their definitions of community wellness. Lastly, I brought these themes and subthemes back to the Elders and knowledge keepers so that they could review, provide their input on and approve the findings, making sure to prioritize their role in leading the research. As a reminder, the research questions I have sought to answer were: How do Elders and knowledge keepers in Whitesand First Nation define community wellness? What teachings are important for personal and community wellness? How did our community

traditionally stay well? The themes and subthemes arose from the stories shared by the Elders and knowledge keepers revealed themselves organically as I sat with the stories and worked through my analysis. I have organized them through a visual representation that I have created of the medicine wheel which is a central part of our Anishinaabe teachings (see Figure 1).

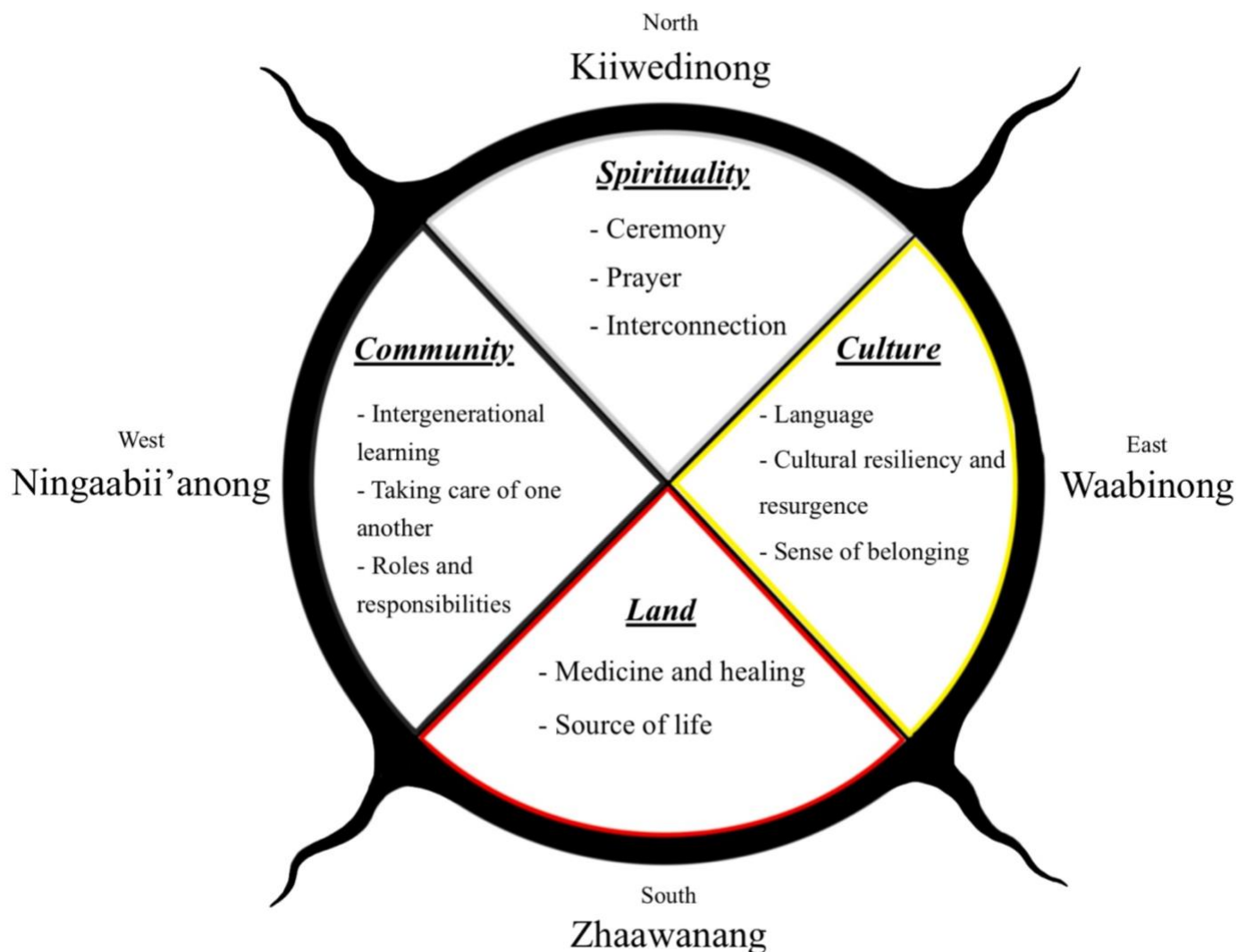


Figure 1. A Medicine Wheel of Community Health and Wellness

The medicine wheel is very significant to us as Anishinaabe people. It contains teachings that have been passed down through many generations. The teachings of the medicine wheel

vary from nation to nation and represent a variety of teachings such as the four sacred directions, the four seasons, the four sacred medicines, the four aspects of our wellbeing, and our life cycle just to name a few. The four directions of the medicine wheel remind us of many things, including the need for balance in the world and the balance we must have within ourselves. I placed the themes and subthemes with the corresponding places of our life cycle for us as Anishinaabe people.

The first theme, Culture, placed in the East, Waabinong, has three main subsections: language, cultural resiliency and resurgence, and sense of belonging and identity. The East is where we begin our journey as human beings coming from the spirit world, it represents our birth. I chose this theme to be represented in the East as we are born into our culture and the teachings that we receive start as soon as we come onto this earth. The second theme, Land, placed in the South, Zhaawanang, has two subthemes: medicine and healing, and source of life. In the southern sector of the medicine wheel, our youth is represented. I placed the second theme in this sector as this is the time in our lives that we begin going out and exploring the land for the first time and learning about all the gifts Mother Earth has given us. The third theme that emerged was Community, placed in the West, Ningaabii'anong, has three subsections: intergenerational learning, taking care of one another, and roles and responsibilities. The western sector on the medicine wheel represents the adult stage of life. I placed this theme here because community becomes an even more prominent part of our lives at this stage as we navigate through our life journey. The last theme, Spirituality, placed in the North, Kiiwedonong, has three subsections: ceremony, prayer, and interconnection. The northern sector of the medicine wheel represents the last stage of our lives, the Elder stage. I placed the theme of Spirituality in this sector because it highlights the spiritual and mental clarity that comes with age, and also because

it is our Elders who are the carriers of deep wisdom within our culture, who pass on the aspects of our culture's spirituality, customs, and traditions. These themes are all equally important to one another and none of them are seen as more valuable than another. They have been discussed in a way that presents ease of flow and readability as well as corresponding to the directions of the medicine wheel and our life stages. These themes reflect the lived experiences of these Elders and knowledge keepers and honour the wisdom that was shared with me. Each theme and subtheme have been brought to life with quotes and excerpts of the stories to help connect you as the reader with this invaluable knowledge.

EASTERN THEME: CULTURE

Throughout the story gathering with the Elders and knowledge keepers, the theme of culture was a prominent point of discussion with each of the visits. The Elders and knowledge keepers reflected and discussed that culture was a key determinant in creating a solid foundation for our wellness and identity as Anishinaabe people. As discussed in the literature, Indigenous scholars argue that health cannot be separated from cultural identity. Wilson (2008) describes knowledge as relational, meaning that cultural teachings, stories, and ceremonies are integral to understanding wellness. Culture in Whitesand First Nation was influenced and brought back through the leadership of a well-respected former Chief within our community. Each of the Elders and knowledge keepers brought up the sacrifice and acts that this former Chief did to take care of our community. I will be discussing this a bit further in this chapter, but I think it is important to acknowledge this here as he was a crucial part of our community regaining our cultural knowledge and practices.

Our culture is a gift from the Creator, "it was a gift we were given and it's a gift that will continue to be here when we leave this world" (Elder P). Our holistic view of health was

described as very important by each of the Elders and knowledge keepers; for example, Elder T. shared that “it’s not only about the physical, it’s about the spiritual and mental as well, it’s all connected”. In Whitesand First Nation, community wellness is deeply rooted in the theme of culture as it reflects an ongoing relationship with the traditions, practices, and values that have been passed down through generations. Culture, in this sense, is not something passive or disconnected from daily life, it is the lifeline that sustains our community, ensuring that every individual is supported by the collective wisdom of our ancestors and that each generation has the tools to continue the journey of healing and wellbeing. Within this theme, the subsections include language, cultural resiliency and resurgence, and sense of belonging.

Anishinaabemowin – Language

Our language was described as one of the ways that connects us to our culture, identity, and worldviews. Absolon (2022) explains that Indigenous languages are deeply tied to ways of knowing and being in the world, making language revitalization essential for community wellbeing. Anishinaabemowin is much more than a means of communication, it is viewed as a vessel for cultural identity and a gateway to understanding the world in an Anishinaabe way. When looking at culture, one of the knowledge keepers discussed how language is a crucial part of our culture but is often times left out of the discussion. The Elders and knowledge keepers all agree that our language is a thread that ties us to our cultural practices and history. One of the Elder’s points out:

“the language is was a very strong component of it you know, to be able to communicate with your Creator in your given language and as First Nations people you know, that’s what it is. To communicate with the Creator in your language whether its Ojibwe or

whether its Sioux, Cree or whatever, but to speak your tongue you know that's an integral part". (Elder P)

The Elders and knowledge keepers believe that speaking our language is not only a means of communication but also a way of connecting with the spirit of culture itself. One of the Elders discussed the revitalization of First Nations languages and talked about the now many opportunities there are to take back those teachings and reclaim our languages. This reclamation of our languages strengthens both individual and collective wellbeing, helping to restore sovereignty and vitality of our culture (Bordor et al., 2022; First Nations Health Authority, 2012; Gonzalez et al., 2023).

Cultural Resiliency and Resurgence

Culture has been noted as a key concept of resilience in the face of historical trauma (Gone, 2011; Gray & Cote, 2019; Kirmayer et al., 2000; Kirmayer et al., 2003; Redvers & Blondin, 2020; Redvers, 2020; Robbins & Dewar, 2011). The Elders and knowledge keepers each spoke about how colonialism, residential schools, and other forms of cultural suppression have caused deep wounds within our communities but yet, we assert that the strength to heal lies in the revitalization of our cultures.

We are still here and we are bringing it back, reviving all the things that were lost from residential school and stuff like that. Resiliency is a pretty unique thing in First Nations people. Like I said the suppression of teachings of our ceremonies, they tried and failed miserably. (Elder P)

As discussed in the literature, the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People (2007) as well as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) highlight the fundamental importance of practicing our culture and exercising our rights to do so. By honouring these

rights, the intrinsic value of cultural and spiritual traditions in fostering resilience and wellness among our First Nation communities is further acknowledged and reinforced. Another Elder discussed part of our culture is getting back into powwows. Because of the impact of residential school and assimilation practices, many of the people within our community were not practicing our ways. The former Chief took it upon himself and went down to the United States to learn some teachings and revive practices since we were not practicing at the time. He went down to a Sioux community in South Dakota, Pine Ridge Reservation, and spent a lot of time with a medicine man in that area. One of the Elders states “sometimes cultural borrowing was necessary to survive and that’s what he did. He brought the culture back. He brought powwows back” (Elder T). Although he was Anishinaabe and went to a Sioux community to learn about teachings and cultural practices, this was a pivotal point in our communities’ journey of reclaiming our ways of knowing and being. The former Chief began to bring powwows back into the community and this brought our community together. This Elder shared a story of the first time she heard the drum at a powwow when she was a young girl:

I was peeking in and there’s people in outfits. Never seen that before. It was a powwow, the very first powwow. It was the Lion Club in Whitesand, he (former chief) brought that home. And people were just like flabbergasted right... yeah it was something, but when you hear that drumbeat boy it just hits you, it just connects with you. And yeah it just, you just know you’re missing something and that’s it, that connection right. (Elder T).

For these Elders and knowledge keepers in Whitesand, our community wellness was intrinsically tied to the reclamation and celebration of our cultural practices. Alfred and Corntassel (2005) argue that the loss of culture due to colonial policies has had lasting effects on Indigenous health,

but the process of reclaiming identity and traditions serves as a powerful form of resistance. One of the Elders spoke about their pride and happiness in seeing a resurgence of our culture:

it's nice to see a resurgence of all, overall a resurgence of the ceremonies, the dances, the songs, the teachings you know. It's nice that there is more of it coming to the forefront where now it's you know, where now its accessible and it's there now for you as an individual, as a First Nations individual to grasp it, to hang onto it you know. It's out. It's here. I think that's another amazing thing because its who we are, it's a part of our like, it's a part of our DNA you know. It's a part of who we are. (Elder P)

The Elders and knowledge keepers emphasize that as long as the community continues to honour and celebrate its culture, the spirit of the people will remain strong, and wellness will thrive not only for the individual but for the whole community.

Sense of Belonging and Identity

Our culture brings us as Anishinaabe people a sense of belonging and identity, whether it is in powwows, sweats, or other gatherings. The Elders and knowledge keepers mentioned how powwows and community events that celebrate our culture bring the community together and provide a place of connection and belonging for our community members. One of the Elders commented on our annual powwow that we host every summer:

that's an anchor, that a, once a year communities can look forward to that. It doesn't matter where it is but once a year they can look forward to this annual powwow where the community can come together as a whole and to be themselves you know...it gives us that opportunity to you know, to be who we were. (Elder P)

This reconnection to our cultural roots provides a reaffirmation of identity and a cultivation of wellness through the wisdom of the past. The literature has pointed out a recommendation to find

ways of restoring balance in all areas of life by incorporating traditional knowledge as a means to reclaiming identity (Hill, 2009; Kirmayer et al., 2003; Nesdole et al., 2014). By reconnecting to our cultural roots through powwows and community events, we begin this reaffirmation and reclamation of identity. Another Elder points out “the biggest thing is, for some of our children, just dancing when they have their outfits and that, it's their traditional components” (Elder B). This sense of belonging and identity extends across the generations and encapsulates all within the community. One of the Elders discussed the protocol of those who dance in the powwow for the first time, highlighting the welcoming back to culture within this ceremony:

they say that when you first dance at a powwow in your regalia and you let them know like this is my first time stepping into the powwow with my regalia you know, it's a special moment. And they normally play a song you know as you do your first rounder and it's a welcoming back to the circle right. And that's again, it's all about welcoming you back to your way of life. (Elder P)

For these Elders and knowledge keepers, cultural practices ranging from ceremonies to language, art, and community gatherings are seen as integral to holistic wellness because they foster a strong sense of identity, belonging, and spiritual connection. As Indigenous scholars emphasize in the literature, it is critical that we have the opportunities to engage the teachings of our respective nations within our natural laws, family systems, and the land, to continue reclaiming healthy Indigenous identity (Corntassel, 2012; Gray & Cote, 2019; Hill, 2009; Kading et al., 2019).

SOUTHERN THEME: LAND

Each of the Elders and knowledge keepers described the profound connection that we have to the land as Anishinaabe people. Our wellness is seen as an interconnected and holistic

concept that extends beyond the individual and is deeply rooted in the land (Kim, 2019; Robbins & Dewar, 2011; Redvers et al., 2021; Redvers, 2020). To these Elders and knowledge keepers, wellness is not just about physical health but about the balance and relationship between the mind, body, spirit, and environment. The land is sacred, and its health is directly tied to the health of our people. The land was discussed as being the living classroom for many of the practices that the Elders and knowledge keepers emphasized. It is where traditional healing methods are learned, where ceremonies are held, and where cycles of life are honoured. Subthemes within this section include medicine and healing, and source of life.

Mashkiki and Healing

The land is seen as a vital source of healing for us in our community as the Elders and knowledge keepers recount “a lot of stuff that they did was off of the land, if you were sick you would go out and get medicine off the land. That was what healed people” (Elder B). Our traditional medicines are seen as not only tools for healing but as gifts that have been passed down from our ancestors. One of the Elders point out:

each root, each plant, has a medicinal purpose. And how they knew that and how they figured that out was a gift from the Creator and from Mother Earth. ‘These are the medicines that I give you. These are the medicines that I put before you that are yours’...those were gifts given to us by the Creator, Mother Earth. (Elder P)

For the Elders and knowledge keepers, traditional medicines are much more than just plant-based remedies. These medicines represent the interconnectedness of all living beings and are used to restore balance and harmony. The Elders and knowledge keepers stress the importance of reciprocity in this process, emphasizing that the act of harvesting medicine is a sacred responsibility, and it must be done with mindfulness, honouring the spiritual nature of the plants.

Indigenous scholars have also maintained this concept of reciprocity when discussing Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Absolon, 2022; Archibald, 2008; Gonzalez et al., 2023; Kovach, 2021; Simpson, 2017; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). One of the Elder's commented, "when we take stuff from the land, be it branches for cedar tea, you know, just how you offered this tobacco, we need to do that to the land as well" (Elder B). Another Elder points out, "you don't want to overdo it and strip the whole land of everything because then once you do that, then there's no more medicine...you want to maintain that balance of what you take and what you leave" (Elder P).

All of the Elders and knowledge keepers talked about how sometimes using Western medicine won't always work for us. One of the Elders stated:

when the non-First Nation medicine doesn't work for you, sometimes you have to go back to your own people and they'll have the right medicine for you...it could be some root, or some ceremony, and it does heal better...I strongly believe in our traditional ways of living off the land and using the land as a healer. For any ailment that I had, especially if doctors couldn't take care of it, our traditional practices did take care of it. (Elder T)

Another Elder reaffirmed this and points out: "medicines are very important to us because there's a lot of people that will look for traditional healings rather than look to mainstream doctors" (Elder P). Redvers and Blondin (2020) emphasize the efficacy of Indigenous medicinal knowledge passed down through generations. Our plants used in traditional medicine such as the four sacred medicines have demonstrated significant healing properties. The authors highlight how Indigenous healers possess extensive knowledge on these natural medicines, which are tailored to individual needs rather than applied universally (Redvers & Blondin, 2020). For many First Nations people, including these Elders and knowledge keepers, they have witnessed and

been victims of the systemic racism that perpetuates itself in the mainstream healthcare system. The *In Plain Site* report (2020) provides overwhelming evidence that Indigenous people in B.C experience racism at multiple levels within the healthcare system. This widespread racism and discrimination extend all across Canada and many Indigenous patients, including these Elders and knowledge keepers, report facing stereotyping, dismissive attitudes, and outright neglect when seeking medical care (Allan & Smylie, 2015). Facing these outcomes has led many of us, as the Elders and knowledge keepers have mentioned, to seek out our traditional medicines and ways of maintaining our health as they can be more conducive to our health and wellbeing. Some articles in the literature have advocated for physicians and other healthcare providers to better collaborate with traditional healers, additionally, there were calls for healthcare systems to improve coordination and integration with Indigenous medicine systems and their practitioners (Gerhardt-Strachen, 2022; Mundell & Chapman, 2010; Redvers & Blondin, 2020). These recommendations align with the concerns of the Elders and knowledge keepers.

Source of Life

The land plays a central role in shaping our understanding of wellness as it is viewed as both the foundation and the source of life for our community. When speaking about the land, the Elders and knowledge keepers maintain the idea that it provides everything that we need from medicines, to healing, to sustenance. Anishinaabe scholar, a knowledge keeper, storyteller, and teacher, Basil Johnston, worked to ensure that Anishinaabe culture would continue to thrive. Johnston's work highlights how Anishinaabe survival is tied to the land's natural gifts. In *Ojibway Heritage*, Johnston (1976) details how knowledge of plants, animals, and the environment was passed down through oral tradition. This perspective is consistent with the view that the Elders and knowledge keepers provided in that traditional Anishinaabe practices, where

we respect the land, ensures that it will continue to provide for future generations. One Elder reflected on life before the exploitation of the land:

there was so much forest, so much forest there (Whitesand) it was crazy. Like there was animals you know, there was beavers in the rivers you know, there was fish in the water, there was moose and you know caribou. (Elder P)

This provided all our people with the food that we needed. The relationship between us as a community and the land is reciprocal, just as the land nourishes and sustains us, the people are responsible for caring for and protecting the land. This connection that we have with the land is rooted in thousands of years of history and is an integral part of Indigenous identity, community, and our wellbeing (Robbins & Dewar, 2011; Redvers et al., 2021; Redvers, 2020). One of our Elder's shared a story about her uncle and his practices he followed while he was fishing that highlights this act of reciprocity and care:

I'd always see him put all his fish bones, whatever he did not eat, back into a container. Then he had a place where he would put the bones back to the river. And I looked at that, I was like, 'Oh, that's so dirty', right? Like, how could you do that? But then I looked at the location where he put it. It wasn't in the system that it was flowing and whatnot, because me, being nosy, who I was, there was a lot of bones there right? But that was his way of paying respect. And when I went fishing with him, I've never seen this happen before, but when he put his rod in, not even five minutes, he had a fish. He would take that off, put it there, put it back in, right away another fish. The fish kept coming to him. And I had to say I was about maybe nine years old when I discovered this. But then I also learned that is the respect. They were taking care of him. (Elder B)

This was her uncle's way of giving back and taking care of the spirits of the fish that he caught. It highlights the reciprocal relationship that we have with the beings we share this life with. Caring for the land through practices like traditional harvesting, caring for medicinal plants, and following the seasonal cycles is viewed as integral to maintaining a healthy, thriving community. When we take care of the land, the animals, the plants, they will do the same for us. Several Indigenous authors such as Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), Leanne Simpson (2017) Gregory Cajete (2000), and Shawn Wilson (2008) have written about this reciprocal relationship, reinforcing the idea that by protecting and respecting the natural world, the land will continue to provide food, medicine, shelter, and spiritual guidance to us as Indigenous people. Indigenous articles and scholarship overwhelmingly reinforce the idea that the land is not just a provider but a relative that responds to how it is being treated. Indigenous teachings emphasize reciprocity, respect, and responsibility when dealing with the land and the Elders and knowledge keepers from Whitesand First Nation strengthen this notion of this symbiotic relationship between us and Mother Earth and all that inhabit her.

WESTERN THEME: COMMUNITY

In our Anishinaabe worldview, our health considers not just the individual but the collective wellbeing of the entire community (Gonzalez et al., 2023; Reading & Wien, 2013; Struthers et al., 2004; Struthers et al., 2008). Within this theme, I discuss the Elders and knowledge keepers sharing of stories and knowledge that pertain to the community influence on our health and wellness. Subthemes in this section include intergenerational learning, roles and responsibilities, and taking care of one another.

Intergenerational Learning

One of the most important aspects of intergenerational learning in our community was outlined by the Elders and knowledge keepers as the transmission of culture, language, and traditions from our Elders to younger generations. Teachings from Elders were passed down “from generations going back two, three hundred years” (Elder P). Through these teachings, our community members learned how to live in harmony with nature, emphasizing reciprocity, respect, and balance. A grandparent of one of the Elders would talk about the history of our people, sharing stories about where they lived, how they lived, and the family connectedness that was present. One of the Elders shared an experience with me when she was just a young girl and would listen to the old ones telling stories at night:

I grew up with my granny so the Elders would sit together at night in a house, so most of, they weren't like this, they were just rooms. One room led to another and there was really no doors or nothing and there would be beds at the end and that's where they would sit. I remember sleeping on the bed with my granny cause you know we'd all sleep together wherever there was beds and I would see one Elder sitting across the bed and then my granny sitting on this bed and they would be talking and the lights would be off so you could only basically see their silhouettes. And they would be talking in the language, they would be sharing all kinds of stories. Things that they heard, whether they were real things or creepy events. Sometimes I'd get scared cause I was young and they'd be talking, you know things that they would do, practices that they would do or you know things that they did out on the trapline or you know when they were washing, you know they would talk about just about everything. So a lot of the time you could get some learning there just from their stories. (Elder T)

Learning from Elders and knowledge keepers within the community was a vital part of our learning experience. This learning also took place from the fellow community members. One of the Elders discussed how the community was a critical part in learning about her family and who she was. Learning was also a lifelong experience that began as soon as a baby was born. One of the Elders explained a tikinagan, a baby carrier, was used so the baby could sit with family and observe and learn. Learning from then on was taught in an experiential way. The Elders and knowledge keepers discussed how children would learn by doing, either by grandparents or the parents, and would always be encouraged to ask questions in their learning journey. As discussed in Chapter 2, the Potlatch Ban made significant impacts on this intergenerational knowledge transfer (Norman, 2024). Not only did the cultural suppression lead to loss of knowledge, language, and traditions, it also inhibited our Elders, who are the primary holders of this knowledge, to continue teaching the younger generations about important aspects of our ways of knowing and being. This disruption of intergenerational knowledge transfer had a ripple effect through the future generations but as previously mentioned and affirmed by the Elders and knowledge keepers, our Anishinaabe and Indigenous ancestors stayed strong in the face of this significant disruption and continued to resist, adapt, and reclaim our traditions, demonstrating remarkable resilience so that our cultures could not be erased (Risling Baldy, 2018; Wabie, 2019).

Taking Care of One Another

The Elders and knowledge keepers all talked about how within our community, the idea of taking care of one another was a large part of how we stayed healthy. Corntassel (2012) argues that acts of taking care of one another are acts of resurgence. This means that Indigenous resistance is not just about reclaiming land or legal recognition, but also about sustaining

communities through everyday acts of support and care. These acts may seem small, like sharing food, teaching a language, offering medicine, or mentoring youth, but they are fundamental to our survival and renewal. One of the Elders stated:

I like that saying it takes a community to raise a child...Community really must come together to help with the growing of family. It takes community to embrace some of the issues. Not be afraid. You know, takes the community to be a community. (Elder B)

Within our community, the Elders and knowledge keepers mentioned how we would support each other through all stages of life including death. An Elder discussed how her grandma explained the idea of respect when it came to losing a community member:

when people passed in the community, the whole community got together to celebrate that person's life, but they came together as a big collective to support one another. My granny used to say always go to someone's funeral because it shows respect to that family right. (Elder T)

The Elders and knowledge keepers all discussed that it was the community taking care of one another that made us strong. It held us together through hard times and also uplifted us during the good times. This relational accountability is one of the fundamental responsibilities that we have to one another and is a foundational part of how our nations function (Gonzalez et al., 2023; Simpson, 2017). One of the knowledge keepers shared a story about how the community came together to do a sweat. She went up into our community last year to run a sweat, thinking that she was going to have to do it all herself, start the fire, heat the rocks, and she was prepared to do it on her own. When she got up to Whitesand she was surprised to see that there was a firekeeper already there that had started the fire and did the rocks. The community came together to help her even though she was prepared to do it all on her own. This concept of caring for one another

could also be seen through the common practice of sharing what we have. The Elders and knowledge keepers mentioned that when we would harvest medicines or hunt for food, we made sure to share what we got with fellow community members and those who were not able to do it on their own. The gifts we got from Mother Earth were meant to be shared and it was only right that we would do that. Indigenous scholars have emphasized the importance of caring for one another as a fundamental part of Indigenous governance, resistance, and resurgence (Corntassel, 2012; Simpson, 2017; Smith, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Whether through kinship, land-based practices, mutual aid, or knowledge sharing, Indigenous communities sustain themselves by fostering reciprocal relationships and collective care.

Roles and Responsibilities

Within our community, all of the Elders discussed the various roles and responsibilities everyone had. One of the elders discussed how it was back in the day:

everyone had their roles. You know men were the hunters, the providers of food so they would go out hunting, woman would keep camp depending on which, in our area that's how it would be. The woman would keep camp, do the laundry, take care of the children but most of the time it was the elderly like the grandparents that took care of the children, so they had that role. (Elder T)

We had medicine people that would take care of the community, "every group of first nations people back then you know they had a medicine man. They had water keepers, they had all these knowledge keepers and all this but every, every group had a medicine man" (Elder P). The roles and responsibilities in our community were shaped by kinship, governance, and environmental stewardship, similar to other nations (Benton-Banai, 2010; Corntassel, 2012; Simpson, 2017). One of the Elders even talked about how her grandmother's aunt was the midwife within the

community. There was a role for just about everyone and everyone had a responsibility to fulfill that role.

One of the things that each of the Elders and knowledge keepers discussed was the role and responsibilities of our leadership, Chief and council. Unlike Western political systems, which emphasize individual leadership and decision making, our governance structures function through collective responsibility and consensus-based decision making (Borrows, 2010). Leadership plays a big role in our health and wellness as the Elders and knowledge keepers discussed. As previously mentioned, a very important person in our community is one of the former Chiefs. Each of the Elders and knowledge keepers mentioned him during our visits and explained how he brought our community back together. Back in the 1940's, our community was flooded out following the construction of a hydro dam which left our community members without a home or land base. It was the former Chief who took it upon himself to start reclaiming what was ours. He started advocating to Indian Affairs to get back our land after the flooding, all while working to bring the culture back to Whitesand. He took on that responsibility for his people. Through ceremony, the Sun Dance, this former Chief would sacrifice himself every year for the community, so his people could live. He did this out of love for his community, to see them prosper and thrive. Through this we can see it is possible that the leadership, when leading in service of the people, can make the biggest change within a community, once taking on that role.

NORTHERN THEME: SPIRITUALITY

The Elders and knowledge keepers emphasized that our spiritual wellbeing is foundational to the overall health of the community. Back in the day “spiritual practices...those practices you know they were strong. They pulled the community together” (Elder, P).

Spirituality, in this context, is not confined to any single ritual or belief, but is understood as a sacred connection to the Creator, our ancestors, and all living beings. It is a dynamic, ever-present force that underlies all aspects of life, guiding us and our community toward balance, harmony, and healing (Bordor et al., 2022; Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Greenwood et al., 2015; Kim, 2019; Nesdole et al., 2014; Robbins & Dewar, 2011; Watts, 2016). The Elders and knowledge keepers emphasized that wellness cannot be attained through physical means alone but must be nurtured through a person's spiritual connection to the world around them. Spiritual strength helps us to navigate life's challenges, reaffirming the importance of faith and trust in the Creator's plans. The Elders and knowledge keepers have encouraged us to listen to our spirit as "it'll guide you" (Elder B). Subthemes in this section include ceremony, prayer, and interconnection.

Ceremony

The Elders and knowledge keepers recognize that spiritual health is rooted in the practice of ceremony, where community members can gather to honour and offer gratitude to the Creator, our ancestors, and the land. They noted that "we as First Nations people, we had our own ways to take care of ourselves" (Elder P). Whether it's a sweat lodge, a feast, or smudging ceremony, these sacred practices were identified to help create a space for individuals to renew their spirit, seek guidance, or cleanse both their body and mind. Our ceremonies help us to remember the need for balance and the need for one another. These ceremonies are "a chance to get some healing in" (Elder T) and work through any problems that we may have in our lives. The literature affirms this notion as ceremony was outlined as a means of healing from historical traumas and addressing the collective wounds that colonization has had on us as a nation (Bordor et al., 2022; Struthers & Eschiti, 2005; Struthers et al., 2004; Struthers et al., 2008). Our

disconnect from ceremony and our spirit is one of the many reasons why we have had a difficult time with mastering the skills to cope with negative experiences that we may have within our lives (Robbins & Dewar, 2011; Struthers et al., 2004). The literature further confirms this as ceremony has been shown to positively impact our spiritual and emotional wellbeing (Bordor et al., 2022; Gone, 2011; Gray & Cote, 2019; Kading et al., 2019; Redvers et al., 2021; Struthers et al., 2004; Struthers & Eschiti, 2005). The Elders and knowledge keepers have all agreed that the ceremonies and teachings bring everybody together in a good way for healing. For example, one of the Elders talks about a teaching behind the sweat lodge ceremony:

the sweat lodge is the womb of Mother Earth and that's the idea of when we crawl in, you crawl in on all fours like you're crawling back into Mother Earth...and when you came out of the sweat it's kind of like your, it's like a rebirth you know. You pray inside that sweat, you leave everything behind there. You don't bring it back out with you because it's a rebirth. And that's why you crawl back out and you're feeling refreshed. It's a new day, it's a new beginning. (Elder P)

Ceremony is rooted in these ancient customs that are still experienced today. Our lives can be seen as a ceremony and the Elders and knowledge keepers draw strength from these traditional ways.

Prayer

The Elders and knowledge keepers speak of the strength that comes from faith and a deep belief in the connection between all living things, "to be able to include that spiritual sense, you have to always believe that there is a higher power" (Elder T). The Elders and knowledge keepers were taught that everything begins with prayer. In the face of hardship, whether personal, familial, or community wide, spirituality and our faith will provide us with a sense of

resilience. Colonial violence has deeply impacted our wellbeing, yet prayer has remained a powerful tool for resilience and renewal (Bordor et al., 2022; Fleming & Ledogar, 2008; Struthers, 2000). It is through prayer and a reliance on the spiritual teachings of our ancestors that the Elders and knowledge keepers believe will help our people endure, heal, and emerge stronger. In our Indigenous traditions, prayer is an expression of relational accountability, the understanding that we as human beings exist within a vast network of relationships, including with the land, animals, our ancestors, and the spirit world (Wilson, 2008). One of the Elders discusses prayer as an integral part of our spirituality, “another thing too with spirituality is prayers. The power of prayer” (Elder B). Our prayers are meant to extend to everyone, and the Elders and knowledge keepers emphasize the need for staying humble through our prayers, “always, always pray for the betterment of health or whatever, what that individual is going through, and even with people who hurt you, who have done you wrong, pray for them” (Elder B). One of the knowledge keepers discussed how an Elder in her own life had explained prayer and how we look at it when we are praying for someone in our life, whether for their wellbeing or in ceremony:

the Elder had broken it down in the sense that when we pray, and you know, we gotta go before the Great Spirit, and we gotta ask, we have to ask humbly, to get this person doctored. And he says, we are more or less asking for their life, for their health. And he says it's in the Creator's and the spirits' hands. (Elder B)

Through prayer, us as Anishinaabe people maintain our spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical wellness, ensuring that our cultural practices and teachings are preserved and passed down through generations. As we continue to resist colonial disruption, prayer will remain an act of resurgence, a way of honouring traditional knowledge, strengthening connections, and ensuring

that future generations inherit a world rooted in balance and care (Simpson, 2017). In this way, prayer becomes a means of living in harmony with the world around us acknowledging our responsibility to care for all beings, and maintaining the spiritual equilibrium that sustains life (Wilson, 2008).

Interconnection

The Elders and knowledge keepers view spirituality as the heart of our being and a source of healing and interconnection that binds individuals together and ties us to our ancestral teachings. This supports the outlined literature as our spirituality is fundamentally relational and communal (Robbins & Dewar, 2011). Grounding our lives in the spiritual teachings of our ancestors ensures that we remain healthy, balanced, and connected to the sacredness of all creation. We as human beings have a responsibility to maintain a balanced, respectful relationship with all beings on Mother Earth as well as the unseen forces that guide the natural world (Redvers, 2020; Robbins & Dewar, 2011; Struthers et al., 2008). Our ongoing relationship and connection with the Creator helps to maintain our spiritual wellness. The Elders and knowledge keepers of Whitesand teach that Creator's gifts of life and the natural world are sacred, and it is through honouring these gifts such as the land, the water, and all living beings, that we can maintain our connection with them. Gonzalez et al., (2023) discuss this as well in *Indigenous Elders' Conceptualization of Well-being* as "something that is gifted to us by our spiritual helpers" (p. 4). One of the Elders states:

the Creator's the one that gives us life, the one that gives us everything that we need to you know, to walk this earth right...as First Nations people we know what the Creator is you know, he's in all of us you know he's in all of us. He's in our children, he's in the trees, he's in the animals, he's in the water, he's in the air. That's the Creator. (Elder P)

The Elders and knowledge keepers emphasized that wellness cannot be attained through physical means alone but must be nurtured through a person's spiritual connection to the world around them. This spiritual balance is vital in our health and wellness as Anishinaabe people (Bedard, 2008; Debassige, 2010; Kruse et al., 2019) This connection is seen as a bridge to ancestral wisdom. One of the Elders shared a story of her and her great aunt going blueberry picking when she was a young girl:

she (aunt) says if you ever need something, something really really, something that you really really need like I don't know, if its health or something for your people, like something major, she points to this hill across the lake. She says one of your relatives is buried there she says, go put tobacco out, go offer tobacco there and he'll help you.

(Elder T)

This story emphasized the interconnection through spirit that we have with our ancestors. They can offer their help and take care of us when we ask them to. All of the Elders and knowledge keepers shared the idea that we are all connected in this life. This connection represents Mino Bimaadiziwin in which our understanding of health and wellness is integrated through both physical and spiritual dimensions (Debassige, 2010)

PERSONAL REFLECTION

The Elders and knowledge keepers shared their life experiences and wisdom with me, and it is my earnest hope that I have adequately and appropriately shared their insights with the reader of this document. They reminded me that our knowledge and ways of living a good life do not come from a textbook, but from a higher source, the Creator. The greatest teacher in the life journeys of these Elders and knowledge keepers has been their experience. I am extremely

grateful that I had the opportunity to sit down with each of them and learn more about our practices that support and uphold our community wellness.

The findings of this study have clearly established the community wellness practices that keep Whitesand First Nation healthy. It is through our culture, land, community, and spirituality, that our community can remain healthy and well, and continue to heal from the impacts of colonization. Much of what I learned about our ways of health and wellness from these Elders and knowledge keepers dealt with relationships with all of our kin, which includes plants, animals, and everything on Mother Earth. This includes the relationships with both the seen and unseen. Being in relationship with the unseen, Creator, the spirits, and our ancestors, is a daily practice for these Elders and knowledge keepers and I have learned that we too must be in these relationships.

In this chapter, I answered my research questions: How do Elders and knowledge keepers in Whitesand First Nation define community wellness? What teachings are important for personal and community wellness? And how did our community traditionally stay well? I organized the discussion around four relevant themes, Culture, Land, Spirituality, and Community, presented in an Anishinaabe medicine wheel corresponding to the life cycle of us as Anishinaabe people. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 supports all of these findings and align with the Elders and knowledge keeper's definition of community wellness. In regard to how our community traditionally stayed well, this can be attributed to the well-respected former Chief who fought the government to regain our land after the flooding due to a hydro dam. He went down to the United States to relearn ceremonial and healing practices, bringing back the powwow to our community and Sundanced for our people. He lived in service of our community and demonstrated how to stay well as our ancestors did. With his sacrifice of himself for our

community, the teachings of Mino Bimaadiziwin were reclaimed. As Anishinaabe people, our wellness was traditionally maintained by upholding our connection to the land, maintaining balance between the physical and spiritual world, participating in ceremony, and utilizing our traditional medicines.

In the chapter that follows, I complete my discussion of this study by providing recommendations based on the knowledge and wisdom that was shared with me from the Elders and knowledge keepers in Whitesand First Nation. These recommendations are directed towards myself, Whitesand First Nation, and Indigenous Health Research and future research directions. I then conclude this thesis with some closing words about my journey during this research project.

Chapter 5: Recommendations

Introduction

The previous chapter has outlined the bundles that have presented themselves through the sharing of stories and wisdom from the three participating Elders and knowledge keepers in Whitesand First Nation. Conducting this research has been a transformative journey, one that has deepened my understanding of community health and wellness while also reinforcing the importance of our Anishinaabe ways of knowing and being. This research was not simply gathering information, but rather, it was about engaging in a process of relationship building, respect, and learning about our ways as Anishinaabe people. It was about listening to the voices of those who have carried knowledge for generations and ensuring that their wisdom continues to guide our path forward.

To carry out this research in a way that honoured my community and its traditions, I followed our Anishinaabe protocols and used an Indigenous research methodology, guided by the teachings of Indigenous scholars and the framework of Indigenous Storywork, developed by Jo-Ann Archibald (2008). Indigenous Storywork, grounded in the power of storytelling as a method of knowledge transmission, has allowed me to engage with the Elders and knowledge keepers in a way that centred relationality, reciprocity, and respect. I have also reflected on foundational works by Indigenous scholars such as Kathleen Absolon (2012, 2022), Margaret Kovach (2009, 2021) and Shawn Wilson (2008), all of whom emphasize the deep connections between Indigenous research and identity, spirituality, and responsibility. Wilson states that “if research doesn’t change you as a person, then you haven’t done it right” (p. 135). This research has changed me in a way I could not have expected. It brought me closer to community members and has shaped my understanding of our wellness as members of Whitesand First Nation. It has

also strengthened my commitment to Mino Bimaadiziwin, a central Anishinaabe teaching that embodies balance, respect, and wellness in all aspects of life.

This chapter, Gigaawaabaamin Miinwaaa (see you again), presents a series of recommendations that have emerged from the themes and subthemes that revealed themselves through the sharing of stories with the Elders and knowledge keepers in Whitesand First Nation. These recommendations are rooted in the lived experiences, teachings, and insights shared by the Elders and knowledge keepers who participated in this study. Their words hold the wisdom of generations, and their guidance serves as a foundation for shaping the future of health and wellness in our community. The recommendations outlined in this chapter are intended to enhance culturally relevant health initiatives, support the integration of traditional knowledge in wellness practices, and promote community-led approaches to holistic wellbeing. These suggestions are meant to serve as actionable steps for local leaders, health practitioners, policymakers, and future researchers who are invested in strengthening Indigenous health and wellness through culturally appropriate, community driven solutions.

The recommendations provided in this chapter are organized into three key areas, each addressing different levels of impact. The first set of recommendations is directed towards myself. As a researcher, community member, and an Anishinaabekwe, I recognize that my learning does not end with the completion of this research. My responsibility is to continue growing, learning from our Elders, and strengthening my connection to traditional knowledge, all while deepening my understanding of Anishinaabe health and wellness. The second set of recommendations focuses on ways to enhance health and wellness initiatives within Whitesand First Nation. These recommendations include revitalizing traditional healing practices, supporting youth-led initiatives that foster cultural knowledge and wellbeing, and implementing

community driven land-based programs. The third set of recommendations is aimed at Indigenous health research and its role in shaping policies and programs as well as future research directions and projects that have come from the research. It is critical to continue researching and centring Indigenous knowledge and methodologies ensuring that these perspectives are recognized and integrated into broader health frameworks and supporting community driven research.

TO MYSELF - KIISIYASOBEK

Commitment to Lifelong Learning and Cultural Growth

Throughout the course of this research, my own journey of learning has deepened in ways that I had not anticipated. I have gained a greater understanding of myself, my community, and the ways in which we can sustain and enhance our health and wellness as Anishinaabe people. However, this learning does not end with the completion of this study, it is an ongoing process, one that requires humility, dedication, and an open heart. Just as this research has allowed me to explore the strengths and values within my community, I recognize that my responsibility now is to continue this journey beyond the academic setting.

One of the most important commitments I make to myself is to keep learning from the Elders and knowledge keepers in my community, as well as those from other Anishinaabe communities. They carry the wisdom of our ancestors, offering guidance on traditional healing, wellness, and ways of living in harmony with the land. I acknowledge that there is always more to learn about our medicines, ceremonies, teachings, and the ways that our ancestors have maintained balance in all aspects of life. My responsibility is not only to absorb this knowledge for my own growth, but to ensure that it is preserved and shared with future generations.

Walking Forward in a Good Way

A key recommendation I give to myself is to continue moving forward in a good way, remaining positive and resilient in the face of challenges. Life will always present hardships, but our teachings remind us to walk with kindness, patience, and determination. There will be times when obstacles arise, whether in my personal life journey, my academic path, or my work within the community. However, I must remember the lessons of our ancestors, to face adversity with strength, to learn from each experience, and to carry these lessons forward with gratitude. Showing gratitude in what we have is one of the things that the Elders said was important: “be thankful for what you have you know. Be thankful for the people that you have in your life and understand that you know things happen” (Elder P). Staying grounded in our Anishinaabe ways of knowing will guide me through these challenges. By continuing to seek knowledge from Elders, participate in ceremonies, and remain connected to the land, I will find the strength and clarity needed to keeping walking this path. I recognize that the more I learn, the greater my responsibility becomes, not only to myself but to my community, particularly the younger generations who will one day walk this path as well. My goal is to be someone who carries and shares these teachings, ensuring that our traditional ways continue to flourish and thrive.

Reconnecting with Language

One of the most important aspects and recommendations that I have for myself is to continue to learn and speak Anishinaabemowin. As the Elders and knowledge keepers emphasized, our language is more than just words, it is a connection to our ancestors, our culture, and the very essence of who we are as Anishinaabe people. It is a vessel for cultural identity and a gateway to understanding the world in an Anishinaabe way. Through Anishinaabemowin, we communicate with the spirits, honour the land, and express our teachings in ways that cannot be fully translated into English. Each word carries a history, a worldview, and a spirit of its own.

Learning and reclaiming Anishinaabemowin is not just a personal goal, it is an act of cultural revitalization (Absolon, 2012, 2022; Bordor et al., 2022; Borrows, 2010; Gonzalez et al., 2023; Simpson, 2017; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Colonization has attempted to take our language from us, yet it still lives within our communities, waiting to be spoken and carried forward. I recommend to myself that I continue to push forward in learning our language, no matter how challenging the journey may be. Whether through speaking with Elders, taking language classes, or practicing daily, I must remain dedicated to this path. By doing so, I strengthen not only my own connection to my identity, but also contribute to the survival and growth of Anishinaabemowin for future generations.

TO WHITESAND FIRST NATION

Revitalization of Traditional Healing Practices and Community Wellness

A crucial step in strengthening community health and wellness in Whitesand First Nation as outlined by the Elders and knowledge keepers is the revitalization of traditional healing practices and the preservation of local knowledge related to land-based healing, medicine gathering, and traditional wellness. For generations, these practices have played a vital role in maintaining the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing of Anishinaabe people. However, due to the impacts of colonialism, residential schools, and the ongoing marginalization of Indigenous ways of knowing and being, many traditional healing methods are at risk of being lost (Greenwood et al., 2015; National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, 2019; Paradies, 2016; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 2000; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015; Watts, 2016). To safeguard this knowledge for future generations, it is essential to work closely with the Elders and knowledge keepers to document and revitalize these practices while ensuring that they remain accessible to our community.

One of the most pressing priorities and recommendations I have for Whitesand is to collaborate with Elders and knowledge keepers in recording and preserving traditional healing methods and ways in which we stay healthy before they are called back to the spirit world. Each year we lose many of our Elders and knowledge keepers and when they go home, they take their wisdom and knowledge with them. These Elders and knowledge keepers hold invaluable wisdom about plant medicines, ceremonial healing, and holistic wellness that cannot be found in textbooks or conventional healthcare systems. By working with them to document these teachings, whether through written records, oral storytelling, or digital archives, our community can ensure that this knowledge is passed down to future generations in a respectful and meaningful way. One of the Elders states: “Elders are key. Directions from those Elders is extremely key. You can’t do this without their direction” (Elder T). Creating opportunities for these Elders and knowledge keepers to share their wisdom, whether through community gatherings, workshops, mentorship programs, or visiting one-on-one, will further strengthen the role of traditional healing within Whitesand First Nation.

For us as Anishinaabe people, healing is holistic, integrating the spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental aspects of our wellbeing (Bordor et al., 2022; Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Kim, 2019; Robbins & Dewar, 2011; Watts, 2016). The Potlatch Ban and the suppression of our ceremonies deeply disrupted our traditional healing systems, severing many from their cultural and spiritual foundations. Today, we have the freedom and responsibility to revitalize our spiritual practices and restore balance in our communities. This is not only about reclaiming lost traditions, but it is also about ensuring that future generations have access to the teachings that were meant to sustain us. Our spiritual health is not just one aspect of wellness, it is the foundation. When we reclaim our languages, ceremonies, and responsibilities to the land, we

strengthen our holistic wellbeing and the wellbeing of future generations. We must honour the knowledge that has survived and ensure that it continues to guide our people forward as it is foundational to who we are as Anishinaabe people.

Empowering Youth Through Cultural Wellness Initiatives

Investing in youth-led initiatives with the guidance of Elders is another key recommendation that I have for fostering health and wellness within our community. By providing our young people with opportunities to learn about their culture, traditional healing, and holistic wellbeing, Whitesand First Nation can ensure that the next generation grows up with a strong connection to their identity as Anishinaabe people. As a youth leader, and through my own personal journey, I have witnessed firsthand the transformative power of cultural connection for our youth. When youth are given opportunities to participate in land-based learning and traditional healing practices, learning more about cultural wellness, something shifts within them. They gain confidence, belonging, and a renewed sense of purpose. The teachings of our ancestors come alive not just in words, but in action, reinforcing that culture is not just something we inherit, but something we must actively live and pass on. Developing youth-led programs that focus on health and wellness will also empower our youth to take an active role in shaping our community's future while reinforcing the importance of traditional knowledge (Lines & Jardine, 2019; Price et al., 2025; Snowshoe et al., 2017). As the Elders and knowledge keepers have taught us, when youth are strong in their identity, the whole community is stronger. A variety of approaches can be used to engage youth in cultural wellness, including storytelling, land-based education, and mentorship models with Elders in the community. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, storytelling has long been a fundamental method of knowledge transfer within Anishinaabe culture, offering valuable lessons about health, resilience, and the

interconnectedness of all beings (Absolon, 2012, 2022; Archibald, 2008; Cajete, 2000; Kovach, 2009, 2021; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Land-based education such as medicine walks, hunting and fishing camps, and traditional food harvesting can further strengthen our youth's connection to our heritage while promoting physical and mental wellbeing (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Lines & Jardine, 2019; Snowshoe et al., 2017). Additionally, mentorship programs, where Elders and knowledge keepers guide young people in learning traditional practices, can help bridge generational gaps and create strong support networks within the community (Bedard et al., 2008; Kennedy et al., 2022; Lines & Jardine, 2019; McGuire-Adams, 2023).

To enhance knowledge sharing, it is also important to develop mentorship programs or digital archives that allow for the preservation and accessibility of traditional teachings. Digital archives such as video recording of Elders and knowledge keepers sharing their knowledge, language resources, and interactive storytelling platforms, can serve as a valuable resource for both current and future generations. Advocating for training programs for our youth who are interested in healthcare careers such as community healthcare workers, nurses, health educators, or mental health workers to name a few, can help strengthen the presence of culturally competent healthcare providers within the community. The literature has outlined that there is a need for cultural competence among healthcare providers as western practitioners often lack understanding of our Indigenous ways of healing (Struthers et al., 2008, Stuthers et al., 2004; Struthers & Eschiti, 2005). The First Nations Health Authority (2012) report on the *Traditional Healers Gathering* emphasizes the importance of integrating traditional Indigenous healing practices with Western healthcare approaches to provide holistic and culturally relevant care for First Nations peoples. By ensuring that our young people have access to both traditional and

modern knowledge in healthcare, Whitesand First Nation can work toward a more holistic and self-sustaining approach to wellness.

Implementing Community Driven Land-Based Programs

My last recommendation for Whitesand First Nation is the implementation of community driven land-based programs which is essential for restoring and maintaining a strong connection between our people and the land. As outlined in the findings, the land itself is a source of healing, providing not only physical sustenance, but also emotional and spiritual nourishment. Programs that focus on land-based healing such as traditional medicine gatherings, sweat lodge ceremonies, fasting camps, and seasonal cultural gatherings, offer opportunities for our community members to reconnect with their identity while also addressing contemporary health concerns (McGuire-Adams, 2023; Redvers, 2020; Redvers et al., 2021; Robbins & Dewar, 2011; Tobias & Richmond, 2014). When asked about the development of a holistic framework of community wellness, one of the Elders states “we have to do the land. You have to go out there. You have to build programs in the bush” (Elder T). These programs should be developed and led by community members, ensuring that they reflect the unique needs, values, and traditions of our community. The Elders and knowledge keepers discussed some of the attributes and qualities that are needed of those who would lead programs such as these, including Chief and Council. These include accountability, respect, and self-awareness, and understanding. Accountability was the first attribute that they spoke about. One of the Elders stated:

Accountability is every day. Accountability is to yourself and that's, that's being truthful to yourself as a person, not just as a council member or Chief but as an individual, just as community member. Being accountable to yourself will determine your wellness.

Mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally. That accountability that we owe to

ourselves as a people, but we owe to our ancestors, our grandmothers, our great grandmothers that went through the horrible stuff... you know as long as we remain accountable to ourselves and responsible you know, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. (Elder P)

Respect is also at the forefront of attributes that these individuals would have to possess: “what may work for one person may not work for another, but we have to respect this” (Elder B). They must respect our differences and have respect for one another. Self-awareness is another attribute that is very important for one to have if they are to be helping with these types of programs. We as a people need to have a certain level of self-aware of ourselves because “how can we help people help another person, if we too are suffering” (Elder B). Understanding is the last attribute the Elders and knowledge keepers acknowledged that they must have. They must understand that we are human: “we as humans, we make many mistakes. We fall down. Some of us face traumas” (Elder B). Another Elder adds on to this and says, “the one thing is to consider is that you know, we’re human beings. We all have our faults, we all have our traumas, we all have our past traumas, we all have the intergenerational trauma, the residual traumas” (Elder P). Having an understanding that we all are human and are susceptible to making mistakes is a vital attribute that one must have in order to have empathy to those who are hurting. By holding these qualities and having a determination to help our people, these programs can provide holistic solutions to health challenges while also reinforcing the importance of our Indigenous self-determination. Investing in these land-based programs will not only benefit the individual’s health and wellbeing, but also strengthen the overall resilience and unity of our community.

TO THE FIELD OF INDIGENOUS HEALTH RESEARCH AND FUTURE DIRECTION
Centring Indigenous Knowledge and Methodologies

One of the most critical aspects of Indigenous health research is the recognition that traditional knowledge and Indigenous methodologies are valid and necessary frameworks for understanding our health and wellness (Absolon, 2011; Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008). Indigenous peoples have maintained sophisticated healing systems since time immemorial, incorporating traditional medicines, ceremonies, and land-based practices to sustain our wellbeing. However, as discussed in Chapter 2 and 3, much of this knowledge has been marginalized or dismissed in favour of Western medical models. Future research should work toward amplifying Indigenous health perspectives by ensuring that methodologies such as storytelling, participatory action research, and relational accountability guide the research process.

To honour these knowledge systems, Elders and knowledge keepers should not simply be participants in research but should lead and shape the direction of studies. Their wisdom provides an understanding of health that extends beyond the physical, incorporating emotional, spiritual, and mental wellbeing, with spiritual wellness being the foundation to our health. Researchers could explore the integration of traditional healing with contemporary healthcare systems, ensuring that Indigenous people have access to holistic and culturally relevant care. This shift would require an approach that moves away from viewing Indigenous knowledge as supplemental and instead sees it as foundational to understanding Indigenous health (Gerhardt-Strachan, 2022; Kolehdooz et al., 2015; Mundel & Chapman, 2010).

Supporting Community Driven Research

Indigenous health research must be community-led, community driven, and community owned (Absolon, 2012, 2022; Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2009, 2021; Wilson, 2008). As discussed in Chapter 3, research has historically been conducted on Indigenous peoples rather

than with them, often resulting in findings that do not accurately reflect community priorities (Cajete, 2000; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Moving forward, Indigenous communities must continue to define their own research priorities, ensuring that the studies address the real and pressing health concerns that they face. Rather than being passive subjects of study, communities must serve as co-creators of knowledge, shaping research objectives, methodologies, and outcomes. Research partnerships should be based on mutual respect and relationships, ensuring that findings are shared transparently with the community and that the research benefits are reciprocal. True Indigenous health research should aim to empower communities, strengthen self-determination, and contribute to lasting solutions for health and wellness.

Expanding the Scope

While this research has provided valuable insights into the knowledge and experiences of Elders and knowledge keepers from Whitesand First Nation, future studies have the potential to build on this foundation by expanding the scope to include more Anishinaabe communities, possibly including the Anishinaabe communities within the Independent First Nations. By broadening the research to encompass a larger geographic range, future studies can offer a more comprehensive understanding of the commonalities in Anishinaabe health perspectives, traditional healing practices, and land-based wellness initiatives as many Anishinaabe communities share similar cultural teachings, healing traditions, and connections to the land. Additionally, further research could continue to explore the benefits of returning to the land for healing and develop structured land-based wellness programs that integrate hunting, fishing, medicine gathering, and traditional teachings. These initiatives can strengthen community wellbeing, reinforce cultural identity, and contribute to long-term health improvements.

By engaging a larger network of Elders, healers, and knowledge keepers, future research could identify different patterns in traditional healing practices while also highlighting the distinct methods that different communities use to promote wellness. This expanded research could explore how regional differences in access to land, water, and traditional medicines impact the ability of Anishinaabe people to engage in their healing traditions. Understanding these factors would be critical in advocating for policies that support Indigenous-led health initiatives across multiple communities.

Expanding Research on Traditional Knowledge as a Path to Healing and Wellness

From the results of this research study, we can see that traditional knowledge has sustained Anishinaabe communities for generations, providing not only practical wisdom but also a deeply rooted sense of identity, balance, and wellbeing. This knowledge passed down through oral traditions, ceremonies, and lived experiences, serves as a powerful source of healing for individuals and communities. While this study has explored the perspectives from Elders and knowledge keepers in Whitesand First Nation, there remains a need to expand research on traditional knowledge as a framework for healing and wellness. Future studies could focus on the revitalization, documentation, and application of traditional teachings to address contemporary health challenges while ensuring that Indigenous-led solutions shape the future of health and wellness initiatives.

This could be taken a step further to expand research on land-based healing and wellness. Our Indigenous worldviews emphasize that land is medicine, providing physical sustenance, emotional healing, and spiritual connection (Reading & Wien, 2013; Redvers, 2020; Robbins & Dewar, 2011). There is a need for studies that document the healing benefits of land-based practices such as traditional medicine gathering, hunting and fishing, and ceremonial practices.

Land-based healing is particularly vital for mental health and trauma recovery (Gray & Cote, 2019; Kirmayer et al., 2003; Nightingale & Richmond, 2022). Many Indigenous communities have developed land-based wellness programs that integrate cultural teachings with mental health support, providing healing opportunities for youth, residential school survivors, and those struggling with intergenerational trauma (Price et al., 2025; Redvers et al., 2021; Redvers, 2020; Woodworth et al., 2025). Future research could examine the long-term impacts of these programs and advocate for their inclusion in health funding and policy development. Recognizing the land as a primary source of healing is vital for developing holistic approaches to Indigenous health today.

CLOSING WORDS

As I come to the end of this research journey, I recognize that this work is not truly ending, but a continuation, a step along a much longer path of learning, healing, and growing. This research has not only deepened my understanding of community health and wellness with my home community, but it has also strengthened my connection to my people, my culture, and my responsibility to carry these teachings forward. Through the voices of the Elders and knowledge keepers, I have come to witness the power of our traditional knowledge, the deep wisdom embedded in our ways of life, and the enduring strength of our people despite the many challenges we have faced. The wisdom of Elders and knowledge keepers is foundational to the survival of our Anishinaabe ways of knowing and being as they are the living embodiment of this cultural knowledge and hold the oral histories, teachings, and ceremonies that sustain our Anishinaabe identity (Archibald, 2008; Gonzalez et al., 2023; Hart, 2015; McGuire-Adams, 2023). Their teachings offer us guidance on how to live in balance with the land, how to uphold responsibilities to our community, and how to heal from intergenerational trauma (Bedard et al.,

2008; Gonzalez, 2023). As my methodology was grounded in Jo-Ann Archibald's (2008). Indigenous Storywork, the approach was one that honours the relational, ethical, and holistic nature of our Anishinaabe ways of knowing and being. This framework of gathering knowledge was not just about collecting stories, it was about engaging in deep, reciprocal relationships with the Elders and knowledge keepers, ensuring that their teachings are shared in a way that respects their wisdom and spirit. Building and maintaining these relationships was essential to gathering the stories in a good way, as this knowledge was gifted, not extracted, and will be carried forward with the utmost care.

The knowledge and wisdom shared in this research is more than words on a page, it is alive. It lives in the stories passed down by our Elders, in the medicines that grow on our lands, in the ceremonies that guide us, and in the relationships that we hold with one another. It is found in the laughter of our youth as they learn from our ancestors, in the healing that takes place when we return to the land, and in the resilience of our people as we continue to walk the path of Mino Bimaadiziwin. This research has further instilled in me that wellness is not just about physical health, it is about balance, connection, and remembering who we are as Anishinaabe people. Though this research is complete, my learning does not stop here. I will continue to seek knowledge from our Elders and knowledge keepers, deepen my understanding of our traditional ways, and strengthen my ability to speak Anishinaabemowin, the language that ties us to our ancestors and the spirits. I carry forward a responsibility, not just to myself, but to my community and to future generations, to ensure that this knowledge does not fade but continues to grow, flourish, and guide us in the future.

As I reflect on this journey, I am filled with immense gratitude for the Elders and knowledge keepers who so generously shared their wisdom, for the land that continues to teach

us, and for the ancestors who have walked before us, ensuring that we can still carry these teachings today. This research has reaffirmed what our people have always known, healing is found in our culture, our language, our stories, and our connection to the land. Moving forward, I will continue to honour these traditions, knowing that they are not just part of our past, but the key to our future. This is not the end, only the beginning.

Chi-Miigwetch. Gigaawaabaamin Miinwaaa.

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Appendix A: Participant Consent Form



Your name: _____

Whitesand First Nation Elder and Knowledge Keeper
Consent to participate in the *Manidookewin: Exploring*
Community Wellness in Whitesand First Nation

You are invited to participate in “**Manidookewin: Exploring Community Wellness in Whitesand First Nation**” a research study aiming to gather knowledge and stories on approaches to community wellness by investigating holistic wellness practices and ceremony with Elders and knowledge keepers.

What will I do?

You will be invited to meet for an informal interview session to help identify holistic wellness frameworks that are rooted in the knowledge systems of our nation through the art of storytelling. The primary focus of this study is to gather knowledge on meanings of wellness within our community in relation to spiritual wellness and ceremony as a pathway to restoring our knowledge systems. There are 5 guiding questions that you will be asked to answer in the first session. I will then ask to meet with you to report any findings/themes for you to review, make changes, and to approve of what is being brought forward. An optional video may also be created to share with the community.

Where will this be shown?

The video may be shared publicly and with Whitesand First Nation. I will also be writing an academic paper to explain what I learned and why it’s important.

Why does this matter?

I am interested in learning about approaches to community wellness by investigating holistic wellness practices and ceremony through the art of storytelling. By participating in this research, you will be providing valuable knowledge, guidance, and insights. This project will try to answer the question: How do Elders and knowledge keepers in Whitesand First Nation define community wellness?

Inconvenience

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including the time commitment to attend the interview session.

Risks

There is the potential risk of tiredness from the meeting. To reduce this risk the following steps will be taken: interview sessions will be scheduled for 90 minutes at a time that is convenient to you, breaks can be taken as needed.

Benefits

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include gaining more knowledge on holistic and spiritual wellness. This project will help society understand the importance of cultural and ceremonial knowledge and will make a contribution to knowledge on our Anishinaabe health systems, community wellness, and learning from knowledge keepers.

Compensation

Compensation in the form of honoraria and small gifts will occur.

Voluntary Participation & On-going consent

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You can participate in the interview session without participating in the video. You may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will not be used. Any items that have been gifted to you are yours to keep.

To make sure that you continue to consent to participate in this research, I will check in every three months to make sure you want to continue participating in the study. Your image can be removed before the video is created. You will be given the option when withdrawing from the study to choose whether to give consent for your images to be used in video and/or photo. Once the community resource materials are being created, the images cannot be removed.

Anonymity & Confidentiality

In terms of protecting your anonymity, you can choose to use a pseudonym or your first name in the research document. Any photos or videos that may have identifying features will only be used with your permission.

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by storing paper files in a locked cabinet at my home and storing computer files in an encrypted password protected computer. Data from this study will be disposed of after seven years. Electronic data will be erased and paper copies will be shredded.

More about this study

This study is being conducted by Kyra Willoughby to fulfill the thesis requirements of the Master of Social Dimensions of Health program at the University of Victoria. The study is being supervised by Dr. Sarah Wright Cardinal in the School of Public Health and Social Policy; you can contact Kyra or Sarah at any time using the contact information below:

Kyra Willoughby – email: kyrawilloughby@uvic.ca or phone: 807-355-6098

Dr. Sarah Wright Cardinal: swcardinal@uvic.ca or phone 250-853-3109

This research has also been approved by the Human Research Ethics Board at the University of Victoria, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria, 250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca.

Confirmation of informed consent

I have read and understand the information in this consent form and have had an opportunity to have my questions answered. I consent to participating in this study.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Visually Recorded Images/Data Participant to provide initials, *only if you consent*:

- Photos and video may be taken of me for: Dissemination* _____
- Video may be taken of me for: Dissemination* _____

*Even if no names are used, you may be recognizable if visual images are shown in the results.

A copy of this consent will be given to you, and a copy will be kept by the researcher.

Appendix B: Interview Discussion Prompt Questions

The questions that were asked during the visits with the Elders and knowledge keepers are:

1. Would you like to share stories about our nation's health system including spiritual practices before colonial disruptions?
2. What insights or stories do you have about our nation's journey to reclaiming cultural teachings and ceremonial practices?
3. In what ways is "land as healer" understood today?
4. Do you have any stories about intergenerational knowledge sharing you would like to share?
5. What would you like us to consider in developing a holistic framework of community wellness?