



Indigenous Culture and Wellness: Healing and Wellbeing in the face of Colonization

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Indigenous people can attest, with or without research evidence, that culture is healing. We are in the era of cultural revitalization. We must acknowledge the complex and unique experience of our current generations attempting to thrive and lean into cultural opportunities of health.

Yet, we must also acknowledge that some are not yet thriving within this revitalization era: those that do not yet have



Photograph Provided by the Author.

“Culture will always be at the foundation of Indigenous health, and colonization will always be considered a fundamental turning point interrupting Indigenous wellbeing.”

access to cultural networks, do not yet know who

to ask to enter these cultural spaces, do not yet know who to turn to for spiritual advice, or do not yet understand the purpose of this engagement. This study addressed one of the ways in which colonization may have disrupted this cultural connection.

Highlights

Indigenous Peoples are revitalizing our culture and way of life, improving our ability to self-heal.

When we accounted for an individual’s *cultural efficacy* in our study, cultural engagement was related to lower levels of anxiety and was significantly related to flourishing mental wellbeing.

Indigenous culture is healing; as researchers, we often cannot quantitatively explain this, which is frustrating. We are lucky to have community partnerships that are engaged and invested in this longitudinal and ongoing research. Our community partners span eight reservations/reserves in the upper Midwest and Canada. Equally, we in the community and in the university (and the many of us who belong to both) believe that we can make real change in Indigenous communities with this research. This study was driven by an Indigenous faculty who believed she was noticing a unique phenomenon in her community with respect to cultural engagement and health. With the help of university and community team members, our team developed a novel measure of *cultural efficacy*, which captured one's confidence in and purpose towards cultural engagement.

Methods

We used study data collected in 2017-2018 including eight reservations/reserves from upper Midwest and Canada. We looked at both direct and indirect relationships between cultural engagement and mental health.

Results

- Accounting for *cultural efficacy* was vital in understanding the healing powers of culture.
- *Cultural efficacy* was positively related to cultural engagement, lower levels of anxiety, and higher levels of positive mental wellbeing.
- When accounting for *cultural efficacy*, being cultural engaged was related to lower levels of anxiety and higher levels of mental wellbeing.
- When we did not account for *cultural efficacy*, cultural engagement was related to heightened levels of anxiety and was unrelated to mental wellbeing.

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?

Indigenous frameworks of health are all interrelated systems of community, earth, wildlife, spirits, and ancestors. Indigenous health is dependent on the health of each of these sub-systems. When we engage culturally, we are engaging with our community, with our relatives of the wild and of the earth, and with our spiritual helpers. It would be difficult to improve the psychological health of an Indigenous individual without addressing their community, culture, and/or spiritual connectedness.

What Does This Mean For?

Research and Evaluation: We must invest in community capacity to engage in research and support Indigenous-led research to further our understanding of the complex relationship between Indigenous culture and wellness. We could not have developed a measure that is relevant to our current context without Indigenous researchers and Indigenous community members working together within their communities and alongside each other in research.

Practice: These results illustrate the importance of re-establishing mentorship relationships with Elders and/or cultural knowledge keepers. We must increase the transmission of Indigenous teachings through widespread culture-based programs and expand ceremonial and cultural activity inclusion and support for Indigenous community members.

Social Action: Our results illustrate the need for systematic investment in and policies to support Indigenous cultural initiatives, Indigenous cultural leadership, and the rebuilding of systems from the ground up. This systematic rebuild must consider Indigenous perspectives and allow Indigenous leaders to guide these changes to improve Indigenous community capacity for self-healing.

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