EXPLORING CULTURAL HEALING AND MENTAL WELLNESS IN A NORTHERN SASKATCHEWAN FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITY

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By

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ABSTRACT

Several health inequities exist between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in Canada. These disparities are a result of colonization, which aimed to disconnect Indigenous Peoples from their land, language, and connection to community. This forced assimilation severed connection between Indigenous Peoples and traditional methods of promoting wellness. Connecting to culture appears to play an important role in enhancing mental wellness among Indigenous individuals and communities.

The aims of this project were to: a) explore the role that culture has in promoting mental wellness for First Nations individuals from the Lac La Ronge Indian Band (LLRIB), b) empower young adults from the LLRIB to share their stories of connecting to culture and the impact that this has on their lives.

This community-based project was conducted in collaboration a Community Advisory Committee. Using purposive and subsequent snowball sampling, 5 participants between ages 18 and 25 from the LLRIB were recruited to partake in a two-part photovoice project. First, participants captured photographs representing their experiences with connecting to culture and the role that this has in improving their mental wellness. Following this, the participants attended a one-on-one discussion with the student researcher where they shared the stories behind the photographs they presented. Data were analyzed using narrative analysis.

Narratives were arranged into one of four overarching categories based on the First Nation Mental Wellness Continuum Framework: hope, belonging, purpose, and meaning. Taking a strengths-based approach, the positive influence of culture and community on individual wellbeing is evident and allows us to understand how connecting to culture acts as a protective mechanism when addressing suicide prevention.

Implications of findings contribute to a greater understanding of the role that connecting to culture has in improving the wellness of Indigenous Peoples. The results of this project could guide future research endeavours with Indigenous communities to explore wellness of other communities. Overall, the project improves understanding of the idea that Indigenous Peoples find strength and wellness within their culture from connection to community, land, and language.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project was made possible by the contribution and collaboration of many people. First and foremost, I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to the five young adults that participated in this study. Thank you for sharing your experiences and your time with me. You are the reason that this project was even possible, and I am so grateful that I had the opportunity to connect with you, even if it was just virtually. I will be reminded of the stories that you shared with me every time I visit my home community.

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I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Gary Groot and co-supervisor Dr. Tracey Carr. Thank you for supporting me throughout both my undergraduate and graduate careers. You were great mentors and helped me get to where I am today. For this, I am forever grateful.

I would like to thank my committee member Dr. Elizabeth Cooper and committee chair Dr. Rachel Engler-Stringer. Thank you for your advice and guidance throughout this project. I would also like to thank Dr. Derek Jennings for his contribution to get this project launched through supportive feedback on using photovoice as a method for data gathering.

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DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Indigenous culture: There are many distinct cultures among First Nations Peoples. “Culture, like language, is spirit centred. Culture expresses language and the worldview it contains. Culture is manifested in the unique ways of living and being in the world. While culture is not static or homogenous across First Nations in Canada, there are common fundamental principles. Identity, relationships, purpose, and meaning are all anchored by culture’s unique way of seeing, relating, being, and thinking” (Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, 2015a).

First Nations: A distinct group of people, separate from Métis and Inuit in Canada. Includes both Status and non-Status Indians, as well as First Nations Peoples who live on or off reserve. There are over 630 First Nations communities in Canada (Government of Canada, 2021).

Indigenous Peoples: The term “Indigenous” is an umbrella term that includes the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples in Canada. Indigenous Peoples were the original descendants of Canada, which was previously known as a part of Turtle Island. Today, there are more than 1.8 million people in Canada that identify as Indigenous (Statistics Canada, 2021). Indigenous Peoples in Canada are the fastest growing population and the youngest population with nearly 50% under the age of 25 years (Statistics Canada, 2021). For this project, Indigenous and First Nations will be used interchangeably. However, the participants in this project are all First Nations Peoples from the LLRIB.

Mental wellness: “Mental wellness is a broader term that can be defined as a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, and is able to make a contribution to her or his own community” (Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, 2015b).
Chapter 1.0 Introduction and Overview

Introduction to the researcher

tanisi! Mikaela Vancoughnett nitasikason oma nitha nehithaw iskewew nitha mistahi sakahikan ohci nitha. I am a Woodland Cree woman and a member of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band (LLRIB) which is located on Treaty 6 territory in north central Saskatchewan. I spent the first five years of my life in La Ronge and since then I have primarily lived in Saskatoon. My father is Woodland Cree from the LLRIB, and he grew up in La Ronge Saskatchewan, while my mother is Métis and grew up in Beauval, Saskatchewan. Although I am a Status Indian, I grew up quite detached from my culture and community as I lived in an urban setting. Since beginning postsecondary education, I have learned more about why this is, as I have expanded my knowledge surrounding colonization in Canada and the impact that it continues to have intergenerationally. Although this research project has been conducted primarily from my home in Saskatoon due to the restraints of the COVID-19 social distancing guidelines, it has been a pleasure to connect remotely with members of my home community.

Before beginning graduate studies, I completed my B.A (Hons) in Psychology at the University of Saskatchewan. Throughout my undergraduate degree, I learned a lot about mental health and the struggles that many face with their mental health. Today, many people struggle with the stigma that is associated with mental illness. Although many struggle with mental health, resources to support people with these struggles are still lacking in our province. This is especially true for marginalized populations such as Indigenous Peoples in Saskatchewan who face unique struggles due to the lack of accessibility of culturally appropriate mental health services (Boksa et al., 2015). Throughout the first year of my graduate studies, I connected my previous knowledge surrounding mental health with what I was learning regarding the impact that colonization has had on health and well-being of Indigenous people in Canada. Currently, I am a second-year student in the College of Medicine at the University of Saskatchewan. I have
the unique privilege to combine my education from all three programs, as well as my personal connection to the community to help me navigate this project.

My goal for this research project was to explore the protective effect that culture has on mental health among members of the LLRIB. My intent was that by conducting a community-based project I could connect with community members and create safe spaces that allowed them to share their stories of their connection to culture. As this project was primarily completed during the COVID-19 pandemic, adaptations were made to adopt a primarily virtual nature of connecting. I look forward to furthering my education and carrying the findings of this project with me as I work towards becoming a physician in Saskatchewan. I intend to share my findings with my other members of the LLRIB community, my peers, and the wider academic audience. The experience of this project has directly contributed to my knowledge of the importance of treating patients based on their individual needs and practicing trauma informed care. My overall goal as a future physician and as a Cree woman is to promote the improvement of the health outcomes for Indigenous Peoples in Saskatchewan.

Indigenous health in Canada

To gain insights into promoting health and wellness among Indigenous Peoples in Canada, it is crucial to comprehend the existing health conditions and the underlying factors that impact health outcomes. Significant health disparities exist between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in Canada (King et al., 2009; FNIGC, 2012; National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2013). These health inequities include both the physical and mental health of Indigenous Peoples (Corrado & Cohen, 2003). Indigenous Peoples suffer from higher rates of diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, respiratory diseases, addiction, and suicide, among other illnesses (National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2013). Many of these inequities are a result of the intergenerational impact of colonizing processes such as the Indian Act, Indian Residential Schools (IRS), and the Sixties Scoop, which aimed to strip Indigenous Peoples of their ways of knowing. Colonization disconnected Indigenous Peoples from their land, their language, and their connection to community (Alfred, 2009). The lasting impact of colonization in Canada, along with determinants of poor health that exist among many First Nations communities have had detrimental impacts on the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Peoples. However, to talk about processes of colonization like they are a thing of the
past would be incorrect. Although the last IRS closed in 1996 (Union of Ontario Indians, 2013), and the Sixties Scoop “ended” in the 1980’s with the amendment to child welfare laws, colonial processes are ingrained into our societal institutions today and continue to impact Indigenous Peoples both directly and indirectly.

The loss of culture that resulted from forced assimilation and displacement from land continues to exert intergenerational effects on the well-being of Indigenous Peoples, both individually and collectively. Mental health in particular remains significantly impacted by the negative consequences of colonization. Indigenous Peoples frequently report high levels of psychological distress (FNIGC, 2012), and suicide and self-inflicted injuries have been reported to be the leading cause of death among Indigenous youth and adults in Canada (Health Canada, 2014). Statistics Canada further reveals that the suicide rate among First Nations people was three times higher than the suicide rate among non-Indigenous populations between 2011 and 2016 (Statistics Canada, 2019). Despite these alarming statistics, many communities continue to face barriers to receiving culturally appropriate mental health services (Boksa et al., 2015).

Traditionally, Western medicine adopts a primarily biomedical approach with emphasis on physical health which differs significantly from the holistic approach to health and wellness that is emphasized among Indigenous Peoples in Canada (Bhattacharjee & Maltby, 2017).

Understanding these differences is crucial to effectively support Indigenous communities as they strive to achieve mental wellness among the individual and community. Additionally, because of collaboration with Indigenous communities, researchers are beginning to realize that connection to language, community, land, and culture are essential factors that contribute to the health and wellness of Indigenous Peoples (National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2016).

### History of colonization

Before the settlement of Europeans in Canada, there were distinct geographical areas of the country which can be used to group First Nations in Canada. Though some beliefs were shared among these First Nations groups, there were distinct variations in the structure of homes, societal organizations, methods of transportation, clothing, and spiritual beliefs and teachings (Government of Canada, 2017). While differences existed between First Nations, for most groups, traditional healing embraced a holistic approach seeking to achieve harmony and balance of the spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical domains. Additionally, all First Nations groups
had traditional methods of healing with their own notion of health and wellness, including designated medicine men and women, and extensive knowledge in using plants as medicines (Turner, 2006). Despite Indigenous Peoples having an extensive knowledge of traditional methods of healing, when the Europeans settled on Turtle Island, they brought with them illnesses that Indigenous Peoples were not previously exposed to leading to widespread impacts on the health of Indigenous communities (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004). Along with the immediate impact that was felt on the physical health of Indigenous Peoples, settlement by Europeans led to a legacy of intergenerational colonial trauma that continues to impact Indigenous Peoples today (Duran & Duran, 1995).

Colonization in Canada began in the 16th century with the settlement of the first Europeans on the East coast (Paul, 2006; Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004; Government of Canada, 2017). Starting in 1820, the British began the process of colonization through various means. Treaties were signed between the Crown and Indigenous Peoples in Canada which led to a significant disconnect to the land that Indigenous Peoples had previously been the sole residents of (Government of Canada, 2017). The impact of the loss of land is widespread and contributes to the disconnect that is experienced today (Josewski et al., 2023). Following this, the government aimed to assimilate through policies such as the Indian Act, Residential Schools, and the Sixties Scoop.

In 1876, the Indian Act was created to govern Indian status and to implement a reserve system in which Indian bands were allocated reserve land that was formed from small subsets of the traditional territory of these First Nations (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2006). The initial goal of the Indian Act was to assimilate First Nations Peoples into Euro-Canadian society by stripping them of their connection to culture. To do this, laws were implemented that gave the government control over access to land, education, political structures, cultural practices and ceremonies, and freedom of First Nations Peoples (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2006). Today, as a result of these laws, a large portion of the First Nations population still reside on-reserve (Statistics Canada, 2021) and many struggle with food insecurity, inadequate housing, and a lack of access to clean drinking water. The Indian Act continues to govern who is eligible to have Indian “status” and subsequently federal government support that having a “status” card offers (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2006). Despite the colonial nature of this document, it remains significant for Indigenous Peoples as it outlines government responsibilities, which act to protect
the rights of Indigenous Peoples and provide benefits to things such as healthcare through the Non-Insured Health Benefits.

The implementation of assimilation policies by the government included the compulsory attendance of Indigenous children at government-sponsored schools known as Indian Residential Schools (IRS), administered by the Catholic church. This approach aimed to "kill the Indian" by, “disconnecting children physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually from their language, culture and their communities and also, but most painfully, from their own sense of identity as being Indian” (Chansonneuve, 2005, p. 44). While attending IRS, children were subject to mental, physical, and sexual abuse, which was detrimental to their well-being, and that of future generations (Corrado & Cohen, 2003; Union of Ontario Indians, 2013). The repercussions of this traumatic experience persist as many Indigenous people grapple with intergenerational colonial trauma stemming from their parents or grandparents’ attendance at residential schools. It is estimated that nearly 150,000 First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children attended IRS and approximately 6,000 children lost their lives while attending (Miller, 2012). Sadly, the number of Indigenous people who perished in IRS continues to grow, with the discovery of unmarked graves on former residential school sites throughout Saskatchewan.

The government’s efforts to assimilate Indigenous Peoples also included the implementation of the Sixties Scoop, a practice that occurred in the 1960’s. During this time, Indigenous children were removed from their homes and placed with primarily non-Indigenous adoptive families throughout Canada and the United States. The Sixties Scoop began following amendments to the Indian Act which gave the government control over the welfare of Indigenous children (Sinclair & Dainard, 2016). In Saskatchewan specifically, it is estimated that 3,400 Indigenous children were adopted out to primarily non-Indigenous families (Sinclair & Dainard, 2016). Today, there is still an overwhelming proportion of Indigenous children and youth in the foster care system. This ongoing situation continues to have a profound impact on future generations, as they are separated from their family and their culture, disconnected from the pathways of achieving mental wellness.

As a result of these processes, intergenerational colonial trauma is observed on the health and well-being of Indigenous Peoples in Canada. These processes have led to a multitude of challenges, including depression, anxiety, suicide, and substance abuse within Indigenous communities. Today, the determinants of health (DoH) further compound the legacy of
intergenerational colonial trauma and contribute to health disparities experienced by Indigenous Peoples (Czyzewski, 2011). Determinants of health include “the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age – conditions that together provide the freedom people need to live the lives they value” (World Health Organization, 2008, p.26). In the context of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, these determinants of health have a profound impact on their wellness, with particular significance for Indigenous youth who often encounter institutions that perpetuate colonial processes. These DoH directly and indirectly affect health outcomes through physical environment, and socioeconomic status (SES), infrastructure, cultural continuity, health care and education systems, social exclusion, self-determination, racism, and colonialism (Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2012; Greenwood et al., 2018). While all these factors play a role, it is important to recognize that distant DoH, such as colonialism, have an indirect, yet substantial impact on the health and well-being of Indigenous Peoples (Kim, 2019). Consequently, it becomes essential to acknowledge and address the historical trauma experienced by Indigenous Peoples and actively engage in decolonization efforts to provide meaningful support. By understanding and addressing the root causes of these health disparities, we can work towards creating a more equitable and inclusive environment that fosters the well-being of Indigenous communities in Canada.

Colonization and mental health

Historical trauma that results from colonization in Canada has profound and lasting effects on the mental health and wellbeing of Indigenous Peoples today (Gracey & King, 2009; Kirmayer et al., 2014). Specifically, the trauma experienced by Residential School Survivors (RSS) leads to an increased prevalence of physical and mental health concerns when compared to those who did not attend these schools (Bombay et al., 2014; Burnett et al., 2022). Higher levels of anxiety, depression, substance use, and suicide attempts are well-documented outcomes of this trauma among RSS (Bombay et al., 2014). Not only are these concerns seen among those who attended IRS, but the children and grandchildren of those who attended, who exhibit similar physical and mental health concerns despite not attending themselves (Brave Heart et al., 2011; Whitbeck et al., 2009). This phenomenon, known as intergenerational colonial trauma, signifies the enduring impact of chronic trauma that is passed down from one generation to the next.

Ground-breaking research by Maria Yellow Horse Braveheart (1998) shed light on the nature of
this historical trauma, demonstrating its cumulative effects on mental, physical, and emotional well-being. Studies reveal that the trauma experienced in residential schools has a cumulative effect on psychological distress, suicide ideation, and suicide attempts, with higher rates observed among those with two previous generations attending compared to those who had one previous generation attend residential schools (Bombay et al., 2014; McQuaid et al., 2017). It is now widely recognized that the trauma from residential schools directly contributes to the epidemic of psychological distress within First Nations communities (Gone, 2013).

Unfortunately, the province of Saskatchewan is not immune to the tragic effects of colonization. Approximately seven years ago, our province witnessed a heartbreaking series of suicides, with three young girls from the LLRIB taking their own lives in a mere four-day span (Laskowski, 2016). As a member of the LLRIB, this tragic event highlighted the need for a change with how culturally appropriate mental health services are provided. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident for this community, or for others in northern Saskatchewan. Just four years ago, our province witnessed another string of three suicides in just three weeks on the Makwa Sahgaihcian First Nation (Stober & Djuric, 2019). To address the high rates of suicide in First Nations communities in Saskatchewan, NDP MLA Doyle Vermette presented Bill 618 “Saskatchewan Strategy for Suicide Prevention Act” to the Legislative Assembly in 2016, and again in 2019, where the bill was rejected twice (Bramadat-Willcock, 2020). As public dissatisfaction with the government’s decisions grew, the proposed bill gained increased attention, ultimately resulting in its successful enactment in April 2021 (Pasiuk, 2021). Upon reflection, it has become clear that despite attempts to instigate change, there have not been significant strides in addressing the pervasive suicide crisis that plagues Indigenous communities (Abedi, 2019).

**Culture as Healing**

In the past, integrating cultural healing practices was not prioritized for promotion of mental wellness in Indigenous communities. However, there is an increasing recognition of the important role that culture can play in treatment and wellness promotion for individuals and communities (Kirmayer et al., 2011; Radu, 2018). Thus, there has been a push for the restoration of traditional Indigenous belief systems, with emphasis on a reconnection to culture, traditions, and language (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004). This restoration and reconnection are
driven by the understanding that culture and cultural ceremonies provide “individuals, families, and communities structures within which to acknowledge and mourn common wounds. Group healing, within ceremonies, reduces isolation; alleviates guilt, shame, and anger; and enhances feelings of self-worth” (Mitchell & Maracle, 2005, p.19).

The 2015 presentation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada outlines several Calls to Action, some of which discuss the need for improvement of mental health services in Indigenous communities. Specifically, Call to Action #21 highlights the need for funding for long-term Indigenous healing centers:

We call upon the federal government to provide sustainable funding for existing and new Aboriginal healing centres to address the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual harms caused by residential schools, and to ensure that the funding of healing centres in Nunavut and the Northwest Territories is a priority (p.3).

Additionally, Call to Action #22 emphasizes the need for a recognition of the value of Indigenous healing practices and for their implementation in the treatment of Indigenous patients:

We call upon those who can effect change within the Canadian health-care system to recognize the value of Aboriginal healing practices and use them in the treatment of Aboriginal patients in collaboration with Aboriginal healers and Elders where requested by Aboriginal patients (p.3)

In addition, the Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (Canada, 2019) outlined various Calls for Justice related to health and wellness. Some relevant recommendations related to health and wellness are 3.2 and 3.7, included below, respectively:

We call upon all governments to provide adequate, stable, equitable, and ongoing funding for Indigenous-centered and community-based health and wellness services that are accessible and culturally appropriate, and meet the health and wellness needs of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people. The lack of health and wellness services within Indigenous communities continues to force Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people to relocate in order to access care. Governments must ensure that health and wellness services are available and accessible within Indigenous communities and wherever Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people reside (p. 180).

We call upon all governments to provide continual and accessible healing programs and support for all children of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people and their family members. Specifically, we call for the permanent establishment of a fund akin to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation and related funding. These funds and their administration must be independent from government and must be
distinctions-based. There must be accessible and equitable allocation of specific monies within the fund for Inuit, Métis, and First Nations Peoples (p. 181).

This document also outlines the role of providers of health and wellness services, specifically highlighting the importance of Indigenous-led initiatives for these services (Canada, 2019). These include Calls 7.1, 7.3, and 7.4, listed below, respectively:

We call upon all governments and health service providers to recognize that Indigenous Peoples – First Nations, Inuit, and Métis, including 2SLGBTQQIA people – are the experts in caring for and healing themselves, and that health and wellness services are most effective when they are designed and delivered by the Indigenous Peoples they are supposed to serve, in a manner consistent with and grounded in the practices, world views, cultures, languages, and values of the diverse Inuit, Métis, and First Nations communities they serve (p.188).

We call upon all governments and health service providers to support Indigenous-led prevention initiatives in the areas of health and community awareness, including, but not limited to programming (p.188):

- for Indigenous men and boys
- related to suicide prevention strategies for youth and adults
- related to sexual trafficking awareness and no-barrier exiting
- specific to safe and healthy relationships
- specific to mental health awareness
- related to 2SLGBTQQIA issues and sex positivity

We call upon all governments and health service providers to provide necessary resources, including funding, to support the revitalization of Indigenous health, wellness, and child and Elder care practices. For healing, this includes teachings that are land based and about harvesting and the use of Indigenous medicines for both ceremony and health issues. This may also include: matriarchal teachings on midwifery and postnatal care for both woman and child; early childhood health care; palliative care; Elder care and care homes to keep Elders in their home communities as valued Knowledge Keepers; and other measures. Specific programs may include but are not limited to correctional facilities, healing centres, hospitals, and rehabilitation centres (p.189).

Despite the formal recognition of the value of Indigenous health practices following the release of the final report, the implementation of Indigenous healing practices within the healthcare system remains limited (Delivering on Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action, 2019). It is evident that while efforts are underway to enhance cultural inclusiveness in healthcare, there is still a considerable journey ahead for both our country and our province (Redvers, et al., 2019). As a researcher, it is evident that this project will contribute to the
knowledge required to support efforts to enhance cultural inclusiveness required to achieve mental wellness.

**Purpose of the Study and Objectives**

The purpose of this community-based study was to engage with young adults from the LLRIB to gain an understanding of their experience with connecting to culture and the influence it has on their mental wellness. Notably, there is a significant research gap in exploring the experiences of young adults connecting to culture in Saskatchewan. Furthermore, understanding this through the lens of Indigenous youth and young adults themselves is desperately needed as past research primarily focused on Euro-centric methodology with emphasis on understanding the factors that contribute to struggles with mental wellness among Indigenous Peoples rather than the ways that they find strength in their everyday lives. Consequently, this project seeks to address this imbalance by placing emphasis on identifying and understanding the ways in which Indigenous youth and young adults find strength, resilience, and empowerment through their cultural connections.

**Objectives**

1. To explore the role that culture has in promoting mental wellness for First Nations individuals from the Lac La Ronge Indian Band.
2. To empower young adults from the Lac La Ronge Indian Band to share their stories of connecting to culture and the impact that this has on their lives.

**Significance of the Project**

Engaging in this project will help better understand experiences of reconnecting to culture and the impact it has on the mental wellness of Indigenous youth and young adults in Saskatchewan. By utilizing research methods that prioritize their agency and allow them to authentically represent their own strengths and challenges, factors contributing to their mental wellness can be revealed. For this project, photovoice enabled the participants to visually express and convey their connection to culture within their community, as well as articulate the profound impact this connection has on their mental well-being. Gaining a better understanding is crucial to enhance the provision of mental health services and support to Indigenous communities in Saskatchewan. Additionally, this project will give a voice to youth or young adults, empowering them to showcase their cultural knowledge and reflect on the journey of obtaining this
knowledge. By amplifying their voices, this project will not only benefit those within the community, but also raise awareness among a wider audience about the strengths present within Indigenous communities and culture, as conveyed by Indigenous voices themselves. Through this project, the objective is to foster a deeper appreciation for Indigenous perspectives, promote cultural resilience, and contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding the importance of cultural reconnection and its profound impact on mental wellness.

Overview of the Thesis

The first chapter introduces the researcher and an overview of various key topics. First, outlining the current state of health of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, followed by a brief exploration of pre contact history, subsequent impacts of colonization, and determinants of health impacting Indigenous communities today. Relevant aspects of culture that are associated with mental wellness set the stage for highlighting the project’s purpose, objectives, and significance. Moving on to Chapter 2, the results of a literature review will delve into the existing research on different aspects of Indigenous culture and the connections to mental wellness among Indigenous Peoples. Chapter 3 will focus on the methodology employed in this project. It will provide detailed information about the project location, the involvement of the Community Advisory Committee, the process of recruitment and target population, data gathering techniques, methods of data analysis, and ethical considerations, including adherence to the OCAP principles. In Chapter 4, the findings of the project will be presented, showcasing the narratives that have emerged from the collected data, arranged into their relevant categories. Chapter 5 will present a comprehensive discussion that links the project results to the existing literature. This section will also include reflections on the project, highlighting its strengths and limitations, exploring further implications, and will end with a conclusive summary.
CHAPTER 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

“Mental wellness is supported by culture, language, Elders, families, and creation, and is necessary for healthy individual, community, and family life.”

– First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework

Community, belonging, and a sense of purpose are recognized as crucial factors that contribute to an individual's well-being. (Palis et al., 2020). However, these fundamentals can be disrupted, which often results in distress at the level of the individual and the community (Adler et al., 2016). For Indigenous Peoples in Canada, colonization has led to a disruption by disconnecting Indigenous Peoples from culture, land, and community. Thus, distress is seen at both the individual and community levels, as Indigenous Peoples suffer from greater health disparities when compared to the non-Indigenous population (Gracey & King, 2009). As a result of colonization and determinants of health, many Indigenous Peoples suffer from feelings of hopelessness, marginalization, and isolation, and the lasting historical trauma is directly and indirectly related to the high rates of suicide within these communities today (Elias et al., 2012).

Despite the negative long-term effects of colonization, Indigenous Peoples in Canada have proven to be resilient. Research shows that strengthening ones’ cultural identity aids in overcoming adversity and betters the health of the individual and the community (Kirmayer et al., 2011). In addition, an extensive systematic literature review found more than 40 protective factors that promote mental wellness in Indigenous youth, some of which include: cultural continuity, sense of belonging and purpose, and high self-efficacy (Macdonald et al., 2013). Cultural continuity among Indigenous Peoples represents being submerged in traditional language, healings, and maintaining a strong overall sense of cultural identity. Hallett, Chandler, and Lalonde (2007) evaluated the relationship between community-level knowledge of traditional Indigenous language and youth suicides. To do this, the researchers collected data from Statistics Canada regarding the number of Indigenous people who had a conversational knowledge of a traditional Indigenous language in British Columbia (BC) and incidence rates of suicide within these communities. They were able to demonstrate that communities in BC with a greater conversational knowledge of traditional Indigenous languages were associated with lower rates of youth suicides. Another study by Wolsko and colleagues (2007) used a self-administered
questionnaire to examine the relationship between cultural identity and psychosocial stress, psychological well-being, and coping in an Indigenous Alaskan community. The researchers collected data from 488 Yup’ik participants who completed a health and wellness survey. The results of this survey illustrated that participants who identified more with their traditional way of life as opposed to the dominant culture reported being happier and having healthier coping mechanisms that aid in resiliency. Wexler (2014) conducted interviews and focus groups with 24 participants from three generations, which included Elders, adults, and youth, in an Indigenous Alaskan community. The researchers presented narratives that were formed based on the participants’ experiences with using strength gained from notions of culture as a form of resiliency against challenges they have faced in their past and ones they continue to face in the present. Overall, the narratives highlight the important roles that strengthening one’s connection to culture and cultural identity have in providing protective factors against historical trauma. Schill and colleagues (2019) made use of sharing circles followed by semi-structured interviews with seven urban Indigenous Elders to elicit discussion regarding their experiences with social determinants of mental wellness. Elders highlighted the important nature of holistic wellness in maintaining a balance between the mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional aspects, which is improved by connection to culture and language. They also shared the importance of improving proximal determinants of health, such as the sense of belonging to their community and their family and the role this plays in creating a strong sense of cultural identity.

Research shows that the sweat lodge ceremony, which is a traditional ceremony practiced by First Nations people in Canada, has the potential to promote mental wellness (Marsh et al., 2018). Researchers evaluated mental health and well-being outcomes as a result of incorporating traditional sweat lodge ceremonies into treatment. They recruited 24 participants that self-identified as Indigenous and as struggling with intergenerational trauma to partake in sharing circles and semi-structured interviews that elicited discussion surrounding their experiences with sweat lodge ceremonies. The participants stated the immense spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical benefits of the sweat lodge ceremonies. In addition, the participants also spoke about the deeper connection that they felt with themselves and with others that they attribute to the sweat lodge ceremonies. Further, Schiff and Moore (2006) evaluated the impacts of sweat lodge ceremonies on psychological and physical well-being using the SF-36 and the Heroic Myth Index, which they administered before and after the sweat lodge ceremony to a total of 39
participants. The results of this study suggest several scales of well-being that are positively impacted as a result of partaking in the sweat lodge ceremony. In addition, Schiff and Pelech (2007) found an improved sense of connection to others and overall sense of belonging. Hadjipavlou and colleagues (2018) found substantial mental health benefits as a result of the integration of an elder program in which Indigenous patients were provided access and guidance to cultural teachings, land-based ceremonies, and one-on-one visits within a primary care clinic. Participants reported experiencing healing after prolonged periods of seeking and desperation, strengthening cultural identity and belonging, developing trust and opening up, coping with losses, and engaging in ceremony and spiritual dimensions of care as a resource for hope. Although research surrounding the efficacy of cultural methods of healing is beginning to increase, there remains a gap in research that is specific to Saskatchewan.

**First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework**

*Mental wellness is a balance of the mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional. This balance is enriched as individuals have:*  
**PURPOSE** in their daily lives whether it is through education, employment, care-giving activities, or cultural ways of being and doing;  
**HOPE** for their future and those of their families that is grounded in a sense of identity, unique Indigenous values, and having a belief in spirit;  
**BELONGING** and connectedness within their families, to community, and to culture;  
and finally a sense of **MEANING** and an understanding of how their lives and those of their families and communities are part of creation and a rich history.

– Thunderbird Partnership Foundation

The First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum (FNMWC) Framework (Image 2.1) was created in 2015 by the Assembly of First Nations with the Thunderbird Partnership Foundation and Health Canada. It is a framework that was developed through the collaborative efforts of Indigenous Peoples from different communities across Canada. The purpose of this framework is to guide the delivery and implementation of appropriate mental health services that promote or enhance wellness among First Nations in Canada.

In the middle of the FNMWC are the words hope, belonging, meaning, and purpose which are the goals or things needed to be fulfilled to achieve mental wellness. Based on these goals, we can characterize the effectiveness or appropriateness of mental health services by the extent at which they improve these core principles. As we move towards the outer circle, the next ring includes the words kinship, community, clan, and Elders. This ring represents those groups
and people who are considered the principal facilitators of the core principles of hope, belonging, meaning, and purpose. Community includes those that you live near or that you share common defining characteristics with. The term Elder is an individual that is highly respected and knowledgeable in an Indigenous community. Kinship includes those that are a part of one’s extended family and clan including the important relationship between Indigenous Peoples and all of creation. Including this ring highlights the important role that relationships have on facilitating mental wellness of the individual. Shifting to the next ring, which is known as the population ring, it serves as a reminder of the significance of prioritizing wellness across all groups, from pre-birth to post-death stages. This highlights the significance of not only enhancing wellness before birth, but also recognizing the impact of maintaining connection to our ancestors. In the past, mental health initiatives have focused on improving mental wellness of adults specifically. However, due to the interconnectedness within First Nations communities, expanding these initiatives to incorporate all populations is essential and leads to improvement in wellness of the entire community. The next layer highlights current struggles among First Nation individuals such as trauma, chronic disease, addictions, and mental health struggles with the adjacent ring outlining the need to address these struggles with implementation of continuum of care, trauma informed care, need for improvement in SDOH, need for overall wellness in all aspects of life.

Implementation of this framework in all its aspects is necessary for the improvement of mental wellness among First Nations peoples in Canada. Therefore, addressing these issues that exist within Indigenous populations on an individual basis alone would not be sufficient to attain wellness. To truly achieve wellness among Indigenous Peoples, it is crucial to promote positive outcomes that extend beyond the individual and encompass the well-being of the family and community. This includes achieving these fundamental elements such as language, culture, and identity.
Image 2.1: First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework
(Adapted from: Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, 2015b)
CHAPTER 3.0 METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The aim of this project was to gain an understanding of how Indigenous youth and young adults from the LLRIB achieve mental wellness through interactions with culture. In the previous chapter, a brief overview was provided to highlight the existing knowledge on the connection between culture and mental wellness among Indigenous Peoples. This section will now explain the methods used and the rationale behind these methods. Following this, the project location, and other pertinent details, such as the recruitment process and methods of data gathering will be presented. This section will be concluded with a discussion about ethical considerations for research and more specifically, for research conducted in collaboration with Indigenous communities.

Decolonizing Methodologies

The history surrounding research conducted with Indigenous Peoples in Canada has not always been positive. Much like the history of colonization in Canada, past research has been predominantly carried out by non-Indigenous researchers without informed consent and active involvement from the Indigenous communities (Absolon, 2011; CIHR, 2014; Canadian Institutes of Health Research [CIHR], Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada & Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2018). Historically, researchers have devalued traditional Indigenous knowledge, placing it as inferior to Euro-centric evidence-based knowledge, oftentimes misrepresenting or misinterpreting knowledge (Coburn, 2013; Wilson, 2008). The history of research with Indigenous Peoples has been described as,

Western knowledge, with its flagship of research, has often advanced into Indigenous Peoples’ communities with little regard for the notions of Indigenous worldviews and self-determination in human development. As a result, the history of Westernization in virtually all locations of the globe reads like a script of relentless disruption and dispossession of Indigenous Peoples with the resulting common pattern of cultural and psychological discontinuity for many in the Indigenous community. (Ermine et al., 2004, p. 9)

Furthermore, past research has overlooked the crucial process of relationship building, resulting in the appropriation of Indigenous knowledge (Wilson, 2001). Thus, establishing meaningful relationships and situating oneself in the research are critical aspects of conducting ethical research with Indigenous Peoples (Lavallée, 2009). As researchers, it is imperative to
learn from past mistakes and actively engage in decolonization through research conducted in collaboration with Indigenous communities. This entails developing and nurturing an understanding and appreciation of Indigenous ways of knowing, recognizing their knowledge as equally valid and credible alongside Euro-centric evidence-based knowledge. Research with Indigenous communities should be based on collaboration, honouring knowledge rather than appropriating it. There must be an understanding of the differences between Euro-centric and Indigenous belief systems with reciprocal respect. In recent years, efforts have been made to establish guidelines for conducting research with Indigenous Peoples in Canada (Canadian Institutes of Health Research [CIHR], Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada & Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2018). These guidelines highlight the importance of understanding the inherent right that Indigenous Peoples must be involved and in control of research that pertains to their culture. One way to honour these guidelines is by actively engaging community members in the research project through participation in all stages of the research project (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2008, p. 19).

Creating a sense of reciprocal respect that is necessary for research projects done in collaboration with Indigenous Peoples requires knowledge and understanding of their belief systems and ways of knowing. This allows for research to be conducted from an Indigenous paradigm, which differs significantly from the typical paradigms used in Euro-centric research systems. Dominant post-positivist paradigms in Euro-centric research are based on the idea that there is one truth and that as researchers, it is our job to understand and explore this one reality, while the Indigenous paradigm says that there are multiple truths (Wilson, 2008, p. 36-37).

Indigenous epistemology considers the complex interplay of all aspects of an individual and the interconnectedness with everything in the universe (Lavallée, 2009). Indigenous paradigms consider knowledge as relational,

Knowledge is shared with all of creation. It is not just interpersonal relationships, not just with the research subjects I may be working with, but it is a relationship with all of creation. It is with the cosmos, it is with the animals, with the plants, with the earth that we share this knowledge. (Wilson, 2001, p. 176-177)

Choosing to use research methods that reflect this value of knowledge as relational is important. As such, storytelling, or narrative based methods of gathering data fit into the Indigenous epistemology because of the unique relationship formed between researcher and
storyteller during the process (Wilson, 2001). In addition, these methods offer community members the chance to display their own strengths. Adopting a strength-based approach places the focus on successful strategies for mental health intervention in communities (Goodkind et al., 2012; Kirmayer et al., 2011; Wexler et al., 2009). Past research methods have primarily adopted a deficit-based approach where problems present within Indigenous communities are the subject of interest. This can be harmful for these communities, as it places focus on struggles and fails to highlight the strengths that are present within these communities. Placing focus on strengths is how we can promote positive change within communities.

Research done in collaboration with Indigenous Peoples and communities is an emerging field that must respect Indigenous ways of knowing, traditions, and employ Indigenous research paradigms. Keeping these principles of research with Indigenous communities in mind, this project was guided by an Indigenous framework as illustrated by Kovach (2009). As guided by this framework, measures were taken to conduct respectful research with Indigenous Peoples including respecting cultural protocols throughout, gathering and interpreting knowledge as guided by Indigenous paradigms, and giving back to the Indigenous community (Kovach, 2009). To ensure that this project was completed in the most appropriate way, I received guidance from community members that were present on my community advisory committee. Based on the understanding that research done in collaboration with Indigenous communities must understand and respect Indigenous methodology, I carefully chose a methodology that would align with this. Thus, this project adopted narrative inquiry as it has been stated to, “most closely resembles Aboriginal ways…in relation to Elders and their stories” (Roberts, 2005, p. 29) by Indigenous researchers.

**Narrative Inquiry**

Built upon the mentioned decolonizing research approach, this project embraced narrative inquiry as a methodology. The choice of narrative inquiry was informed by its alignment with Indigenous epistemology and with the Plains Cree worldview, as well as with the overall aim for this project which is understanding lived experiences of youth and young adults from the LLRIB (Clandinin & Caine, 2013; Kovach, 2009). Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research methodology that focuses on understanding perceptions and lived experiences primarily through the collection and analysis of stories or narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).
Narrative inquiry has been described as, “stories lived and told…a way of understanding experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). To be more specific, this project adopted a visual-based narrative inquiry. Using photography as a means to elicit discussion is discussed by researchers such as Riessman (2013) who states, “photographers and other visual artists sequence images in a way that invite narrative inquiry” (p. 258). As a result of this methodology, an understanding of the connection between events and their implication on the lives of individuals are discovered. However, it is important to note that this methodology does not yield information about the causality of these connections, and that narratives are not necessarily generalizable to the wider community, or in this case to the wider population of Indigenous Peoples in Canada (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Nevertheless, the narratives that were created within discussions for this project provided an understanding of the true experiences of connecting to culture for a handful of individuals from the LLRIB.

It is said that “a story is one’s identity, a story created, told, revised, and retold through life” (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 7). Narrative inquiry allowed the exploration of experiences of participants through participant stories, which offered a rich description of their experiences and the meanings associated with them (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2007). Narrative inquiry allowed participants to drive discussion through their personal engagement in active shaping of experience and meaning. Narrative inquiry aligns with Indigenous paradigms that acknowledge the existence of multiple truths, allowing us to incorporate elements of photovoice and storytelling to convey participant realities or truths about past experiences (Riessman, 2008). Given the negative history of research with Indigenous Peoples, narrative inquiry allowed for participants to share these experiences from their own perspective and reflection, while the research team simply illuminated the voices of participants, intertwining their stories when similarities were present. This approach aimed to honor and amplify Indigenous voices, fostering a collaborative and respectful research process.

Methods

In this thesis, I am employing photovoice and storytelling within the context of Community-Based Participatory Research. This section outlines these research methods, including their relevance to this project specifically.
Photovoice

Photovoice is a visual research method that was developed by Wang and Burris (1997) where participants capture photographs that represent their experiences with strengths and issues of concern within their community. These photos provide an opportunity for discussion surrounding important topics that are identified from the perspective of community members themselves. A key theoretical underpinning of this method is empowerment education. The method of photovoice has three primary goals, as identified by Wang and Burris (1997): 1) to empower individuals to capture and represent their community’s strengths and concerns from their own perspectives; 2) to promote conversations and shared knowledge about these community strengths and concerns through discussion of photographs; and 3) to elicit action and reach policy makers, community members, and society about community experiences of health.

Using photovoice as a research method for this project is appropriate because it empowers Indigenous Peoples whose voices have been silenced for far too long. Photovoice as a research method is important as it, “puts cameras in the hands of people who have been left out of policy decision-making, or denied access to and participation in matters that concern their daily lives” (Luttrell, 2010, p. 226). Past researchers have successfully implemented photovoice projects with Indigenous communities to explore a wide variety of community health topics (Jennings & Lowe, 2013; Mchugh et al., 2013; Poudrier & Mac-Lean, 2009). Shifting control to the participants allows for them to tell their story the way that they want to (Castlenden et al., 2008). For this project specifically, photovoice allowed participants to show the richness of their culture. Fortunately for this project, the photovoice methodology proved to be adaptable, allowing for modifications based on participant needs and feedback. This research followed the general outline for photovoice that Wang and Burris (1997) have developed, in cooperation with narrative inquiry through one-on-one discussions.

Storytelling

The act of storytelling holds sacred significance within First Nations culture serving as a means for Indigenous Peoples to share experiences, transfer knowledge and promote community change (McIvor, 2010; Kovach, 2009). For generations, storytelling has been a vital tradition through which Indigenous Peoples pass down knowledge (Iseke, 2013). In certain academic circles, there is growing acknowledgement of the value and credibility of Indigenous storytelling
as a means of transmitting knowledge. Although this recognition has been relatively recent in Western institutions, Indigenous storytelling allows individuals to reclaim their narratives and reject external definitions imposed upon them (Sium & Ritskes, 2013). It is crucial to recognize that storytelling plays a vital role in decolonization as storytellers are offered the opportunity to deconstruct colonial ways of knowing and restore alternative or Indigenous ways of knowing (Sium & Ritskes, 2013). Healing is an inherent component of storytelling, empowering Indigenous Peoples with ownership and control over their stories' sharing and audience. For this project, using discussions with prompts as opposed to interviews with closed or open-ended questions allowed the participant to guide the discussion through storytelling. Given the profound value placed on storytelling in Indigenous cultures, it takes a great deal of trust and connection between the storyteller and listener. However, with this trust there comes stories rich with information and knowledge that empower the storyteller as well as future generations.

Community-Based Participatory Research

For this qualitative research project, I used a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach which allowed me to collaborate with the community members, an Elder, and a Chief and Council representative throughout various stages of this research. CBPR is deemed suitable for conducting research in collaboration with Indigenous Peoples, as it aligns well with Indigenous research approaches (Castleden, 2008; FNIGC, 2014). This approach emphasizes the aspect of collaboration between researchers and community members, giving control to the community to identify needs and how to meet them (Holkup et al., 2004). In CBPR, meetings are arranged prior to the onset of research to develop collaborative partnerships between community members and the research team. Subsequent meetings are arranged as the research progresses ensuring that both researchers and community members are satisfied with past and future project plans. Emphasis is placed on reciprocity, thus, following completion of the project, findings are shared with all partners of the research team (Israel et al., 1998).

I formed a Community Advisory Committee that comprised four members from the LLRIB. This committee included 1) councillor Linda Charles, 2) Elder John Halkett, 3) community member Shane Bird, and 4) community member Carol Charles. Three meetings were scheduled with the Community Advisory Committee over the course of this research project. The first meeting occurred following research approval from Chief and Council, and before the onset
of the project. The second meeting was arranged following the completion of data gathering, allowing for review of findings and input from the Community Advisory Committee, and the final meeting was arranged following the completion of the research project to discuss steps for dissemination of findings. The purpose of these meetings was to ensure that we conducted research that was relevant to the community in the most appropriate way. More specifically, these meetings gave us the opportunity to have discussions surrounding appropriate approaches to recruitment, methods of data collection, data analysis, knowledge translation, etc. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these meetings took place virtually in accordance with public health orders put in place by the Government of Saskatchewan.

**Project Setting**

This project worked in partnership with the LLRIB which is in northern Saskatchewan, approximately 380 km north of Saskatoon. This location was chosen based on the direct connection between the student researcher and the LLRIB. As previously discussed, the importance of relationship building throughout the research process is well understood (Kovach, 2009). The establishment of a connection between the researcher and the LLRIB facilitated a seamless transition towards building trust between the researcher and participants.

The LLRIB is located on Treaty 6 territory and is the largest First Nation in Saskatchewan, with over 11,000 members (Lac La Ronge Indian Band Chief & Council, n.d). Members of the LLRIB are Woodland Cree. The LLRIB is comprised of six communities (see Image 3.1), which include: Little Red River (paskwāw-askihk), Morin Lake (Hall Lake – Sikachu & Clam, mōsosākahikanisīsihk), La Ronge/Kitsaki (mistahisākahikanihk), Sucker River (namīpithsīpihk), Stanley Mission (āmacīwispimowinihk), and Grandmother’s Bay (kohkominānihk). Below is an image of the communities that comprise the LLRIB (Image 3.1).
Project Participants

Purposive sampling was initially used to choose participants, followed by a subsequent ‘snowball strategy’ (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 140). Participants were identified by Chief Tammy Cook-Searson, Shane Bird, Devin Bernatchez, and Sally Roberts through their engagement with young adult development within the community. The recruitment process involved community members reaching out to potential participants, introducing them to the research project, and gauging their interest in participating. If the potential participants expressed interest, their contact information was passed on to the student researcher, who then initiated phone contact to discuss the project further. All relevant documents, such as a project summary and consent form (See Appendix A), were shared with the participants in advance, allowing them to review the materials and prepare any questions they may have had. During the phone conversation, the student researcher provided a detailed explanation of the project, addressing any questions raised.
by the participants. After the meeting concluded and oral consent was obtained, the participants were free to begin Part 1 of the data gathering process. The scheduling of Part 2 of data gathering was individually arranged with each participant, taking into consideration their availability and the start date of Part 1.

Data Gathering

Part 1: Capturing Images

Photovoice was used as a research method to explore how connection to culture can promote mental wellness among young adults living on the LLRIB. To ensure transparency and informed participation, all potential participants were provided with a comprehensive Participant Photovoice Information Sheet (See Appendix B). This document included prompts for capturing photographs, ethical guidelines for photography, instructions for photo submission, and contact information for any questions. During individual phone conversations with potential participants, I offered them an opportunity to seek clarifications on the document and inquire about their roles and responsibilities for the project before providing consent. I reiterated the key points outlined in the document and discussed the specific experiences I encouraged participants to represent through their photographs. All participants elected to use their personal cellphones to capture photographs. Participants were granted the freedom to take as many photographs as they desired, depicting their encounters with cultural connection and its impact on their mental wellness. To accommodate their preferences, participants submitted their photographs to me via text message, Facebook, or email, based on their convenience.

During the data gathering phase, an aspect that was questioned and underwent modification was what photographs participants were able to include. After careful consideration, it was decided that participants could incorporate photographs that they had taken prior to the commencement of this research project if they considered them to be relevant to the purpose of the project. The decision to allow for inclusion of photographs captured before the beginning of the research project was accepted for several reasons. First, considering the project's relatively short timeline spanning the summer season, participants were given a two-week window to capture photographs (with some granted extensions due to exceptional circumstances such as illness). While this timeframe sufficed for some, others faced scheduling constraints that limited their ability to represent all they had intended to. Second, given that this
project occurred over the course of the summer, the previous guidelines would have limited the photographs to certain cultural ceremonies or events that happen in the summer months. Expanding the inclusion criteria to accommodate for past photos allowed participants to represent experiences throughout all four seasons and empowered their narratives to encompass significant cultural moments in their lives, regardless of when they occurred. Last, as I will touch on later in the discussion section, adapting to the needs of the participants and collaborating community is essential. Several participants asked if they would be able to include photographs from the past. Denying this request would be a form of controlling what they share, and it would have limited their narratives. The stories of Indigenous Peoples have been silenced for too long in research and in the public scope. Granting participants control over the experiences they share and how they represent them is merely a small step towards decolonization, yet a profoundly significant one.

**Part 2: One-on-one Discussions**

Following the general outline that is provided by Wang and Burris (1997), the next step involved utilizing group discussion to generate narratives that build upon the images that the participants have photographed in the initial data gathering phase. However, a modification was made during the project to allow for one-on-one discussions between the participant and the researcher to occur instead. Once the first part of data gathering was completed and the participant felt that they had sufficient time to capture or collect photographs that represent their experience with connecting to culture and the impact that it has on their mental wellness, a meeting was arranged at their convenience. Before the recording of the session began, participants were offered the opportunity to ask any questions about the process. I took a moment at the beginning of the call to remind the participant that there would be prompts (See Appendix C) that would be used to guide discussion if necessary. Additionally, I reminded the participants of some important points regarding consent, emphasizing the right they had to stop the interview at any point, the option to pause the interview and resume later, the confidentiality of their responses, and the freedom to refrain from discussing anything that they were not comfortable with. Furthermore, I made it a point to emphasize to participants that there are no right or wrong answers because this is their story that they are telling, so it is their truth. During the one-on-one discussion, participants were able to go through the photographs that they captured one by one to
tell their stories of each photograph. Each discussion was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by me.

**Data Analysis**

For this project, I used narrative analysis to analyze the stories, accompanying the photographs shared by participants. Though there are several subtypes of narrative analysis, this project adopted a narrative thematic analysis which allowed for the identification of patterns or themes among participant stories as arranged in relation to the pre-existing Mental Wellness Continuum framework. Narrative thematic analysis as a subtype of narrative analysis places emphasis on what is said or told rather than how the story was shared (Riessman, 2005). For this project, participant stories were evaluated alongside relevant photographs that were captured by participants. By adopting this method of analysis, this project allowed for the observation and interpretation of stories that participants shared to understand their experience with connecting to culture. One important point of consideration that Riessman (2008) points out when using narrative analysis is,

> By our interviewing and transcription practices, we play a major part in constituting the narrative data that we then analyze. Through our presence, and by listening and questioning in particular ways, we critically shape the stories participants choose to tell. (p. 50)

This is important to recognize as this project attempted to employ a method that would give control to the participants within the project, but despite efforts, stories continue to be shaped through the research process to some extent.

Data gathering resulted in the collection of participant stories derived from discussion surrounding their photovoice images. Each participant discussion was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by myself. Relevant photographs were embedded into the transcripts when they were brought up by each participant, linking them with their corresponding narratives. To become well familiarised with the data, I read the transcripts multiple times. I began making myself familiar with each participant narrative immediately following completion of the discussion. With each subsequent review, notes were made as I arranged narratives participants shared both in relation to other participants, and in their relation to the descriptions of the four categories within the Mental Wellness Continuum framework. Following this, participant
narratives were arranged into four categories with the use of direct quotes and images associated with the narratives. To ensure readability and clarity for the reader, some modifications were made to direct quotes when deemed necessary (Reissman, 2008). Confidentiality and privacy were prioritized, and any personal identifiers or sensitive information was removed. To protect the identity of participants, they were assigned pseudonyms. In cases where certain information within the quotes was deemed irrelevant to the overall story, it was replaced by ellipses (...) to maintain focus on essential content. Square brackets ([ ]) were occasionally used to insert additional words that would provide context to the quote. Furthermore, in instances where quotes were disjointed due to interruptions or responses from the student researcher, extended ellipses (…….) were used to signify a continuation of the participant’s story or thought. Once the analysis was complete, participants were sent copies of the categories, including the quotes that were used from their stories, and the corresponding images included. This allowed participants the opportunity to review the narrative themes, suggest adjustments, and give their approval to the findings. Participants were given two weeks to review the documents and respond.

**Knowledge Translation**

A key aspect of photovoice involves the policy change and action that comes after photographs are taken and discussions have occurred. Knowledge translation, as defined in the Indigenous context involves, “sharing what we know about living a good life” (Estey et al., 2009, p.3). While this project did not specifically target policy change, the goal was to create more awareness surrounding the positive impact that connecting to culture and community has on the mental wellness of First Nations youth and young adults. To do this, sharing the information that was gathered and analyzed through this project with the community in a meaningful way is critical. This approach aligns with the collaborative and relational nature of research conducted with Indigenous Peoples, as discussed earlier, and emphasizes the notion of shared ownership (Tachine et al., 2016). To determine how best to share the information that was gathered in this project, I sought input from participants and community members on the desired audience and methods of sharing these stories. Aspects of knowledge translation will be ongoing as key members of the collaborative team will receive final presentations on this project upon completion, most notably Chief and Council for the LLRIB. Knowledge translation thus far has taken the form of a poster presentation at one academic research day. I will submit this project to
Indigenous health and/or qualitative research journals as my research team, myself, and the LLRIB community see fit (e.g., International Journal of Indigenous Health, AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples, etc).

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BEH ID 2697) prior to onset of the project. Additionally, approval was obtained from the LLRIB Chief and Council prior to onset of the project (See Appendix D) and an agreement was signed between principal investigator and Chief and Council (See Appendix E). This research adhered to the expectations outlined in Chapter 9: Research Involving the First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples of Canada, which is located in the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS): Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (Canadian Institutes of Health Research [CIHR], Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada & Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2018). Building relationships and situating oneself in the research are important aspects of conducting ethical research with Indigenous Peoples (Lavallée, 2009). As an Indigenous researcher, and being from the same community as participants, this connection offered an opportunity to build unique relationships between student researcher and participants. However, as this project was primarily completed during the COVID-19 pandemic, aspects of relationship building were compromised as guidelines set out by the Government of Saskatchewan restricted methods of connecting. Thus, this project adopted a primarily virtual nature of connecting.

**OCAP Principles**

This Project has been informed by principles within Chapter 9 of the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS) 2 on conducting ethical research involving First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples of Canada (CIHR et al., 2014; Canadian Institutes of Health Research [CIHR], Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada & Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2018). The OCAP principles stand for Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession. These principles serve as guidelines to creating respectful relationships between researchers and data and information collected within First Nations communities. Most importantly, the OCAP principles state that First Nations have control over the processes of data
gathering including how the information gathered is stored, interpreted, used, and shared (FNIGC, 2014).

This project will exemplify principles outlined by OCAP which include, but are not limited to the following: i) at all times the LLRIB will maintain ownership of all research data collected and all related research outputs and publications, ii) the LLRIB must approve any research projects involving their community members, iii) any other use or disclosure of the community members data beyond this project is strictly prohibited, iv) the LLRIB may have access to any aggregated data and reports produced by the research projects that involved their community members, and v) the LLRIB maintains ownership of all research data.

For this research project, the LLRIB and the researchers have jointly agreed to store the research data on Jade Drive, DATASTORE, and/or in the locked office of Dr. Gary Groot at the University of Saskatchewan for the purpose of maintaining privacy.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

In the following section, the analysis of participant experiences related to their connection to culture and its impact on their mental wellness will be presented. At the end of recruitment, there were five participants, two male and three female, aged 18-25 that participated in this research project. The same five participants were involved in both part 1 and part 2 of data gathering. All the participants were members of the LLRIB. Home communities for participants in this project included: Hall Lake, La Ronge, Grandmother’s Bay, and Sucker River. Unfortunately, due to constraints with participant recruitment, we were unable to recruit participants from Stanley Mission and Little Red River that were eligible and able to participate in the project. The following criteria for participation were developed and agreed upon by the researchers and Community Advisory Committee:

i) a minimum of 18 years old and a maximum of 25 years old
ii) a self-identified member of the LLRIB
iii) currently residing in one of the six communities that comprise the LLRIB (Little Red River, Hall Lake, Grandmother’s Bay, Stanley Mission, La Ronge, Sucker River)
iv) English-speaking

This section aims to fulfill the main objectives of this project, which were: (1) To explore the role that culture has in promoting mental wellness for First Nations individuals from the LLRIB, and (2) To empower young adults from the LLRIB to share their stories of connecting to culture and the impact that this has on their lives. These participants are all members of the LLRIB, and their unique perspectives have shaped the insights presented here. This data was derived using narrative analysis, wherein participant shared their stories and reflections through discussions centered around the photographs they captured. Therefore, participant photographs will be incorporated into this chapter to help represent stories that were told through a participant driven lens. While participant photographs served as a starting point for participants to share their experiences through story, not every story discussed is linked with a tangible photograph. Rather, the photographs acted as catalysts for the natural flow of storytelling, allowing participants to delve into various aspects of their experiences using the prompt of a single image. As a result, not every narrative shared below will be associated with a corresponding photograph. To maintain the authenticity and integrity of participants' voices, many significant direct quotes
have been included throughout the thesis. By doing so, this thesis becomes a platform for participants to authentically share their stories, perspectives, and insights.

Narratives were arranged into one of four overarching categories based on the FNMWC Framework: hope, belonging, purpose, and meaning. As discussed previously, these categories are used to measure how much something is contributing to the wellness of an individual or community. Taking a strengths-based approach, one can see the influence of culture and community on individual wellbeing and can begin to understand how connecting to culture acts as a protective mechanism when addressing suicide prevention.

Hope

Hope for the future of community members and all their relations is an integral part for the flourishing of individual and community. At various times throughout the participant discussions, colonization and its ongoing impacts were raised. Sometimes it was brought up to discuss what has been lost, sometimes it was to discuss what is being reclaimed, and sometimes to highlight where Indigenous Peoples have come from and where they are going. As mentioned in previous sections, many aspects of the Indigenous culture were forbidden, including cultural ceremonies, traditions, language, and ways of being. For many, this has led to a struggle with cultural identity, as Indigeneity is still something that is defined and governed by the Indian Act in Canada. This was very much a reality for one participant, who discussed different ways that they represent their cultural identity on the outside:

... usually people who don't know me usually question my Indigenousness, which is rather annoying. But that doesn't mean I'm any less Indigenous than anyone else, like I'm still Native, and so it's nice to represent that with how I present myself on the outside. And aw I should’ve really got a picture of it, but like me in my ribbon skirt. Or recently I have started wearing more beaded earrings, which for some reason I have a better, like I wear them better than I do regular earrings. I don't know if that really, wait let me explain. I have like, like I can feel earrings when I wear them, and like it's just like a, you know what I mean like you feel it in your ear, like tugging and it's just my goodness why, but for some reason with beaded earrings they're just so cute that I can overlook it. And usually like the texture of the beads and playing with that kind of calms me down too, and I have even kind of taken to beading myself a bit, but I'm very, very new to it. – Participant 3

As a result of Indigenization, many young adults are being introduced to traditional ways of being at a later point in their life. Therefore, they have memories of beginning to learn specific traditions or cultural teachings. However, as progress is made towards reclaiming culture, we can
see that some traditions are beginning to become second nature as individuals are growing up with a healthy connection to culture. This same participant expanded on their formation of cultural identity to say:

…like it's so ingrained in the culture to be able to braid I find… it's just like... just something I always grew up with, knew how to do, we always learned how to do it. Like you braid your hair, you braid your medicine you... like everyone just knows how to braid up here…… And I always find that’s one thing that like really comforts me, like, I've kind of used it to comfort myself is I’ll braid and then like undo and then like re braid my hair. Like some days you'll see me and I'll just have a bunch of tiny little braids in my hair, just kind of in random spots. – Participant 3

This participant went on to clarify why they choose to represent themself this way by saying that it is “more of just an affirmation for myself, I guess...Like it's just like kind of reclaiming who I am, and presenting who I am to the world.” – Participant 3

It was clear that participants were at different points of their journey with connection to culture and cultural identity formation. One participant discussed the evolution of their awareness of appropriate cultural protocols and the continuous learning that they are experiencing. They shared a story about specific teachings about fire keeping and about the Spirit and how this has evolved since they decided to choose this way of life:

I didn’t really know much about anything about the protocols of keeping fire so, I had my music, and my dad, I was listening to my music the whole night through the morning. You know, um then I started to learn protocol. Basically, you have to, you know you can’t blow in the fire because it’s like you’re blowing on someone’s face, ‘cause the fires
a Spirit. And uh, um you can’t be on your phones around the sacred fire. You can’t take pictures of it. No garbage goes in it, only tobacco and food offerings. Um, but yeah, I learned… that’s how I got into this traditional way of life basically. That was uh, when I started choosing this way of life. – Participant 1

Hope for the future that is grounded in a sense of having a belief in Spirit was shared by another participant who discussed specific teachings related to protocol for respecting the northern lights and their Indigenous ancestors:

… that's one thing that I definitely took for granted as a kid, is the fact that we always see the Northern Lights... like I don't think I realized how rare Northern Lights actually are to see like as a human being…… but like for me it's just something that I've lived with, and I’ve learned rules about them like you don’t point at Northern Lights, you don’t whistle at Northern Lights, like you are respectful to Northern Lights. Like those are the ancestors dancing... and you don’t disrespect them. And I was just always raised with teachings like that. – Participant 3

Cultural protocols and teachings were passed on through connections to family, friends, and through interactions with elders for some. Elders are highly respected individuals who play an important role in Indigenous communities by passing on valuable cultural knowledge and teachings to future generations. Participants discussed different roles that are reserved for elders and the significant role that elders as well as other knowledge keepers have in continuity of culture. Some roles that elders have in the community that were discussed include performing pipe ceremony (Participant 1), storytelling (Participant 2), and aspects related to moose meat prep or birch sap prep where elders are considered the ‘expert’ (Participant 3). However, this was not directly posed as a question to participants, and we are aware that elders play many important
roles within community beyond what was mentioned here. One participant discussed the importance of the knowledge that elders hold:

…we’ve lost a lot of knowledge I guess you can say, but we still keep these traditions going… try to keep our knowledge, what knowledge we do have. One of the teachings is that when you learn something you know you don’t keep it to yourself, you share that knowledge. You know when an elder dies a library is gone, that’s one of the teachings. – Participant 1

One factor that impacts the mental wellness of Indigenous youth and young adults is the lack of accessibility to culturally appropriate mental health services. Although it is important to shift focus towards preventative medicine by enhancing connection to culture for youth thereby creating a strong foundation for them to support mental wellness throughout their life. It is also important that culturally appropriate options to mental health services be accessible. A huge barrier accessing services or support in many Indigenous communities in northern Saskatchewan is related to the commute to urban centres that is often necessary to receive care. As of late, there has been a push from Indigenous communities to improve this accessibility, and within the LLRIB community specifically, this was achieved. One participant discussed their feelings on the impact that the new Woodland Wellness Centre will make and why:

I know this is gonna make a huge difference like up north. ‘Cause we don't usually have access to anything, let alone mental health help… And so, like this will be an amazing place of healing, and that will marry not only [those who] want only western medicine, but also traditional medicines and traditional ways of thinking, like with indigenous staff instead of going down South... Like it's gonna make a huge difference in accessibility for help and more tailored help that will be more likely to work in the long run. – Participant 3

![Image 4.3: Woodland Wellness Centre La Ronge](image-url)
Despite the primarily negative impact of colonization, Indigenous participants find strength within their culture, including traditional aspects and aspects of culture that have evolved and are continuing to evolve. One participant brought up this aspect of evolution or blending of traditional aspects of their culture with more modern aspects of their daily life. They discussed this in relation to a recent project that they complete which was a beaded pop socket:

![Image 4.4: Beaded Pop Socket](image)

I’ve noticed this becoming a trend that I really loved them marriage of like traditional crafts with like new things. Like who would have thought, heck not even 100, like 10 years ago that this would be something that’s commonly beaded. Like I love how culture is still evolving and changing and adapting with the times. – Participant 3

As is widely recognized, intergenerational colonial trauma exists as a result of residential school trauma and continues to impact generations of Indigenous Peoples in various ways. Future generations are continuously taking on the weight of previous trauma which is inhibiting them from healing. However, one participant discussed something that she believes is needed to heal this generation and generations to come:

I just pulled over on the side of the road, and just released my inner child, and made a little snowman, which I feel like is a big part of healing is releasing your inner child. And just especially like, being Native I feel like so many Native people had their childhood's taken away with residential schools, and then even this generation like I know so many of my peers who had to raise their own siblings... and like lost their childhoods. And like it's just a good way of healing. Sometimes you just have to stop and build a snowman. – Participant 3
Belonging

Having a sense of belonging is extremely important to individual wellbeing. A sense of belonging is the feeling that one is a part of something that is greater than themselves. It is the sense of connection that one gets to family, friends, community, or their culture. Having a strong sense of belonging can be especially important when individuals are dealing with personal problems. Participants portrayed the sense of belonging they feel in various ways. One participant shared the impact that connecting to culture has had on their mental health. They stated the change that they experienced in not only gaining confidence, but also gaining a healthy support system for times that they struggle:

But yeah, all this had a very positive effect on my life. For sure I would have been extremely introverted, um socially awkward. I am, but not as much as I could have been. You know, I’m able to talk right now, but if I didn’t have this way of life, I’d probably... wouldn’t be able to talk as much as I am right now… So, this way of life had a very good effect on my way of thinking and handling things. I still go through hard times, but I’ve had all these people that I’ve met through this way of life that I can talk to.
– Participant 1

“I wanted to get some food and then I needed my stepdad there to come get food with me, that’s how bad I was with being socially awkward and introverted. I had, you know major anxiety. That’s gone down a lot, around people, like I couldn’t be around so much people.” – Participant 1

Another participant shared the strength that they found through connection to family and the support that they provide:
… the community I grew up in there’s not a lot of them because the majority of them were alcoholics, because I remember not being allowed to go to different houses because they were drinking, and my parents don’t drink so, they were like don’t go here because they are drinking and come home if they are drinking, you know. They have that lifestyle, I felt into that lifestyle, I was drinking for a while, but coming back home is what brought me out of it and having the family support system which helped a lot. My mother’s a mental health therapist so she helped a lot to. – Participant 5

For one participant, the connection to community and culture was felt through participation in drumming. They shared a story of the evolution of their connection to drumming. They discussed an initial introduction to drumming, which was primarily done in a group setting around a large drum. Followed by this, there was a progression as they transitioned from a large drum, to their first hand drum when their friend made them their own drum. During their story, they talked about the many different events that they have been a part of and the connectedness they have felt to other drummers in their community. They even shared the desire to continue drumming despite moving away from their community with their usual group of friends, sharing the thoughts they have had about starting their own group:

Uh, we don’t have a drum group here, I was actually thinking about starting one, but that’s a, I still need to learn more songs, and more um traditions around the drum, like protocol. Basically, which songs I can’t sing, and which songs I can. Also, I’d have to make more drums too. – Participant 1

Although this participant performed at various community events, such as the Churchill graduation and several cultural ceremonies, they also mentioned that it was a way to connect to other community members on a more informal level as well as they would sometimes:

“just go to the house and we jam to songs or learn songs.” (Participant 1)

One participant felt connection to community through their role in fire keeping. This will also be discussed in the section about purpose, as it gave the participant a valuable role to play in the community and contributed to their overall sense of purpose. However, the participant also talked about the connections that were made to others in their community as a result of this role:

Man, I met a lot of people keeping the fire. My first time, this woman she needed a place to sleep, and it was cold, it was at night, it was in town. and she woke up at 4:00 o’clock and she was like “Is it 4?” and I was like, “how do you know that?” she’s like, “that’s when I wake up.” So she woke up and she left. *laughs* That was a funny interaction. Another one, this really old lady, she's pretty thin, she was wearing onesies and she came in to get inside with us. And then this intoxicated man he came in once, he told us about the story, he made up a lie saying that his wife was in the hospital for something serious, but he got a call and it was on speaker his wife was intoxicated. Yeah, he was like lying.
to us and then I traded shirts with him because his was all wet. He took my [shirt]… I had a bag there with my clothes in it because I was staying there for the night… I think I was sleeping in the hotel, but I had my bag there, so I took one of my shirts, it was my northlands college shirt, and he gave me his purple shirt. And uh, yeah, I still have it, I don't wear it, but I still have it. – Participant 1

Further building on the relationships and connections built to others in community, the participant also discussed friends and family that they have connected with since becoming a fire keeper:

…one of my stepdad’s friends, he was a fire keeper, and he would teach me some things. Um and then, I kept fire with him and his son, [they’ve] both passed now. Yeah, I kept fire with my brothers, my best friend a couple of times. – Participant 1

… you know it's a good time to talk too. Like with your friends, or whoever you're keeping fire with. I kept fire with some of the youth, they were learning… but yeah. And sometimes I keep fire with a couple of my buddies that are from the drum group, we take turns taking naps. – Participant 1

While listening to participant stories and through analysis, it became evident that tipis played a role in wellness by acting to connect individuals to both community and culture in a variety of different ways. Tipis fostered a connection to culture, mother nature, and to community. Tipis often housed cultural activities or ceremonies, including things such as sharing circles which play a significant role in healing. Some participants discussed the various uses of tipis, and how tipis can be set up for short or long-term. One participant captured a photo of a tipi that was up year-round in their friend’s yard. Through their stories, it was evident that this tipi acted as a constant place for community members to go and connect with others from the community.

When asked how they feel about tipis, they stated:

Well, tipis are like idunno, I feel really connected to my culture when I’m staying in one because our people have been staying in them for a lot of years before the colonizers came. – Participant 2

This same participant went more in depth by also connecting tipis to other aspects of culture such as sharing circles:

…We had a sharing circle in there and in those sharing circles we all get a chance to talk freely without being interrupted or, or um distracted, I guess. And um, I’m not sure if our people did it a long time ago but it really feels like it fits, like it belongs…Yeah, and just like staying in a tipi just makes you feel so connected to like the um, well mother nature, ‘cause we’re like sleeping on the grass… – Participant 2
Another participant talked about the impact of sharing circles. It appeared that sharing circles not only provided a way to connect to other community members, but also acted as an outlet to discuss things without fear of the discussion leaving the circle:

…we’d have uh, usually we’d have uh, a sharing circle in the main tipi which has to be the biggest tipi. Um, in the sharing circle, everything... we can’t... what we speak about in the sharing circle stays in the sharing circle, is one of the sayings we say before we start sharing. On the first day it’s usually just like introducing yourself, and people barely talking, and then, you know, until the last day where everyone it just like sharing their stories and just laughing and having a good time in the sharing circle, just enjoying themselves, speaking from their hearts. – Participant 1

This participant proceeded to discuss that sharing circles can be held for various reasons, and then discussed the role that sharing circles have within the community when someone passes away:
When someone passes that’s what we usually do, we set up the sacred fire. We keep it going for four days and four nights. And I’m usually keeping the fire at night until morning. And um, if people choose to, or if we choose to, we’d have a sharing circle or talk about the person. – Participant 1

Sharing circles appeared to offer a connection to others within the community and provided an outlet for sharing as much, or as little as one would like. Despite the somber nature of some of the thoughts shared within the sharing circle, it was evident that they provided a healthy and safe place to deal with emotions as stated by two participants:

… definitely had some tears in a couple sharing circles, but after the tears came laughter so… that was good. – Participant 1

We do things like sharing circles in there and we invite Elders in there and they tell us stories… it’s just a really nice safe space for the youth. – Participant 2

Another aspect of connecting with community and culture that was discussed often among various participants was related to food or meals. It was evident that food sourcing, preparation, and meals were not solitary tasks, but rather there was emphasis placed on the aspect of togetherness. As a result of this togetherness, youth or young adults would often get the opportunity to learn important teachings from their parents or other family members with the hopes that these traditions would continue to be passed on through generations. On more than one occasion, participants discussed the experience of hunting, preparing, and eating moose meat within their family unit:

.. we got a moose, we had to take [it] inside that house, we put the tarp down on the floor, we get my sisters, I have six sisters, we get my sisters, and my aunties, people come to help cut. Uh, my mom was teaching me how to cut this moose.” – Participant 1

“You know one would cut the leg and one would cut a different leg or take a different portion of the moose. They get the moose meat for helping us. – Participant 1

Usually when he comes home he cooks the insides so the internal organs. His favorite, he’ll have family come down for a feast. We will all help each other cut up the moose meat to make it thin, to make dry meat... – Participant 4
One participant discussed their hunting and game preparation traditions, and touched on the aspect of sharing that comes following a successful hunt:

We would go out on the lake and go out hunting, early in the morning before the sun came up. You’d see a little bit before it gets light out like before the sun comes up we would go out and go hunting and bring back a moose and then after we bring back the moose we would cut it all up, bag it, smoke it, if we were out at the cabin we would smoke a majority of it and store it and make it into Pemmican, so that’s quite the process. And um 98% of the meat that we get ever since I can remember, we would give it away to the community, family members, anybody who was like can I have some meat. And then if we had it we would give it to them and nothing in return you know, we don’t ask for anything in return we just give and give. – Participant 5

This same participant shared a story about the connection to their family as a result of gathering together and eating moose meat:

I remember growing up eating the butt, my mom would throw the whole butt in the oven. We would all sit there and chitchat away, talk about our day, school and whatnot, just little family gatherings eating moose meat, using a knife to cut it off the bone because it would be kind of like dried to the bone. I grew up eating that with my family… – Participant 5

Although the aspect of togetherness during food preparation was evident, it was also clear that everyone had specific roles within the group:

Uh, the head though. It’s usually Elders who cut the head or my father or my mother. The more experienced ones. I’m not familiar with cutting the moose head myself, I usually just cut the smoked meat because you want it nice and thin or we cut them into chunks
for frying. My dad usually handles the ribs, cracking them in half or sawing them in half, the steaks, the back brisket part with a saw. Yep. My aunties usually come around as well, his sisters, they come and, my kokum as well, my grandmother, they come and help me cut the meat from. Take their own bags of meat home. – Participant 4

I help most of the time. It’s my mother-in-law that does the whitefish and then my father-in-law is usually the pro at the walleye. Help them smoke it, take turns looking after it… go and see if the logs are still smoking or lit on fire… ‘cause you don’t want the fire too big when you’re smoking. – Participant 4

The sense of belonging was evident as one participant experienced a connectedness to their mother and to their culture through tradition of making birch syrup. Their story covered the process of the evolution of their knowledge, as they began by initially aiding in the collection of the birch water for their mother, to taking on more responsibility in helping and learning from her, to eventually making their first batch:

…2018 I started helping my mom gather the water, then from there I started watching her, helping her, taking turns, mixing the water. – Participant 4

This is my first batch right here on this picture that I’m showing you... and the picture with the woman... the woman is me... and that is the finished product that I am holding there. – Participant 4

*Image 4.9: Boiling Birch Sap*
As other food is shared among community members, once completed birch syrup is shared amongst elders and other community members. The participant stated that:

One whole batch in two days would maybe make around 20 to 23 jars of birch sap. And from there we usually give them away to the elders. The elders that grew up eating it because this was basically their candy a long time ago, they would eat this with maybe bannock or something. – Participant 4

Like the togetherness that is experienced during food sourcing, preparation, and meals, many participants talked about their experience with sourcing traditional medicines and the transmission of teachings surrounding this traditional practice. Participants talked about the importance of picking medicine sustainably to provide for future generations, which includes not taking more than you need, and sourcing the medicines properly:

Um, one thing my family always does usually like, my mom mainly taught me, but is how to pick medicines. There's mint that grows near our house so I always go and pick that every summer. And my mom has taught me how to tell whether it's mint or a weed that looks kind of like it by taking one of the little leaves and just smelling it, making sure that you pick the right things, and teaching me how to properly pick them too like, not just ripping out the whole plant but snipping it so that it can keep growing for years to come. – Participant 3

And I was also taught how to preserve it by handing it up in a certain way, and just letting it dry out, so that it doesn’t get moldy or go bad. – Participant 3

Besides the benefits to wellness as participants connected to family, community, and culture through these traditional practices, there were also many additional benefits that participant specifically talked about with regards to traditional medicines. Some of these benefits were for
physical health, while others were related to mental health or for beauty. Like other aspects of traditional Indigenous culture, these teachings, while obvious for some, are slowly being reclaimed and incorporated into daily life for others. Traditional medicines or methods of healing play a significant role in the wellness of Indigenous Peoples and should be integrated with Eurocentric healing practices whenever possible. Below are participant images of various traditional medicines and plants that were discussed.


There’s so much medicine in this photo and... like that Labrador tea it’s really good for you, it gives you lots of vitamins... – Participant 2

They’re good for things like inflammation, and so you use them if you have like sore muscles or if you have acne... – Participant 3

…it’s like a pharmacy out there if you know what you are looking for. – Participant 3

The next photo is a picture of mint. We use that for sicknesses. I didn’t finish with this Sage one. The sage we use for smudging and that purifies the air, it’s almost like a sanitizer I guess. It clears the air by 80%, so when you are going to hike and you have
fresh sage you just kind of crumple it up in your hand and you inhale it and you go for a walk and you won’t be out of breath as fast as if you don’t do that. And Sage can also be used as a flavouring for food and in tea for uh, getting rid of toxins in your body. Same thing with the mint, it can help you get over a cold, soothe the throat, um, eliminate fevers. The next photo is a flower, it called Yarrow and that one is a head medicine, so if you’re feeling depressed, down, you’re having suicidal thoughts, you made this into a tea and you drink it and it will help you. – Participant 5

the next photo is a picture of wild roses, they are pink flowers, and you can eat them as a snack when you are out in the bush, the petals, you just pick off the petals and you eat them. – Participant 5

The next one is redroot, it looks like it is in a zip lock bag, and you can use that for traditional lipstick and to flush out your system, make it into a tea. – Participant 5

The next one is Labrador tea, looks like it has white flowers and kind of like brownish green leaves and you use that for flushing out your kidneys. It is a kidney medicine. – Participant 5

And that photo is a picture of lady slippers, and the lady slipper root you can use it as a toothpaste and for like being anxious it will calm your nerves, so it’s kind of like an anesthetic… – Participant 5

Other aspects of connectedness to family, community, and culture occurred through other traditional activities such as preparing moosehide. This community-oriented task, which is commonly done in a group setting is important for the creation of things such as regalia, drums, shelter, clothing, and more. One participant shared their experience with seeing this be done for the first time:

The first time that I’ve ever saw my mom do this I was probably about four years old… I remember her doing the hide in the back of the house. And I’ve been learning every year from her on steps to do it and helping her out with the hide and you know her teaching me all of these little tricks to make leather. My mom was a big part of my life, still is. – Participant 5
Another participant discussed their experience with preparing moosehide:

    My mother likes to keep the hide and I also help her with that……skinning it, preparing it, smoking it, drying it.” – Participant 4

Many participants referred to fishing within their stories. Fishing allowed individuals to connect to the land, provided food, and served as a learning opportunity for future generations to expand their knowledge of traditional ways of being and doing. In addition, there was also an overarching benefit of connecting to family or community as participating in these activities was often done alongside family members and rarely considered a solitary activity. Below are some parts of the stories told by participant 4 surrounding fishing at their lake and the benefits that they feel to their mental wellness as a result:
There is the one of the lake. That’s one of my favourite activities to do, summer or winter ice fishing or out on a boat. – Participant 4

![](image)

*Image 4.21: Fishing*

I’ll usually have somebody with me. It’s nice though just to sit there, peaceful, relaxing, enjoying the nature. Summer to get away, to get away from anything. – Participant 4

we …. Fish too, in the winter. That’s usually a night activity, some people, most people do, go from 9 to 2am they’ll have a fish derby. Everyone will pull out their fish shacks with their stoves in there. Be nice and warm and usually have two holes. Have a couple outside in the dark with some bells on it so you know when your fish is hooked. – Participant 4

Another participant shared the photograph below and said that it is an image of: “me teaching my daughter how to clean and fillet fish and debone it” (Participant 5).

![](image)

*Image 4.22: Fileting Fish with Daughter*

This same participant shared another photograph of fishing (Image 4.23) and said that in this image she is: “teaching my daughter how to fish so she knows how to survive in the winter” (Participant 5).
For one participant, watching their mom filet a fish during their university lesson portrayed the ability to integrate traditional practices and ways of being with conventional Euro-centric practices. This idea of integration between two cultures and the benefits that this can have for individual wellbeing will be expanded on and discussed in other categories as well. The participant shared the following about the image below:

Um, right now my mom is currently working on getting her I think her master’s... but she's still doing classes, but, and since everything is on Zoom, she was in the middle of a class when someone came to the door and dropped off some fresh fish. And, she didn't want it to go to waste and all of her instincts just kicked in, all of her instincts from growing up on the trap line, like well if the fish is fresh you get it in you clean it... and you cook it, and lunch was coming up, and so right in the middle of class she just got her stuff ready and started cleaning the fish. – Participant 3
And like I’d always just grow up watching her do stuff like that and just, like keeping the traditions alive and passing them on. Like I probably I wouldn’t be as good as her cleaning a fish, but I probably could. – Participant 3

One participant mentioned other land-based activities that they look forward to, and how they connect with their partner in doing these activities:

Yes, that one is, that is when we were snaring rabbits actually. Another fun activity to do in the winter, go set rabbit snares during the evening, wait for the night, and then usually we go out right early in the morning when the sun is coming up we go check our snares... usually some are... I’m not sure how to say that, but like the rabbit is almost caught ha ha. – Participant 4

![Image 4.25: Rabbit Snaring](image)

Rabbit snaring I usually do with my hunny. That’s an activity we like to do together. – Participant 4

Various aspects of participant stories represented the ways that they feel a sense of belonging in their daily lives. Participants connected to family, community, land, and culture. As a result of these relationships, the transmission of valuable knowledge occurred and subsequent improvement in mental wellness.

**Purpose**

Having a sense of purpose is very beneficial for individual wellbeing. Whether it is having something to look forward to or having a goal, it involves any motivating factors that are present within one’s life. Purpose is the reason that individuals feel a desire to continue moving
forward each day despite any internal struggles that they may be dealing with. For Indigenous youth and young adults, having a sense of purpose can be important for their identity development and plays a role in suicide prevention. As discussed in previous sections, suicide rates are much higher in Indigenous communities which is why understanding and implementing these protective mechanisms are crucial.

Although the participants did not explicitly state what they felt their purpose was, it was represented in their stories in various ways. One participant talked about the role that they have when they attend culture camps which is that of an oskapewis. This role was described by the participant as:

... oskapewis is like a Creator’s helper, so I’d take the rocks in, keep the fire going for the sweat, or I’d help to set up the sweat … But now we just help out with sweats, fire keeping, setting up tipis and all of that, help around the camp…— Participant 1

This participant went into detail about one specific aspect of their role as an oskapewis, which is fire keeping. Through stories that the participant shared, it was evident that fire keeping gave them a sense of purpose. They shared the story of their first time keeping fire in 2018 and how this was the turning point where they chose to become more immersed in the traditional way of being. They talked about the progression that they have made over the years. Initially, they mentioned being naïve to the importance of certain protocol that must be respected when keeping fire. However, over the years they have become aware of the teachings and protocol to be followed, continually learning more, and passing on what they have learnt.

Passing on knowledge to future generations or other community members was discussed by several participants as something that they felt was very meaningful. Some participants shared stories about the teachings that they have received and the feeling they get from passing on this knowledge to the next generation. Knowledge translation occurred in formal and informal settings such as at culture camps, through employment opportunities, and in day-to-day life. Below, two participants directly talked to how this transmission of knowledge made them feel:

And just watching the youth build those shelters made me feel really happy and it felt really good to know that we are passing on that knowledge. – Participant 2

...one of the best things about these camps is that we learn how to help each other. and then we teach the youth how to help each other when we need, like when someone needs to get their wood chopped, or how to make a fire, things like that. Um, you know we don't do everything um for them, so they can learn. Uh, we teach them. – Participant 1
So, like every year at the trappers festival this is one of the competitions tea boiling. Which is just melting snow in the pot and starting everything from scratch and my uncles and my aunties used to do that every year and they taught me how to do it and I passed on that knowledge to some of those youth as well. I guess it feels like I am connecting to my culture when I am passing on knowledge because that is really how we all learn. – Participant 2

Another participant talked about transmission of knowledge through their role as a caregiver to their daughter:

it's just the way I grew it up and I'm teaching my daughter whatever I know and whatever my mom and whoever else taught these, these traditional items, like with prayer and all of that teaching my daughter that, passing the knowledge down because I know that I was able to remember from a very young age so my daughter is able to learn from a very young age as well. I think it makes me who I am today. If I didn't know any of these, I probably would be on the street doing something or getting in trouble with the law. – Participant 5

This participant also reflected on the transmission of knowledge between her mother and herself:

My mother had taught me how to make ribbon skirts and after that I made quite a bit and giving them away, and for my daughter, for myself. That’s one of the ribbons skirts that I just made.” This participant later shared some other teachings that were passed on from her mother: “My mom taught me quite a bit of stuff, like from the moccasin making, to the ribbon skirt making, to the making of clothing, to rabbit socks… - Participant 5
Similarly, other participants found purpose in connecting with the future generation through community-based employment opportunities. One participant discussed their role as a youth worker at a youth centre in their community. They shared stories of the outings that they would take the youth on and different activities that were available. They discussed the significance of this centre not only for the youth, but the benefits that they felt. When reflecting on their time spent as a youth worker, they said:

> it was just kind of like a place for the kids to go where they could be safe and... they could stay out of trouble, because otherwise they would just be roaming the streets with nothing to do... and many of them don't have the best home life so this is also like a place where they could come and eat, and just kind of relax away from home. And it was really nice to work in that center, like on reserve there... and I felt like it made a difference for some kids you know. – Participant 3
This sense of purpose can be felt not only by the participant, but we can also assume the youth receiving this knowledge and the Elders or family members that initially shared this knowledge. As mentioned previously, passing on cultural knowledge or historical teachings to future generations is akin to the evidence-based knowledge that is predominantly used in Western education or cultures. Passing on teachings and knowledge is a part of the healing process that many Indigenous Peoples are currently on as they are reclaiming knowledge that was once at risk of being lost forever. It is known that numerous attempts were made to erode Indigenous Peoples' traditional ways of being, including threats to language, culture, and community. However, we know that this was not successful as Indigenous language is beginning to flourish, with the incorporation of traditional land and language-based teachings or traditions being passed on. One participant highlighted a tradition that they look forward to that is embedded in culture and that gives them a sense of purpose or hopefulness:

![Image 4.29: Beaded Blueberry](image)

So down to the blueberry pin. This was one of my first attempts at beadwork. And I made this from Mother's Day for my mom, because we always, every year in the fall it's berry picking time… it's just the yearly tradition to go out and sit in the sun, pick your berries, come home and lay them out on towels and pick apart all the extra leaves and twigs that got into your bucket, package everything up nicely, and put it in the freezer. Then all year you'll have smoothies and jam... oh it's amazing. – Participant 3

Another participant shared stories of the teachings that they have received surrounding traditional cultural ceremonies or activities and the evolution of their knowledge. This participant proudly discussed the success that their father has had at their community winter festivals, with him often being awarded the title of King Trapper. This participant discussed how the winter festival is something that people in the community look forward to, and that the participant is
looking forward to joining in it during the upcoming season for their first time. They discussed the many events that are including in the festival, and talked about how they often train for these events with the help of their parents. In addition to the purpose felt as the participant trains for and competes in events at the winter festival, we can also see a significant connection to cultural ways of being as they reference many traditional activities.

The winter festival trainings, they usually have them all over, so we have one in Stanley Mission, Sucker River, La Ronge, Prince Albert... they’re usually all over. There’s a lot of activities to it, we have animal calling, trap setting, axe throwing, rope winding, flour packing... there’s Bannock making… uh, snowshoe race. – Participant 4

… the axe throwing station is right beside the smokehouse there. There is usually um, a really sick log set up there with a spray-painted dot in the middle that we try to aim for.

the trapper events I was talking about that I watched my dad do them most of my life watching him my mother, they were both Queen and King Trapper. So they were pros at that… – Participant 4

Some participants shared stories of how the traditional roles that men and women take on at camp are still alive today as they work together for the benefit of the group. Community was a big part of stories that were shared, with limited discussion about solo activities. In many of the stories told, there were roles that individuals played, roles that gave them a purpose and sense of being a part of the community.

We go to the bush, we set up camp, the women would usually stay behind and keep camp, and keep the babies because the babies can’t really go out hunting, but you can when they are a little bit older like maybe two years old you can take them with you, but the majority of the time they just stay at the camp and wait for the hunters to come back. If they come back with blood on their pants we know they got a kill, so that’s an exciting sight to see when the hunters come back from hunting. And then when you get the moose you would set up a smoker with whatever material we have in the bush we would cut down, get the men to cut down some trees, to make the smoker. Get them to cut down some more trees for smoking it, I think you would use poplar wood for the smoking of the meat. And if you’re out, when you’re out hunting, and if you’re hungry when you get a kill, the first thing that you will want to eat is kidney. You can eat the kidney raw, straight from the moose. – Participant 5

Meaning

Creating an understanding and a sense of meaning behind the things that individuals are a part of allows them to understand their important role in the world. They can appreciate aspects of culture that have been passed down through generations and have contributed to the culture
today. Through discussions with participants, it was clear that a sense of meaning was cultivated in various ways. Some participants exhibited a sense of meaning in the teachings that were passed down and the way that these teachings have impacted their lives. Others found value in understanding the meaning of the world around them, as they began to reject Euro-centric ways of thinking and embrace Indigenous ways of knowing.

Through discussion, some participants talked about others who have not embraced the culture, while also being non-judgemental to the choices of others and respecting where the individual is at. One participant shared a story about unique Indigenous values that they were introduced to and that the choice they made to get more involved with Indigenous way of life:

… uh but the thing about our way is that it's a choice, like he didn't force me to get into these ways I had to choose it for myself and I just, I did like a couple years ago. Before that I was just like, I was mostly just uh... *laughs* I guess you could say I was colonized in a way. I was so much on the, so much into games and stuff and social media and I was always inside you know, things like that. And uh, yeah basically watching too much TV and all that, you know. But yeah, we had to uh choose this life, it's a way of life basically. Uh, 'cause that's one of the teachings he taught me, that one of the things we were given in this life was our gift, one of the gifts we were given I mean, was the gift of choice. So yeah, and so yeah, it's been pretty good... [experience]. – Participant 1

One participant shared their understanding behind the meaning of tipis, initially discussing the teachings of each of the 15 poles such as love, respect, and discipline. This participant is still in the process of creating meaning as they are still learning these teachings from their stepfather. They were able to share the current knowledge they have about the historical aspect of tipis and how they are incorporated into culture today.

…keeping tipis are a big... part of our culture. They used to be our homes, uh, we still sleep in them like for camps. we set them up for camps for now. And uh, if you ever needed to go up, you could just go and set up a tipi and uh, now that's where most of the activities happen. We'll have a, an Elder, like for Indigenous Day we had different uh, teachings in each tipi or different activities like storytelling, traditional storytelling in one, and drum teachings in another tipi. – Participant 1

Some participants made connections and reflected on the precontact era and current period. Participants exhibited awareness of the impact that colonization had, including the aspects of culture that were lost.
I had been watching a video about precontact dogs... which, are dog breeds that existed before contact with that outside world, like pre colonization… what had happened that kind of mirrors what had happened with the people, is during colonization, many of the dogs that were also brought over spread diseases... and like took up space and food, and resources, and so many dogs died off during colonization and... so there aren’t... like this breed of dog went completely extinct. Like they just straight up don't exist anymore. And there’s actually very few breeds from pre contact that exist… But even then nowadays none of them are purebred... like they're all being mixed with the, with other European breeds. – Participant 3

I think that goes for anything that's in our way of life ’cause there used to be a lot of different types of Native people and there's not as much as there is now, you got Cree, Dene, Dakota, South Dakota, but there were way more so much more before colonization. Yeah, so as much as everything that happened to us in the past, we still try to keep these... we've lost a lot of knowledge I guess you can say, but we still keep these traditions going... try to keep our knowledge, what knowledge we do have. One of the teachings is that when you learn something you know you don't keep it to yourself, you share that knowledge. You know when an Elder dies a library is gone, that’s one of the teachings. – Participant 1

Likewise, participants reflected on the history of Indigenous Peoples in Canada which created a curiosity of where aspects of the Indigenous culture came from. Many lost their connection to culture and traditional storytelling through colonization. Therefore, a way of achieving mental
wellness is by reconnecting to culture, through exploring cultural teachings and gaining an understanding of the history of culture.

Yeah, and there was one question in my mind that I always had, that I didn't know that I had, but it was why is the Cree word for dog atim, and the Cree word for a horse mistatim… and I always wondered like, why would that be. And then... and I just thought it was because we would have got horses later and horses just to look like big dogs, and my brain just kind of left it at that, but this video made me realize that with all the dogs dying off and with assimilation being forced... many people who their whole lives have relied on dog teams and their Huskies to get around... would have then been forced to start using horses to carry stuff around instead of their usual dog team. And so, it would have been like a replacement for their dogs, but bigger. And so that just kind of made a bit more sense to me when it clicked in my brain that way. – Participant 3

Yeah, there’s a lot to learn I still want to learn more honestly. – Participant 3

Participants also reflected on the uniqueness of their culture, and the variations of other Indigenous groups in Saskatchewan. Gaining an understanding the complex history of Indigenous groups in Canada helps individuals appreciate their importance in the world and the meaning behind creation, and everything that has happened since to contribute to where they are today. In addition, this allows individuals to feel connected to those outside their community, whether it be other Indigenous groups, or other cultures that share similar values.

…there are different types of sweats it's kind of like a... I don't even know how to explain it. You know, it's all steamy in there or we splash water on the rocks and all that, but yeah, it's one of the traditional ceremonies we'd have. There's even this one old man who could barely walk then we had a sweat... I think he was one of the Japanese people, well we had a sweat and then after the sweat he crawled out of the sweat by himself. you know, he didn't need any help or anything, that was very cool. But yeah, there are different types of sweats, just like there are different types of Indigenous people, and like there are different types of drums. I saw my first Dene drum at the Indigenous day in PA. I'd never seen one before which was pretty cool, but yeah. – Participant 1

Building on this idea of connectedness, one participant shared a story of an experience where they had the opportunity to connect with other Indigenous youth from across Canada.

… And part of that too was we also had like cultural programming too. And so they had like different teachings, and talent shows, and just lots of like talking about like what's different, what's the same, like how do our experiences match up, like how do our identities differ, like how do our cultures differ. And... it was just really cool like seeing all the different perspectives from across Canada, and across tribes, and like it was an awesome experience. – Participant 3
Creating a sense of meaning and understanding behind traditional ways of being was evident when listening to one participant’s story about the history behind the cradleboard and wewepison. It was evident that these traditional aspects of culture held more meaning that simply a place that children would sleep. When talking about the cradleboard, the participant said:

And then the next one is a cradleboard. The one with the beaded moosehide looking one with the feathers and the blue flowers. You put the baby in there and there's little lever on top that you can see metal attachments to it on the side. You can put like a blanket over it like that or a netting to cover the baby from bugs getting into them and the reason why they had the cradleboard is so that the baby can be put up um at head height. You never put a baby below like 5 feet level you put them at head level so they're learning. – Participant 5

![Image 4.31: Cradleboard](image.png)

This participant then went on to talk about a traditional swing and the significance behind why it is used:

… the next photo is a picture of a swing, and in Cree it’s a wewepison. and that's how we got the kids to bed because, it's kind of like a resemblance of being inside the womb, you’re level with the earth. When you're swaying back and forth, it's soothing. Because when you're pregnant you are swaying back and forth, when you walk, so then the babies like that and it soothes them to sleep. – Participant 5
Image 4.32: wewepison
CHAPTER 5.0: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to engage with young adults from the LLRIB to gain insights into their experiences with connecting to culture and the resulting impact on their mental wellness. Notably, there exists a significant research gap in exploring the experiences of young adults connecting to culture in Saskatchewan. Furthermore, it is crucial to understand these experiences from the perspective of Indigenous youth and young adults themselves, as previous research has predominantly relied on Euro-centric methodologies focused on understanding factors contributing to mental wellness struggles among Indigenous Peoples rather than exploring their sources of strength in daily life. As a result, this project aimed to address this gap by placing emphasis on identifying and understanding the ways in which Indigenous youth and young adults derive strength, resilience, and empowerment from their cultural connections.

Following analysis of the experiences shared by participants, narratives were arranged into one of four overarching categories based on the FNMWC Framework: hope, belonging, purpose, and meaning. The following section will provide a summary of the findings in connection to the current literature, followed by researcher reflections, strengths and limitations of the project, future directions for research, and end with a conclusion.

Connecting Findings to Current Literature

Hope

Hope for the future plays a strong role in the desire to create goals and to is an essential contributing factor to mental wellness. Hope consists of individual drive to create goals, motivation to accomplish these goals, and the strategies by which individuals plan to achieve set goals (Snyder, 1995). Hope has a significant influence on psychological outcomes leading to elevated levels of wellbeing and reduced levels of psychological distress (Mosley et al., 2020).

“Hope drives our optimism about tomorrow; our own futures, and that of our families. It is a balance of our mental wellness through our spiritual connection, and is expressed everyday through what we believe in, knowing who we are, and what we care about as indigenous people.” (Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, n.d.)

Hope for the future of individuals and that of their community is grounded in a sense of cultural identity, with appreciation of traditional Indigenous values, and a belief in Spirit with a strong
sense of faith (Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, 2015a). The connection between hope for
the future and wellness is seen because for Indigenous Peoples,

…wellness is rooted in our knowledge and value systems. Indigenous language,
spirituality, culture, land, physical health, mental health, emotional health, and
community (people) are all parts of a system. Every part of that system needs to work
together in unison and in balance for a person (and community) to be healthy and whole.
(Lesage et al., 2022, p. 197)

Having a strong sense of cultural identity leads to overall improvement in well-being of
First Nations youth as connecting to culture aids in healthy development (Snowshoe et al., 2017). Fostering cultural identity can be done through things such as culturally relevant mentoring for First Nations youth. This is shown to be linked to improvement in sense of well-being and overall mental health (Crooks et al., 2017). More specifically, this improvement of mental health and well-being and stronger sense of cultural identity is a result of developing a knowledge base regarding culture, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and relationship skills. This idea of cultural identity as connected to mental wellness is mirrored within the stories told by participants within this project. As a result of the disconnect from culture, it seems that some Indigenous youth and young adults today are still trying to understand and reaffirm their cultural identity. Through listening to discussions, one participant stated that cultural identity was something that they felt they had to prove on the outside, as they struggle with being questioned on their “Indigenousness.” Specific aspects of reclamation and representation of cultural identity were discussed such as through the wearing of ribbon skirts, beaded earrings, and braided hair. Similar benefits to mental wellness were found with the integration of an elder program in which Indigenous patients were provided access and guidance to cultural teachings, land-based ceremonies, and one-on-one visits within a primary care clinic. Participants reported experiencing healing after prolonged periods of seeking and desperation, strengthening cultural identity and sense of belonging, developing trust and opening up, coping with losses, and engaging in ceremony and spiritual dimensions of care as a resource for hope (Hadjipavlou et al., 2018). This notion was supported through stories told within this current project that highlighted the important teachings and knowledge that elders possess and how this knowledge drives the community forward through connection through storytelling and to ceremony. Discussion about teachings passed on from parents, elders, or friends held great value among participants. Many participants talked about passing on knowledge and the significance of being on both the
receiving and giving end of knowledge. It seems as if participants felt great sense of purpose from being a role model.

Growing recognition of the significance of preserving and promoting culture within Indigenous communities is accompanied by an increasing awareness of the positive impact on mental wellness. As efforts towards decolonization progress, the preservation of culture emerges as a vital element. Notably, this preservation is linked to a reduction in suicide rates, reinforcing the notion that culture serves as a protective factor that significantly contributes to the enhancement of mental wellness (Chandler et al., 2003). When examining the relationship between cultural identity and psychosocial stress, psychological well-being, and coping, researchers were able to illustrate that participants who identified more with their traditional way of life as opposed to the dominant culture reported being happier and having healthier coping mechanisms that aid in resiliency (Wolsko et al., 2007). Although this current project supports the benefits associated with connecting to culture and traditional way of life, one participant also discussed the concept of blending traditional and Euro-centric or modern ways within their daily life. This blending occurred through everyday hobbies such as beading a pop socket, to largely influential collaborative efforts such as those within the Woodland Wellness Centre. This healing centre takes a blended approach towards wellness within the community to improve the appropriateness of mental health services. As suicide rates are of concern within First Nations communities, improving the state of mental health services, including the improvement in collaborative efforts between Western medicine and traditional methods of healing is very important.

Aside from cultural identity, Indigenous values, belief in spirit, and participation in ceremony all play a role in giving hope to Indigenous youth and adults. Ceremony plays an important role in achieving mental wellness among the individual and within the community (George et al., 2019; Gone, 2013; Waddell et al., 2017). One specific ceremony, the sweat lodge ceremony, which is traditionally practiced by First Nations people in Canada, has the potential to promote mental wellness (Schiff & Moore, 2006; Marsh et al., 2018). When evaluating mental health and well-being outcomes as a result of incorporating traditional sweat lodge ceremonies into treatment, participants stated immense spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical benefits as well as a deeper connection that they felt with themselves and with others that they attribute to
the sweat lodge ceremonies (Marsh et al., 2018). Ceremony is a large part of Indigenous culture and involves many different activities that may be unique to each community.

Prayer is ceremony. Everyone should be able to worship in their own way; it may mean going to church for some, and for others it could be more spiritual. Regardless, prayer is about showing gratitude and having a relationship with Newehstįnę. For many Indigenous Peoples, praying includes smudging, drumming songs, drum dances, fire feeding, and offerings to land and water. (Lesage et al., 2022, p. 204)

Belief in spirit, understanding its complex intertwinement within the lives of everything around us plays an important role in mental wellness among Indigenous Peoples. The connection between traditional spiritual practices in Indigenous communities, identity formation and wellbeing has been shown in literature (Pomerville & Gone, 2019). Thus, promoting these spiritual practices is a protective mechanism that supports mental wellness within Indigenous communities. The importance of understanding spirit and protocol that is taught around being respectful to the ancestors were discussed in multiple stories shared within this current project. One participant talked about the evolution of their belief in Spirit and the awareness of cultural protocols that they have gained over the years. They discussed their initial naivety, and how this has evolved to a willingness and desire to continue learning. Being submersed in traditional language, healings, and maintaining a strong overall sense of cultural identity aids in promotion of mental wellness. According to Indigenous culture, there is a belief that people are given everything they need to take care of themselves. Therefore, the process of connecting with culture and engaging in ceremonies becomes crucial, as it serves to nurture hope and wellbeing (Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, 2016a). One thing that was not explicitly stated in the research but was meaningful from the participant stories within this project is the impact of healing your inner child. Through the literature we are aware of the important of forming a cultural identity and understanding cultural values, belief in spirit, and connection to ceremony to impact mental wellness. However, understanding that healing our inner child may allow for these to begin is important to consider.

Belonging

Having a sense of belonging is an important aspect that contributes to individual wellbeing. This can be the sense of connection that one gets to family, friends, community, land, or their culture. These aspects impact individual resiliency in a variety of ways through
providing connection to everything around them. A sense of belonging allows individuals to feel supported or that they are not alone, which makes it easier to cope with hardships. As stated on the Thunderbird Partnership Foundation (n.d.) website:

Belonging is a direct result of our emotional wellness and is expressed through our connectedness and relationship to family, community, land, and culture. As Indigenous people, we know family extends beyond blood to include Clan. Our language tells us we are related to all beings of creation. Our sense of belonging also comes from our community stories about who we are as a People.

**Connection to family, friends, and community**

Relationships play a significant role in the connection that individuals feel to others within their community and the sense of belonging as a result. Past projects have found that relationships promote some critical aspects of mental wellness such as providing hope, improving self-awareness, helping regulate difficult emotions, personal growth, and problem solving (Graham & Martin, 2016). These findings were mirrored within the current project as participants directly stated the benefits of connection to family and the support received from these relationships, especially with maintaining resiliency in the face of addiction. Relationships that are formed among participants, teachers, Elders, and to community by spending time on the land contributes to healing and wellness among all involved (Grande 2010; Redvers 2020). Working together with others contributes to the feeling of community which creates a sense of belonging (Walsh et al., 2020). This was found through stories in this current project when participants discussed the benefits of fire keeping, how it has connected them with others within their community, and the relationships that have resulted from this. In addition to this connection to community, fire keeping taught the individual valuable lessons, strengthened the relationship between themselves and their family and friends, and gave them a sense of purpose as they transmitted knowledge and teachings to the future generation. Another means of connecting to culture and community was through drumming, which one participant in this current project discussed as a hobby and something that the individual looks forward to. The connections that result from land-based experiences also allow knowledge to be transmitted through Elders, among youth, and by place (Grande 2010; Walsh et al., 2020). Transmission of knowledge is something that is considered very important in the Indigenous culture, and it is said that:
It’s important to help others in our community, this includes helping others to acquire new knowledge and skills. (p. 202) … Trying to learn traditional skills makes people feel connected with their communities. We need to have a sense of community and belonging for our mental health. We need to feel connected to others. (Lesage et al., 2022, p.202)

Time spent together on the land fosters the birth of important relationships that contribute to the betterment of Indigenous youth. The connection that Indigenous youth feel to others while spending time on the land and the appreciation of what the land can offer them, gives them that sense of kinship (Hatala et al., 2019). This sense of kinship is important, as research has shown that positive family connections are crucial for First Nations youth, leading to reduced rates of suicidal behavior and emotional distress (van der Woerd et al., 2005). Land-based activities were found as protective for mental health among the participants in this project, with one participant noting that connection to others through these activities is what helps them get through tough times. Fishing and trapping were specific land-based activities that were brought up by participants. Benefits associated with these activities included connection to land, participating in traditional ways of being and doing, and connection to friends, family, and community.

Talking and communication, including the relationships that result from this connection between community members, friends, and family is associated with well-being (Kral et al., 2011; MacDonald et al., 2015).

“In community, stories connect people to each other: when we share personal stories, we learn how to be gentle with one another. This creates supportive communities.” (Lesage et al., 2022, p.222)

Communication, and connection to others as a result of culture-based activities such as sharing circles leads to a positive impact for the mental wellness of Indigenous youth and young adults (Kirmayer et al., 2003). The positive impact of sharing circles on mental wellness was discussed on more than one occasion in the stories told by participants within this current project. Participants specifically noted connection to others in the community, to the land, and having a confidential space to talk about concerns. It was also mentioned that sharing circles provided an opportunity for storytelling and subsequent benefits of passing on traditions, as well as for honouring loved ones. As sharing circles often take place within tipis, several participants brought up tipis within their discussion, highlighting the role that they have in the community. Through stories, it was evident that tipis fostered a connection to culture, mother nature, and to community. Not only did tipis leave a space for togetherness, but also for safety, shelter, and
honouring of loved ones. One participant even discussed how tipis make them feel connected to culture and proposed that it may be due to the large role of tipis as shelter in pre contact era.

**Connection to culture**

An overwhelming amount of the current literature regarding the health outcomes of Indigenous Peoples highlights the importance of cultural continuity as a determinant of health. Cultural continuity can be defined as the transmission of cultural knowledge from one generation to the next (Auger, 2016). As a result of colonization, Indigenous Peoples experienced dispossession from the land, impacting their way of life, connection to culture, and their relationship to clan. However, reconnecting to culture by being with and on the land can improve the mental health and well-being of Indigenous Peoples (Bowra et al., 2021; Hatala et al., 2020; Walsh et al., 2020). Thus, revitalization of culture is a critical aspect of improving mental wellness among Indigenous youth as culture provides connection to many protective mechanisms that support mental health (Bombay et al., 2010).

Traditional cultural activities, such as hunting, trapping, game preparation, and storytelling, have been associated with youth empowerment, improved self-esteem, and improved wellness by fostering pro-social behaviour and a sense of cultural pride (Janelle et al., 2009; Hossain & Lamb, 2020; Ahmed et al., 2021). These findings were mirrored in stories shared for this project when participants discussed the togetherness and connection to culture as a result of traditional activities such as game preparation, storytelling, and rabbit snaring. Through listening to participant stories, it became evident that togetherness was very important and was commonly associated with mental wellness. Several participants discussed togetherness in the context of food preparation. From hunting and preparing the meat, to eating together, individuals fell into roles within their family unit as traditions were passed down through generations. This transmission of knowledge and roles within the family and community gives individuals a sense of belonging, positively impacting their mental wellness.

Research has shown that cultural connectedness is a protective factor against the intergenerational effects of IRS attendance on mental health and wellness (Gray & Cote, 2019). This supports the tenet of ‘culture as treatment,’ and highlights the importance of reconnecting to culture and the impact it can have on mental wellness. The importance of culture and the role it plays in helping to decrease suicides among youth is also recognized within the literature.
(Chandler et al., 2003; Kirmayer et al., 2003; Wexler & Gone, 2012). Connecting to culture has been reported to strengthen mental health among Indigenous youth in Canada. Research with Inuit people in Canada identified connection to culture and traditional knowledge as factors associated with well-being and happiness (Kral et al., 2011; MacDonald et al., 2015). To further support culture as a protective factor, participants identified that when these factors are absent, wellness suffers and there is unhappiness. Similar findings can be seen among Native Americans, with a positive association between cultural connectedness and mental health and well-being (Masotti et al., 2020).

Gathering berries promotes mental wellness of individual and community in various ways including connecting individuals to others within community, connecting to land and the natural world, and aiding in the goal of balancing the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of well-being (Boulanger-Lapointe et al., 2019; Parlee et al., 2005; Michell, 2009). Berry picking allows for mental wellness through the promotion of cultural continuity, social connections, spirituality, stewardship, and connection to the land (Parlee et al., 2005). Harvesting blueberries was discussed by one participant as a tradition that they found meaningful, and one that connected them to their family and others within the community. Similar to harvesting berries, other participants in the current project discussed the harvesting of traditional medicines. Values were transmitted through generations during these times spent together harvesting on the land. Participants talked about traditional medicines, including the preparation and protocols of respect when sourcing plants. As a result, participants felt connection to family, community, and culture, which in turn provided benefits to mental wellness, along with the physical benefits that the medicines provided.

**Connection to language**

Language is a significant part of one’s culture and therefore, a connection to language is essential to achieve wellness. In Canada, there are 12 First Nations language families (Statistics Canada, 2017). Within these language families there are several languages with similar language structure. The largest language family in Canada is Algonquin, with 51 languages within it. There are five First Nations language families present in Saskatchewan and these include: Dene (Chipewyan), Dakota, Nakota (Assiniboine), Cree, and Saulteaux (Government of Canada, 2021). In addition, Métis Peoples in Saskatchewan speak Michif, which is a combination of Cree
and French languages. The language of Indigenous Peoples is strengths-based. For First Nations Peoples, their language was given to them by the Creator not simply as a means of communicating, but as a means of pursuing and sustaining a good life. Indigenous languages do not have deficit terms, but this is not to say that there is no way to describe negative things. However, instead of focusing on these deficits, descriptions through language offer ways of pursuing methods of overcoming these negative things.

Current research on the topic of cultural continuity point to several different categories of cultural knowledge that influence the health and well-being of Indigenous Peoples, one being connection to traditional language. Among First Nation children and youth, use of traditional languages is associated with a strong cultural identity, which we know from above is important for individual and community wellness (Reyhner, 2010). Hallett, Chandler, and Lalonde (2007) evaluated the relationship between community-level knowledge of traditional Indigenous language and youth suicides. They found that communities in BC with a greater conversational knowledge of traditional Indigenous languages were associated with lower rates of youth suicides. Throughout discussions with participants for this project, the impact of connection to traditional language was not brought up. However, this is not to say that participants cannot speak Cree, or that they do not think it is an important factor contributing to mental wellness. Instead, it may have been a result of recruitment methods or criteria that required participants to be English speaking.

Connection to land

Land-based teachings have become increasingly common over the last decade. Though Indigenous Peoples have always been aware of the importance of connection to land, researchers are beginning to realize that reconnecting with the land is an important aspect of mental wellness for Indigenous Peoples (Hansen, 2018; Kirmayer et al., 2003; Redvers, 2020; Walsh et al., 2020). The importance of connection to land was highlighted throughout many participant stories in various ways. This important role stems from our knowledge of the relational component of land and its impact on healing and wellbeing, including the knowledge that cultural identity is connected to land (Hatala et al., 2019; Redvers, 2020). This relational component allows us to understand that the land is a “partner to the person or people engaged in the healing process” (Hanson, 2012, p.2). It is also important to appreciate that, “the knowledge we carry from the
land is medicine” (Lesage et al., 2022, p. 160). Land-based experiences are also seen as a way to connect with other areas of wellness previously discussed, such as cultural ways of being, nature, family and community, identity, and spirituality (Walsh et al., 2020).

As per current literature, it is widely accepted that to foster decolonization and resiliency, it is necessary to adopt an approach that is in complete opposition to the processes of colonization that were implemented in Canada (Wildcat, et al., 2014). Therefore, we must recognize that creating a relationship with the land will reconnect Indigenous Peoples to the land that was lost and foster the healing that is needed for many Indigenous people (Walsh et al., 2020). Additionally, good relations with the land and nature supports mental wellness among Indigenous youth (Big-Canoe Richmond, 2014; Brown et al., 2012; Kirmayer et al., 2009; Richmond and Ross, 2009; Ritchie et al., 2015; Wexler, 2006). Land-based teachings inform Indigenous youth of Indigenous knowledge, languages, and overall culture and allow them to reconnect to the land and be resilient in the face of adversity. Simply engaging with and connecting to nature has been shown to help Indigenous youth cope with the daily stressors within their lives, including but not limited to experiences with stress, anger, and fear (Hatala et al., 2020; MacDonald et al., 2015). In Ontario, researchers Gaudet and Chilton (2018) described and evaluated the Milo Pimatisiwin Project that was implemented in the Moose Cree First Nation community. This project highlights the importance of engaging Indigenous youth in various cultural teachings, some of which include moose hunting, fishing, and the values associated with hunting and gathering. These findings are supported by the stories shared in this research project as participants discussed their engagement with fishing, hunting, and rabbit snaring and the impact that this has on their mental wellness. Walsh and colleagues (2020) described a similar land-based intervention program set in Ontario. Their findings suggest that these land-based strategies are becoming increasingly implemented due to their overwhelmingly positive impact on mental health in Indigenous populations. Strides are also being taken in post-secondary education to promote land-based teachings for Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth and adults. The University of Toronto’s Master of Public Health in Indigenous Health program allows graduate students to participate in land-based education where the curriculum is primarily focused on learning from the Indigenous worldview (Mashford-Pringle & Stewart, 2019). Although there is a growing appreciation for land-based education, implementation and accessibility to these programs could be improved in Saskatchewan, and Canada as a whole.
Purpose

Individuals find purpose in the things that they do in their everyday lives. A sense of purpose can be fostered through various activities and can be related to the significance in the role that they play. As stated on the Thunderbird Partnership Foundation (n.d.) website,

Physical wellness creates purpose, and is expressed through a way of being, doing and wholeness. It is found in our daily lives, whether it is through education, employment, care-giving activities, or cultural ways of being and doing. Examples can be our laughter, which helps us cope with life through joy, or picking berries because we understand that this first food is as important to us as a mother’s milk is to a newborn. Purpose creates an understanding that we are sacred, and our bodies are ‘home’ for our spirit, heart, and mind, all of which are interconnected and work inseparably.

Cultural ways of being and doing contribute to purpose by giving individuals a role within their community and by passing on valuable lessons that are associated with these activities. Fire keeping is a cultural practice that was banned when settlers arrived with the beginning of colonization. Cultural burning is a community practice that was traditionally used to protect from out-of-control wildfires by limiting excess debris. Participating in cultural burning promotes social networking, intergenerational teachings, and community health and mental wellness (Lake et al., 2017). Fire keeping can also be a role given to the person that tends fires within community, such as during a sacred fire. During discussions with participants in this current project, one individual spoke about the importance of their role as a fire keeper, and the connection that they feel to others in community as a result. This role, along with other roles that individuals fall into provide individuals with purpose, giving them a reason to show up, and an understanding that they are important to their community. In addition, these roles provide individuals with knowledge about the individual spirit and body. One teaching is about the importance of taking care of oneself as you would the fire, not letting yourself get burnt out and not getting out of control, ensuring that you stay on the right path (Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, 2016b). These teachings are important for impressionable youth that may be straying down a path that is not benefiting their mental wellness. As heard through participant stories in this project, fire keeping connects individual to community and is used during times of gathering, when performing ceremony and protocol, and when honouring loved ones. A sacred fire is not only a way to honour those who have passed but is also a way that individuals can connect to the spiritual world, which positively impacts their identity formation (Wieman & Gauthier, 2021).
Another vital aspect of community involvement that contributes significantly to a sense of purpose is individuals' participation in employment opportunities. Studies have found that secure employment improves the mental health and well-being of Indigenous Peoples and that it is a necessary contributing factor to mental wellness (Graham & Martin, 2016). Some benefits that were identified to be a result of employment included: financial freedom, daily structure, hope, and a source of stimulation (Graham & Martin, 2016). This project explored the influence of employment on mental well-being, illustrated by a participant who shared their personal encounter while working at a youth center. They emphasized the benefit that they felt being able to play a role in the transmission of knowledge to youth within their community. Moreover, transmission of knowledge through various means such as employment opportunities, during culture camps, through roles as a caregiver, or through educational means was discussed as something meaningful on many occasions during the participant discussions. Many individuals discussed the transmission of knowledge that they received, which they found meaningful, and which fueled their determination to share what they have learned with future generations. The narratives revealed that some participants had experiences that motivated them to teach future generations techniques associated with resiliency and wellness strategies.

As mentioned above, purpose can be felt through the roles that individuals serve within their communities, more specifically the roles that individuals have when influencing future generations or other community members. It has been said that,

> It’s our culture to serve our community. We are meant to help each other to survive and thrive. It was true in the past and it’s still true today. We need to be strong for each other. (Lesage et al., 2022, p.199)

When serving others within the community, the benefits are felt from the individual receiving and providing. It is shown to provide a sense of pride for individuals, who also feel respected and needed from others within their community when they provide help to others (Graham & Martin, 2016). Similar benefits were found when exploring the healing journey of Indigenous men, as participants shared the significance of role modeling, stating that it gave them a sense of belonging and purpose. The benefits from helping, teaching, or modeling traditional roles within the community are all spoken about by the participants in this project. Participant stories about the happiness and pride that they feel when passing on knowledge to youth or others within their community and also when they are on the receiving end are evidence
of the benefits of collaboration within community. The literature says that participation in role modeling connects individuals to others within their community, allowing them to develop a network. (Waddell et al., 2021). The significance of role within community as a factor for mental wellness was found through stories of being an oskapewis by one participant. This role made them feel needed, as they helped where they could, as well as it provided them something to look forward to.

**Meaning**

Forming an awareness of how certain aspects of an individual’s life are meaningful and understanding that they have an important role in the world gives them strength. This involves gaining an appreciation of aspects of culture passed down through generations and the contribution that they make to the culture today. Meaning can be understood and defined by the following quote:

> Meaning is created by our mental wellness, and is expressed through rational thought, intuition and understanding of how we connect to Creation, our rich history, and our reason for being. We all want to know our lives have meaning. When we understand who we are, have a connection with family and community, what our roles and responsibilities are, as well as our unique traits and characteristics... we give meaning to our life, which helps us develop an attitude to live life to its fullest. – Thunderbird Partnership Foundation (n.d.)

Within the Indigenous culture, there is the teaching that everything around us has meaning, you have a choice to give meaning to your life and you learn from your mistakes (Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, 2016c). There is importance in surrounding yourself with people who help you reach and understand your own personal meaning and align with the choices you make to keep you on the right path. However, as expressed by Lesage et al. (2022), "it's not our way to tell people how to live their lives. All we can do is live by example and share knowledge with those who seek it out" (p. 200). This notion was echoed in one participant's story when they discussed the teachings, they received regarding the inherent gifts that everyone is born with, including the gift of choice. Although previous research, including findings from this study, have identified many benefits of connecting to culture for mental wellness, this participant's perspective serves as a reminder that individuals should not be forced by others to live their lives in an arranged manner. It is important for the Indigenous youth to understand that
purpose, belonging, hope and meaning all contribute to and promote mental wellness moving forward. It is said that,

We all have strength and resiliency in our blood. It was passed down from our ancestors, but we forgot it for a while. Despite cultural genocide, disease, and starvation, we are still here. We have a responsibility to be healthy and strong. We need to take better care of ourselves to honour our ancestors and the struggles they face that we could be here today. We build resilience to reconnection with culture and land and knowing who we are as indigenous Peoples. (Lesage et al., 2022, p. 207)

Understanding the strength within culture and within individuals themselves came with the creation of the meaning of things around them. Throughout this project, participants shared instances where they engaged in meaning-making, such as when they delved into the significance of tipis and how the poles symbolize important values that should be maintained. Some participants engaged in reflections on connections between the precontact era and modern times, contemplating their individual journeys toward personal growth. As previously mentioned, recognizing, and embracing identities as Indigenous Peoples holds great importance for mental wellness. For one participant, the journey of comprehending who they are, and their origins contributed to making sense of their actions and finding personal meaning. This is also true for trying to understand Indigenous language, appreciating its foundation of strengths-based terms that support the notion that Indigenous Peoples are resilient. Participant stories about understanding other Indigenous groups in Canada and the similarities and differences can contribute to feelings of unification or connectedness as well.

**Researcher Reflections**

Throughout the process of this project, I stumbled upon several unexpected roadblocks. However, these roadblocks worked together to force a flexibility in the research project. Many adaptations were made as not only did this research project begin during the COVID-19 pandemic, which came with setbacks in and of itself, but the project was also put on hold while I embarked on a journey of being a student in the College of Medicine. As I sit here and reflect on this journey, there is a variety of things that I've learned regarding not only this project, but also about myself.

As I listened to the stories from young adults from my own band, I felt a great sense of connection to home and my culture. Living in Saskatoon, I usually feel quite disconnected from my culture and my family. However, the experience of listening to these stories was very special.
Not only did I feel a great sense of pride in my fellow band members for reconnecting to their culture, but I was excited to learn everything they had to share and excited to represent how resilient our future Indigenous generations can be. Each participant is moving at their own pace as they learn traditional teachings, connecting to the land, language, culture, and their community. I applaud them for their courage and strength in navigating life in a predominantly Euro-centric society while also striving to reclaim a culture that was suppressed through assimilation policies.

**Project Strengths**

This project was associated with certain strengths that I will discuss. I think one of the most profound takeaways I have from the process of completing this research project the realization that research is far from being black and white; rather, it encompasses various nuances and complexities. Coming from an academic perspective, I understand that research needs to be somewhat laid out following a plan agreed upon between researchers and the Behavioral Ethics Board at the University of Saskatchewan. However, after completing this project, I realize that being flexible and adaptable to the needs of the population that you are carrying out the research project with is equally as important. I believe that this is especially important when conducting research with Indigenous Peoples in Canada. If history has taught us anything, it is that there is no benefit in forcing someone to fit into a construct. I believe that I adopted an adaptive approach based on the participant needs. Multiple unexpected roadblocks arose for participants throughout the data gathering aspect, including things such as: running out of minutes for their phone, not having clear phone connection to transmit voice for recording, not having access to a private area for confidentiality of the interview, among others. However, I believe a strength is how flexible we were, both myself and the participants. We worked together to overcome these struggles and to accommodate, ensuring that there weren’t restrictions to the discussion that occurred.

Using photovoice as the main method of data gathering was a strength as it offered a way for the youth and young adults to drive a discussion based on their personal experience with connecting to culture. It allowed for the discussion to start with the participant and be driven by them, while only being slightly guided by prompts when necessary. Often, the stories went in a direction that I believe would not have been elicited if more structured interviews were used.
Additionally, the process of capturing these photographs allowed the participants to reflect on their daily life. At the beginning of the project, many participants said that they didn’t know what kind of pictures I wanted them to take. I reminded them that it could be anything, and that it didn’t have to make sense to anyone else but themselves. While I had preconceived images in my head that I thought I may come across when participants submitted pictures, it was interesting to see how participants represented experiences in unique ways that I never imagined. The story that I created in my head following initial exposure to the images fell short of capturing the profound experiences and stories that each participant conveyed for every photograph. Further, I had not anticipated the emergence of narratives branching off from the main story associated with the images. As participants shared their experiences, this prompted discussions about other experiences allowing for unexpected stories to emerge. This method of data gathering ultimately gave participants control over what they wanted to share and how they wanted to share it. At times, the discussions went further than participants had even expected, as they created meaning through storytelling. The impact of their words, in combination with photographs, will allow for a meaningful means by which knowledge is translated.

**Project Limitations**

This project, as with any, had some limitations that will be discussed. The first limitation was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on many aspects of this project. First and foremost, the inability to meet and connect with participants and advisory committee members in person limited the potential for a deeper relationship between the myself and those involved in the project. This impacted the recruitment process greatly, leading to delays in contacting, arranging, and generally hearing back from people. Due to COVID-19, there were also participants involved in the project getting ill and needing to quarantine, delaying data gathering or leading to the inability to make use of in person participant sampling. Overall, dealing with these restrictions and delays lead to a lengthier process and did not allow for the original plan which included the use of sharing circles for part 2.

Another limitation to this project that was related to the need to restructure for a primarily virtual formation was the lack of non-verbal communication that was able to occur during discussion. It was evident that conducting discussions over a phone came with a its own set of challenges. During the one-on-one discussions with participants there was limited ability to
express nonverbal communication cues. Since the participant was not able to see me, I had to rely on expressing my engagement through short phrases or words such as, “wow,” “mhm,” and “cool.” I felt it was difficult to show the participant that I was actively listening and difficult to decide whether I needed to give the participant a new prompt or give them a moment to think. Due to this, I believe there may be times during participants stories that my inability to accurately evaluate non-verbal cues from the participant limited the depth of the conversation, cutting discussions off prematurely.

Another limitation that became evident following completion of the project, but also during the writing process of the results section was the interpretations I had as a researcher. The participants stories, though representation through photographs and direct quotes, were still analyzed by myself and thus were presented based on my interpretation. This is a limitation because there is always the possibility that their stories were misinterpreted or misrepresented (Coburn, 2013; Wilson, 2008). However, to attempt to avoid this, participants were given the opportunity to look through the thesis in its entirety and discuss any changes that they would like made to data that belonged to them before the submission of this project. Despite this, it remains important to be aware of the potential meaning that was attached to their words as we strive to conduct ethical research.

Another limitation that was evident during the one-on-one discussions as brought up by participants was being unable to include faces. Many participants stated that they don’t frequently stand behind the photo, but that usually they are in pictures with a group of people. This rule was later changed to allow include faces so long as they were blurred out, but it was already past the point of being inclusive for some participants. Had we opened up the opportunity to include faces with proper consent from the beginning of the project, we may have elicited a richer discussion surrounding relationship and connections with others. Included below is some feedback about this specific limitation from the participants themselves,

I feel like I kind of fretted over ah, but I can't have faces in this too much, but I still came out with some good pictures. – Participant 3

…like a lot of my photos include faces and I didn't know if we could do that so, 'cause like I… I don't know we always take like group photos and I'm never out there really taking photos by myself of like landscapes I guess… – Participant 2

…it was kind of hard to take pictures on Indigenous day because on the document it said that we weren't allowed to include people's faces. – Participant 1
Similar to the previous limitation, another potential limitation that occurred was having a restriction that the photographs must be taken prospectively. This was realized during the project, and as a result, there was a change that was made allowing participants to include photos taken before the beginning of the research project. The feedback regarding this was positive, with all participants including photos from pre and post start date.

I was able to go back and find a lot of good ones that I had taken in the past. And I feel like those ones actually came with like the best stories rather than like the fresh, fresh ones… which they still came with really good stories. – Participant 3

Additionally, another aspect of capturing photographs included a tight timeline turnaround of two weeks. This was a limitation within the project as it was evident that participants had things that they had wanted to capture, but sometimes the timing may have not been right. When arranging the one-on-one discussions, it was evident that participants wanted to push the discussion date back because they were hoping to get some photographs at community events such as culture camps. Therefore, this was another reason that the decision was made to allow participants to bring in retrospectively captured photographs.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

There is a wide body of literature that adopts a deficit-based approach when exploring aspects of culture that were lost and this impact across Indigenous communities in Canada. Additionally, much of the literature that adopts a strengths-based approach neglect to make use of Indigenous methodology and paradigm within the core of the project. Future research should be done based on needs of Indigenous communities and should be driven by Indigenous paradigm and Indigenous researchers. Focusing on the phrase “nothing about us without us,” serves as a reminder to researchers about the vital values of respect and reciprocity when engaging in research with Indigenous communities. As this project focused on exploring the experiences of youth and young adults (18-25 years), future areas of research could also explore the experience of the younger population (<18 years). This population is in the stage of identity formation, and understanding how to support them on their journey of creating a strong sense of cultural identity is crucial.
Conclusion

This project explored the role that culture has in promoting mental wellness for First Nations individuals from the LLRIB by encouraging young adults to share their stories of connecting to culture and the impact that this has on their lives. Through the use of narrative inquiry and photovoice, participant shared stories which were arranged into categories of hope, belonging, meaning, and purpose. Participants shared stories of aspects of culture that give them hope, including a strong sense of cultural identity, participating in cultural activities, improving appropriateness of mental health services, and looking forward to traditions related to culture. Additionally, participants shared stories of things that give them a sense of belonging, including traditions that drove togetherness of family and community, intergenerational transmission of values and knowledge, and activities that connected individuals to the land. Furthermore, participants shared stories of the sense of purpose they gained from roles within their community and role modeling cultural ways of being. Participants also shared narratives of gaining a sense of meaning, including understanding unique Indigenous values, the history of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, and gaining an overall understanding of why they are important and their personal meaning. This project contributes to the literature exploring the experience of Indigenous youth and young adults’ engagements with aspects of culture and the impact it has on their mental wellness. This project highlights the strength that is associated with culture and the role it has in healing. Additionally, this project emphasizes the need to support these communities, to work to actively decolonize our institutions, and to develop safe, meaningful environments that nurture cultural revitalization within our province.
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APPENDIX A – Consent Form
You are invited to participate in a research study entitled: Exploring cultural healing and mental well-being in a northern Saskatchewan First Nations community

**Researcher(s):**
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**Purpose(s) and Objective(s) of the Research:**
- The purpose of this qualitative research project is to explore the role that culture has in promoting mental wellness for First Nations individuals from the Lac La Ronge Indian Band.

**Procedures:**
- In part 1 of data gathering, participants will be asked to take photographs that represent their experiences with connecting to culture and the role that culture has in improving their mental wellness. In part 2, participants will first have an individual meeting with student researcher Mikaela Vancoughnett where they will have the opportunity to share all of the images that they have taken and discuss the significance surrounding them. At the end of this meeting, participants will then be asked to choose 3-5 photographs that they will discuss further in a group setting with the other participants, Mikaela Vancoughnett, and Community Advisory Committee (CAC) members. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, this group discussion will take place via Zoom. Zoom is a secure platform approved for use by the University of Saskatchewan. Please refer to this link for more information on Zoom’s privacy policy ([https://zoom.us/privacy](https://zoom.us/privacy)). The group discussion will contain open-ended questions, with prompts, and will last for approximately 2 hours. The group discussion will be audio-taped and transcribed verbatim by the University of Saskatchewan’s Canadian Hub for Applied and Social Research (CHASR). Participants will have the opportunity to review their individual interview after it has been transcribed.

**Funded by:** Social Accountability Lab for Learning and Teaching (SALLT)

**Potential Risks:**
- There is a minimal risk that participants will experience psychological or emotional harm or discomfort as they are sharing their stories in the individual meeting or the group discussion.
- **These potential risk(s) will be addressed by:** In situations where participants feel discomfort when sharing their story, they may excuse themselves from the discussion and information
about accessing counseling services will be provided. Should the participant have questions regarding their mental health they will be directed to a local mental health professional.

**Potential Benefits:**
- Although there are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study, participant stories regarding their experiences with connecting to culture will provide valuable knowledge of the role that culture has in promoting mental health within the community. This research has the potential to inform and improve the ways that we approach providing culturally appropriate mental health services on the LLRIB and in other Indigenous communities.

**Compensation:**
- Each participant will be given an honorarium in recognition for their time and for sharing their experience. Following participation in the one-on-one meeting, participants will be given $50. Following participation in the group discussion, participants will be given another $50 for a total of $100. Please note that compensation will not be dependent on completion of the one-on-one meeting or group discussion.

**Confidentiality:**
- Confidentiality of participants will be protected. However, there are limits due to selection where procedures for recruiting or selecting participants may compromise the confidentiality of participants.
- The researcher will undertake steps to safeguard the confidentiality of the discussion but cannot guarantee that other members of the group will do so. Please respect the confidentiality of the other members of the group by not disclosing the contents of this discussion outside the group and be aware that others may not respect your confidentiality.
- The videoconference will be conducted in a private area of the researchers’ home, not accessible to anyone outside of the research team while one-on-one meetings and the group discussion are in session. I recommend that you do the same, if possible.
- Although the researchers will take all necessary steps to ensure confidentiality is protected, there is no guarantee of privacy of data due to the nature of a videoconferencing platform.
- During the data collection, the student researcher will store the data either on a locked computer, or in a locked filing cabinet in their office.
- Information from this study will be used in student theses and may be published in academic journals. Any direct quotes from the group discussion that appear in any published materials will not use your name.

**Storage of Data:**
- A unique project code (e.g., U01, U02, U03) will be allocated to each participant and stored on the master list. The master list will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the locked office of Dr. Gary Groot at the University of Saskatchewan, separate from the storage of any data.
- Dr. Gary Groot is responsible for the long-term storage of the data. Data and any research materials will be stored and backed up on Dr. Groot’s Jade drive and DATASTORE, both of which are secure password-protected storage spaces used by University of Saskatchewan’s researchers. We will not be saving any information on personal computers. Data will be kept for five years post study in a locked cabinet in Dr. Groot’s office. At the end of this time, all data
will be permanently deleted from hard-drives and physical copies will be shredded in a secure manner.

**Right to Withdraw:**
- Your participation is voluntary, and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time without explanation or penalty of any sort. You have the right to withdraw prior to the data analysis at which point your information may be too intertwined to separate your results from the rest of the data. Data analysis will begin one week following your one-on-one meeting and immediately following the completion of the group discussion. If you wish to withdraw, please contact any member of the research team.
- Whether you choose to participate or not will have no effect on your access to health services or how you will be treated.

**Follow up:**
- Following the completion of the group discussion and data analysis, participants will be asked if they would like to receive a final report of the findings. If so, results will be e-mailed (or mailed if the patient prefers) to each participant. Further, information regarding how individuals could access counseling services will be provided, should participants feel that they need such services.

**Questions or Concerns:**
- Contact the researcher(s) using the information at the top of page 1;
- This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office ethics.office@usask.ca (306) 966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free (888) 966-2975.

**Oral Consent**

“I have read and explained this Consent Form to the participant before receiving the participants’ consent, and the participant had knowledge of its contents and appeared to understand it.”

By consenting to take part, you agree to not take any unauthorized recordings of the content of the discussion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Participant</th>
<th>Researcher’s Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
APPENDIX B – Photovoice Information Sheet
Project: Exploring cultural healing and mental well-being in a northern Saskatchewan First Nations community

Project Objective

This qualitative research project will explore how cultural healing practices are being used to enhance mental wellness in a northern Saskatchewan First Nations community.

Instructions

You may take as many photos as you would like (or use photographs that you have taken in the past) before the deadline at the bottom of this document. You may use your personal mobile device to take pictures, or you may request a disposable camera. You can contact Mikaela Vancoughnett using the contact information at the bottom of this sheet if you would like a disposable camera.

Take photographs that represent your experiences with:

- Connecting to culture and the role that this has in improving your mental well-being
- Cultural healing practices that have improved your mental well-being
- Finding resiliency through cultural experiences
- Successful mental health resources within your community

These instructions are intended to offer guidance. Feel free to be as creative as possible in taking photographs for this project. The goal is that you, as a participant are able to take photos that represent your experiences with culture, and the impact it has on your mental wellness. These photographs will provide an opportunity for individual and group discussion surrounding important topics that are identified from your perspective and the perspectives of your fellow community members.

Note: Following the deadline, a one-on-one meeting will be arranged with Mikaela Vancoughnett which will give you a chance to present all your photographs and discuss the significance around each one of them. More information will be provided upon submission of your photographs on the date of the submission deadline.

Guidelines for ethical photography
• All photographs that you submit must be taken by you. You may use photographs that you have taken in the past. However, you may not use photographs that you obtain from web searches or photographs that another person (including friends or family) has taken.
• You must respect the privacy of others when taking your photographs. Avoid taking photographs where other peoples’ faces are visible. Consider taking photographs where no people are present or where identifiable features are not apparent (i.e., taken from behind, from a distance, only including hands or feet, etc.)
• It is your responsibility to ensure that you are not breaking any laws while you are taking the photographs for this project.
• You will maintain full ownership over your photographs. You will have the opportunity to consent to having your photographs used in the final report for this research project and subsequent publications or presentations related to the project.

Deadline

Please submit your photos to Mikaela Vancoughnett by ________. Following this deadline, your one-on-one meeting with Mikaela Vancoughnett (student researcher) will be arranged. The date for the group discussion will be decided upon completion of all one-on-one participant meetings with the student researcher.

Instructions for photograph submission

Photographs can be submitted online to:

Mikaela.vancoughnett@usask.ca

Contact Information:

For more information or further questions, please contact:

Mikaela Vancoughnett
Department of Community Health and Epidemiology
University of Saskatchewan,
Cell phone: 306-380-9451
Email: mikaela.vancoughnett@usask.ca
APPENDIX C – Prompts for One-on-One Discussion
Prompts for one-on-one discussion with participants

How was the experience of capturing the photographs?
Tell me about your experience taking these photos over the last couple of weeks.
Tell me the story behind this photograph.
What compelled you to take this photograph?
How does this photograph represent your connection to culture?
Can you tell me more about what is happening in this photograph?
Describe what you photographed.
APPENDIX D – Research Project Approval by the Lac La Ronge Indian Band
MOTION: 17/09/2020 – 036

MOVED BY: Councillor Gerald McKenzie
SECONDED BY: Councillor Ann Ratt

To approve Research Project – Mental Wellness as submitted by Mikeala Vancoughnett

10 in Favor 0 Opposed 0 Abstentions Motion Carried
APPENDIX E – Collaborative Research Agreement
Collaborative Research Agreement

Between:

Chief Tammy Cook-Searson
Lac La Ronge Indian Band
Box 480, La Ronge, SK S0J 1L0
(the “LLRIB”)

- and -

Dr. Gary Groot
University of Saskatchewan
HSC E-Wing 3242
107 Wiggins Road
Saskatoon, SK S7N 5E5
(the “the researchers”)

(collectively known as “the Partners”)

For the Project entitled: *Exploring cultural healing and mental well-being in a northern Saskatchewan First Nations community (“Project”)*

Date: March 23, 2021

A. Introduction

This Collaborative Research Agreement (CRA) outlines terms of understanding between the LLRIB and the researchers regarding the Project. Dr. Gary Groot is the Principal Investigator and faculty supervisor for the project, Mikaela Vancoughnett is the student researcher for the Project, and members of the LLRIB are participants and Community Advisory Committee (CAC) collaborators.

B. Purpose

The purpose of this CRA is to confirm mutual interest and understanding between the researchers and the LLRIB regarding the Project. This CRA also confirms agreement by the Partners with regards to the Project’s goals, research processes, and anticipated outcomes, and the desire to foster an environment of open communication and information exchange. This document will ensure that research for the Project is carried out in respectful way that follows relevant protocols.

Statement of Mutual Benefit

This Project has the potential to benefit the LLRIB by providing knowledge of the role that culture has in promoting mental wellness within the community from the perspectives of young people. It also has the potential to inform and improve the ways that we approach providing culturally appropriate mental health services.
This Project benefits the researchers by providing a thesis prepared by Mikaela Vancoughnett for her master’s degree. This Project also benefits the researchers by leading to a publication in a scientific journal.

Property of Information
The “Data” refers to any originals of notes, audio-recordings, observations, photographs, transcripts, and other information gathered throughout the course of this research project.

The LLRIB will maintain ownership of the Data, which will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the locked office of Dr. Gary Groot at the University to maintain privacy of personal data. Data will be stored for a minimum of five years after the completion of the research Project. At the end of this time, data will be permanently deleted from hard drives and physical copies will be shredded in a secure manner.

The Data will not be used for any purpose other than which is outlined within this document without approval from the LLRIB. Hard copies and digital copies of the Research Documents will be distributed to the LLRIB upon completion.

C. Project Scope
Research Purpose
The purpose of this research is to explore how young people (age 18-25) perceive the connection between cultural healing practices and mental wellness in a northern Saskatchewan First Nations community.

Research Objective
To explore the role that culture has in promoting mental wellness for First Nations individuals from the Lac La Ronge Indian Band.

Research Documents
It is anticipated that this research will result in three documents (collectively referred to as “Research Documents”) as follows:
1. An academic journal article to disseminate the research findings to the wider academic audience.
3. A one-page report that will be sent to Chief and Council prepared by Mikaela Vancoughnett.

Research Timeline
It is anticipated that data gathering will be complete by May 30, 2021. Data analysis will begin following the completion of part 2 of data gathering and will be complete by June 31, 2021. The writing and revision processes will occur following.

D. Research Process
Guiding Principles
This Project has been informed by principles within Chapter 9 of the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS) 2 on conducting ethical research involving First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples of Canada. This Project will exemplify principles outlined by OCAP which include, but are not limited to the following:

**Ownership**
- At all times the LLRIB will maintain ownership of all research data collected and all related research outputs and publications

**Control**
- The LLRIB must approve any research projects involving their community members
- Any other use or disclosure of the community members data beyond this Project is strictly prohibited

**Access**
- The LLRIB may have access to any aggregated data and reports produced by the research projects that involved their community members.

**Possession**
- The LLRIB maintains ownership of all research data. The LLRIB and the researchers have jointly agreed to store the research data in the locked office of Dr. Gary Groot at the University of Saskatchewan for the purpose of maintaining privacy.

**Research Methods**
The primary methods of data gathering will be photovoice and group discussion. First, the researchers will have participants take photos that represent their experiences with connecting to culture and the role that this has in improving their mental wellness (participants may use photos that were taken before the beginning of this research project if they are relevant). Following this, participants will take part in a group discussion with other participants that generate narratives based upon the images that they have taken. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this group discussion will take place virtually using the platform Zoom.

**Informed Consent**
Participation in any research project by an individual will be voluntary. Participants may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time without explanation or penalty of any sort. All research participants will be asked to provide oral informed consent prior to participating.

**Ethical Approval**
This research maintains ethical approval from the University of Saskatchewan’s Research Ethics Board (REB) upon the signing of this document.

**E. Communication**
Dr. Gary Groot and Mikaela Vancoughnett are the main contacts for the University. Any questions or documents may be sent to Dr. Gary Groot, Principal Investigator, and to Mikaela Vancoughnett, Masters Student, University of Saskatchewan.
F. Duration
This CRA shall become effective upon the completion of signatures by the researchers and the LLRIB, and will remain in effect until August 31, 2021 unless modified or terminated by any one of the parties. This CRA may be updated by mutual agreement from the researchers and the LLRIB. This CRA may be terminated by either party by giving sixty (60) days written notice to the other. This CRA may be terminated at any time with mutual written consent of the Partners.

G. Contact Information
University:
University of Saskatchewan
Dr. Gary Groot, Principal Investigator, Supervisor
College of Medicine
Department of Community Health and Epidemiology
Box 7, Health Science Building, 107 Wiggins Road
Saskatoon, SK S7N 5E5
Telephone (W): 306-966-1670
Email: gary.groot@usask.ca

- and -

University of Saskatchewan
Mikaela Vancoughnett, Masters Student, Researcher
Telephone (C): 306-380-9451
Email: Mikaela.vancoughnett@usask.ca

LLRIB
Lac La Ronge Indian Band
Tammy Cook-Searson, Chief
Telephone (C): (306) 425-8144
Email: tcooksearson@llrib.ca

H. Effective Date and Signature
This CRA becomes effective on ___________

March 30, 2021.
Date
Chief Tammy Cook-Searson

March 23, 2021
Date
Dr. Gary Groot, Principal Investigator