

The Role of Self-Determination in Health and Wellness: A Qualitative Study with Indigenous Youth Health Leaders Across Canada



JUST SIX
QUESTIONS
RESEARCH
SUMMARY

“In the 1800s when the government passed the law to, uh, outlaw practicing religious ceremonies and dances, they say that’s when our spirit died because people no longer had coping mechanisms for all of the things that were going on. ... And you do see spirit being restored back to people when they have access to their culture. When they’re able to learn about their traditions and their language and meet with like elders and different community members” (p. 4).

1. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

Mental health programs for Indigenous people have been – and continue to be – delivered through Western and/or non-Indigenous methods that frame Indigenous people as vulnerable and ill and that aim to cure. High reporting of Indigenous ‘problems’ has signaled a call for interventions from health professionals to ‘help’. Emerging Indigenous health research places Indigenous youth as experts in their own experience.

This research explores how non-state-mediated, **grounded practices of self-determination** enhance the work of Indigenous youth wellness. The study centres the active voices of Indigenous young people to explore how they define and enact self-determination – centering young people’s solutions in a way that redistributes power and resources – and how these expressions impact their health and wellness and that of their communities.

2. WHERE DID THE RESEARCH TAKE PLACE?

The research took place in Canada.

3. WHO IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is about Indigenous youth, ages 18-35, from across Canada. Participants were those who worked within the context of mental health, wellness, and life promotion, and were identified as leaders in their communities and as important knowledge holders in their understanding of health.

4. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

Researchers **selected 15 transcripts of semi-structured one-on-one interviews** conducted over video from November 2019 to May 2020 as part of a larger study called *Manitou2Manidoo*; this Indigenous youth-engaged study, conducted by Jeffrey Ansloos (one of the authors of this article), was aimed at understanding how Indigenous youth community and health activists theorize, practice, and share knowledge of health, wellness, culture, spirituality, and healing.

Participants had been recruited through **network sampling** (young people were recruited through other study participants or community contacts). The researchers were guided by a **community-based participatory action research approach**, which requires the involvement of Indigenous communities in every step of the research process.

Authors used **reflexive thematic analysis** to analyze the interview transcripts and to ensure that youth voices were being accurately understood and reflected upon, which involved sharing the analysis with the young people interviewed in the study for feedback.

5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

Results indicate that Indigenous youth define and enact self-determination through **three shared approaches**:

i) Traditional healing and embracing cultural wellness practices.

- Intentionally (re)connecting to traditional healing and cultural practices is vital to improving mental health and wellness.
- Healing through relationships with cultural ceremonies and community practices can mitigate the cultural impacts of colonization.
- Engaging in ceremony, which requires confronting the impacts of colonization.
- Reclaiming cultural and community practices in ways that make sense for the daily lives of youth.

ii) Shared lived/living experience and meeting people where they're at.

- Sharing personal and cultural wisdom from their life experiences with other young people is vital to youth wellness promotion.
- Supporting this reciprocal recognition encourages the spread of radical resurgence through everyday acts of culture reclamation and self-determination.
- Emphasizing balance and non-coercive healing practices through sharing needs and listening to yourself and others.
- Sharing and honouring different journeys and defining self-determination for yourself leads to finding tools for wellness.

iii) Community inclusion (ensuring a wide range of people with diverse lived experiences and cultural knowledge are present) and intuitive practice.

- Involving community members of many ages.
- Speaking to leadership structures run by and for Indigenous youth to centre Indigenous voices.
- Being able to work in a completely self-determined and fully Indigenous way without the need for approval or input from non-Indigenous people.

6. WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER FOR YOUTH WORK?

The young people in this study highlight the impacts of colonization on wellbeing, the multidimensional and holistic nature of health, and the healing impact of increased autonomy in Indigenous communities. Any solutions to improve Indigenous youth wellbeing must be **grounded in the community's conceptualizations of wellness and led by young people** within their communities. Youth workers should consider positioning themselves as **advocates of Indigenous youth autonomy** and **support Indigenous young people as they find their path to wellbeing**.

Emphasis must be placed on **redistributing power and resources** to bring to light the active and self-determining ways that youth build power for health transformation. Self-determination should be a primary focus of Indigenous youth health research and the implementation of mental health programming for Indigenous young people. This includes **identifying colonialism as a barrier to Indigenous youth wellness**, as colonization (re)produces trauma and alienation.

In addition to decolonizing existing spaces, Indigenous young people describe the importance of **creating their own spaces**, characterized by the freedom to express themselves. Engaging in cultural-based spirituality, encouraging healing journeys, engaging young people through reciprocal recognition, and allowing Indigenous young people to discover self-determination wellness are all protective factors anchored in Indigenous community leadership and self-governance. **Indigenous youth self-determination wellness calls for a relational strategy that includes re-negotiating relationships with settlers and the state while centering Indigenous working methods.**

Q Thornburn, R., Ansloos, J., McCormick, S., & Zantingh, D. (2023). [The role of self-determination in health and wellness: A qualitative study with Indigenous youth health leaders across Canada](#). *International Journal of Indigenous Health*, 18(1), 1-11.