A Qualitative Study of Traditional Healers and Their Experiences of Marginalization by Biomedical Professionals

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Abstract
U.S.-born and migrant Latiné communities historically access traditional healers, preferring culturally informed treatment approaches. Biomedical practitioners occasionally integrate traditional healers into treatment to inform culturally bound syndromes. This study used a qualitative framework to explore traditional healers' lived experiences of working with biomedical practitioners. Eight traditional healers who specialize in one or more traditional healing art sat for semi-structured interviews on their attitudes and beliefs about collaboration, steps to collaboration, and ways to overcome barriers. Findings reflected the oppression, marginalization, and obstacles to collaboration traditional healers often encounter from biomedical practitioners. The findings highlight the role of cultural preservation as a form of resistance against the Latiné health paradox, which posits that Latiné migrants experience poorer health the longer they are in the United States. The findings can inform legal mandates and policies on how best to incorporate traditional healers into treatment.

Introduction

Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) often have worldviews and epistemologies that biomedical mental health professionals do not easily understand. Power patterns established through colonial rule continue to define mental health treatment for marginalized communities (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). The belief in and continuation of Western

healing processes when reaching out to minoritized populations denies their social reality and limits the availability of therapeutic interventions for diverse communities.

There is a need to decolonize hegemonic biomedical theories of mental health, which originated from a colonial mindset of dominant race and gender and specifically refer to White cisgender men. In part, decolonizing healing practices requires examining power imbalances affecting the types of evidence-based treatments distributed by biomedical mental health professionals. We conducted this study to document practice-based treatment of traditional healers by biomedical professionals (e.g., psychologists and other medical doctors) and to present ancient healing in the Latiné community that is culturally specific and maintain Indigenous worldviews separate from those practiced in modern Western society.

Traditional Healers

Curanderismo is an Indigenous healing intervention based in teachings and ceremonial practices from Mesoamerica, Africa, and Spanish diasporas (Pérez-Aguilar, 2023). To bridge the gap between Latiné diasporic worldviews and the dominant theoretical discourses in Western society, traditional healers, or *curanderas*, have attracted attention in research. However, these healers have rarely been given the appropriate voice and means to integrate into Western theoretical modalities (Hoskins & Platt, 2022). Traditional healers have also largely stayed out of academic research because of stigma and marginalization in a society that does not view their practices as evidence-based (Hoskins & Padrón, 2018).

Latiné communities tend to avoid Western medicine, instead turning to traditional healers for their traditional medicine, for spiritual healing, and to maintain health that reflects their cultural beliefs (Nahin et al., 2010). Guillén (2004) noted that newcomers seeking traditional healing tend to be less acculturated to American culture and that language has been used as a

proxy to identify people who may be less acculturated. In a study on Indigenous Oaxacan Mixtecs in California, González-Vázquez et al. (2016) confirmed that maintaining cultural ties with traditional healers improved health. Other research has shown that Latiné migrants engage in medical pluralism, seeking care from traditional healers and physicians (Sandberg et al., 2018).

Inequities Experienced and Service Usage Patterns by Latinés in the United States

For Latiné and underserved populations in general, several factors can result in health inequities, including language barriers, stereotypes, and structural racism (Squires, 2018). Structural racism is of particular concern, identified as a key predictor and underlying cause of the health inequities experienced by Latiné peoples and marginalized populations (Churchwell et al., 2020). Structural barriers contribute to the risk of stress-related health disparities (e.g., obesity, diabetes; Pérez-Escamilla, 2011), compelling the need for interventions promoting health and well-being with greater relevance to clients' worldviews and belief systems.

Traditional healers engage their clients through similar worldviews, which can encompass religion/spirituality (Hoskins & Padrón, 2018). In the United States, traditional healers can be the first point of care for Latiné individuals with limited access to care. They also act as culture brokers for individuals who distrust biomedical health care systems. A systematic review of 85 studies found that the use of traditional healer among Latiné individuals ranged from 6% to 67.7% (Sandberg et al., 2018).

Limited Relevant Theory/Intervention

Various challenges can create cultural mismatches between evidence-based mindfulness programs and worldviews in Latiné communities (Castro et al., 2004), including reluctance to

seek mental health services (Paniagua, 2013); the lack of Latin- and Spanish-speaking mental health providers to offer possible racial, ethnic, and linguistic concordance (Alegría et al., 2013); and the presence of culturally specific symptoms, and increased risk of traumatic exposure in Latiné immigrants (Donlan & Lee, 2010; Paniagua, 2013). A mismatch of worldviews can result in adverse effects of dominant practices for Latiné migrants who have fled countries due to war or civil unrest (Hoskins et al., 2023). Moreover, even if the client identifies as Christian, Latiné religious and spiritual practices are diverse and may encompass Indigenous and Black diaspora practices as well as herbs and traditional medicine (Hoskins & Padrón, 2018).

Purpose of the Study

Our focus in this study was to illuminate ways to engage and work appropriately in collaboration with biomedical mental health professionals by exploring the lived experiences of traditional healers working with Latiné communities. We argue that by identifying views and experiences from past collaboration, we could provide better treatment for Latiné communities and offer guidance for other underserved communities with different worldviews from mainstream mental health providers. Ultimately, we discovered ways to decolonize mental health treatment for Latiné communities and provide liberating approaches to the lived experiences of traditional healers with expansive philosophies about health and wellness. Our results identified issues related to colonialism and oppression, liberation, and discrimination.

Methods

Participants

We interviewed a purposeful sample of eight traditional healers working in predominantly Mexican and Central American communities in California. Inclusion criteria

required self-identification as a traditional healer with at least five years of practice and offered

at least one type of traditional healing method. Participants must have learned their vocation

directly from another traditional healer and be fluent in Spanish (see Table 1).

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Participant	Language	Client ethnicities	Area of expertise	License	Clients of Mexican descent	Years of practice	Gender	Age	Region where practices were learned
Cristina	English, Spanish	Mexican, Mexican American, Anglo-American	Sobadas	MT & N	> 300	30	Female	63	New Mexico; Cuernavaca, Mexico
Griselda	English, Spanish, Nahuatl	Chicano, Latiné, Native to Mexico, African American, Asian American, European American	Spiritual, herbalist	Psychology	5,000	50	Female	77	Oaxaca, Mexico
Harriet	Spanish, English, Nahuatl Lakota	Mexican American, Native Mexican, Native American	Spiritual, herbalist	LMFT, HP	7–800	35	Female	58	New Mexico; Michoacan and Oaxaca, Mexico
Francisca	Zapotec, Spanish	Northern Oaxacans, Mexicans	Traditional midwife		> 5,000	58	Female	75	Northern Oaxaca, Mexico
Alberto	Maya Quiche, Spanish	Mayans, Latins	All		> 1,000	> 40	Male	48	Maya
Guadeloupe	English, Spanish	Mexicans, Chicanos, Native Americans, Anglos	Sobadas, herbalist, temascalera, suction cups	MT	3–500	10	Female	57	Jalisco and Morelos, Mexico

Participant	Language	Client ethnicities	Area of expertise	License	Clients of Mexican descent	Years of practice	Gender	Age	Region where practices were learned
José	English, Spanish	Mexicans, individuals from Latin Americans, Caucasians	Spiritual, talks		> 100	20	Male	63	San Luis Potosi, Mexico
Juan	English, Spanish, Nahuatl	Chicanos, Mexicans, Indians	Spiritual, herbs, talks	Master of Arts in Psychiatry	>1,000	35	Male	60	Chihuahua and Aguas Calientes, Mexico

Note. MT = massage therapy; HP = holistic practitioner; N = naturopathic

Measurement

We conducted in-depth interviews in English or Spanish depending on the participant's language preference. Traditional healers who spoke an Indigenous language (e.g., Mam or Zapotec) completed the interview in Spanish, given the lack of interpreters for these languages. However, they expressed confidence in dialogue in Spanish. In keeping with phenomenological theory, the interviews consisted of open-ended questions to cover areas underrepresented in the current literature.

Recruitment and Data Collection

The director of a mental health agency who studied curanderismo for 25 years provided contact information for traditional healers. We also used snowball sampling with enrolled participants. The small sample, similar to Lieblich et al.'s (1998) recommendations, facilitated a meaningful and deep understanding of the participants' lived experiences as practitioners of curanderismo and connections with biomedical providers.

All study materials and procedures were reviewed and approved by a university institutional review board. Data were collected on two separate occasions, approximately 1–2 weeks apart. Each interview was 1–2 hours, for a total of 2–4 hours per participant. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed with the interviewees' permission. Before conducting the interviews, the principal investigator reflected on his expectations and values related to the study. Reflexivity allows researchers to increase their awareness of the dynamics between themselves and the participants (Nilson, 2017).

Data Analysis

We used Langdridge's (2007) methodological framework to develop distinct narrative stories for each participant, highlighting the range of lived experiences and situated traditional healers as heterogeneous communities. We explored stories to identify rhetorical tone and function and how participants constructed and presented their identities. Using critical phenomenology as a methodological lens, we critically analyzed narratives from the perspective of knowledge and oppression in biomedical spaces, deconstructing how traditional healers lived experiences—both inside and outside of biomedical spaces—are shaped by anti-Indigenous racism and sexism as structures of White settler colonialism that subjugates Indigenous ways.

We then used phenomenological critical narrative analysis, which combines hermeneutics with critical theory to expose hidden power imbalances and challenge the status quo (Langdridge, 2009), to explore issues directly influenced by power issues such as traditional healer interactions and oppressive treatment by biomedical providers. Filtered through the lens of liberation psychologies, we identified significant patterns in the data, reading and rereading the texts several times, pointing out emerging ideas and highlighting key sentences. Inductive nodes were captured separately for each participant, followed by comparing nodes between

participants to determine relationships between them, categorize them, and develop topics from them. The analysis was an iterative process, requiring several revisions of the original transcripts to refine the categories and core themes. Destabilizing the narrative involved using critical theory to analyze narratives from a place that would deprivilege Western approaches to mental health.

We sought specific interactions and effects of colonial oppression, considering the relational dynamics and historical roots of biomedicine that maintain oppression and disadvantage between traditional healers and Indigenous communities. We identified salient commonalities and engaged in discussions to challenge, question, and justify interpretations. From our critical point of view, we identified the main themes and interactions influencing oppressive possibilities and also highlighted how traditional healers resist biomedical forms of oppression to revitalize Indigenous ways of healing. From an Indigenous epistemological standpoint, the participants' narratives revealed the nuances of what it will take for collaboration between traditional healers and biomedical providers to break free from the coloniality of mental health care, where legitimacy is given to those with educational credentials rather than community recognition and trust.

Researcher Positionality

The research team was three scholars with shared and distinct identities across race, class, gender, ability status, age, etc. The first author is a bilingual Mexican American who has practiced psychology with Latiné populations for most of his career and has personal experience with traditional healing. The second author is an Indigenous Xicana scholar with Zapotec roots and lived experience navigating the mental health system as a provider, service user, and activist. The third author is a Mexican physician, a specialist in family medicine, with postgraduate

training in social anthropology and expertise in urban and rural traditional healing in Mexico and Latin America.

Results

We next discuss the results for the three theme-focused analyses (i.e., beliefs and attitudes toward collaboration, lived experiences of collaboration and obstacles, and how they were overcome). Participants are identified by pseudonyms. The themes reflect the importance of structural equity in collaboration and recognition of Indigenous roots in cultural constructions or worldviews by working with practitioners from different backgrounds.

Attitudes and Beliefs Toward Working With Biomedical Providers

Most traditional healers had positive attitudes toward collaboration and focused on the values of openness and respect in the collaborative process. They saw value in collaborating with biomedical professionals, identifying aspects such as differences between therapeutic approaches as a reason for doing so, as shown in Cristina's statement: "A traditional healer works with a person spiritually, but a therapist may have more to offer in terms of ongoing therapy, such as improving relationships."

Several participants said biomedical professionals regularly contacted them for consultations. Alberto noted that biomedical mental health therapists would call him regarding healing interventions "when the relationship [between practitioner and patient] is not working." He added that psychiatrists referred clients to him, usually when they had difficulty assessing psychosis and differentiating it from a culturally specific syndrome.

Reasons for Collaboration

The participants generally refer to mental health therapists in three situations: when they identify clients needing long-term work, when clients are in acute crisis, and for medication evaluations, even when there is apprehension about pharmaceuticals. Cristina explained, "When I see a client repeatedly for the same problem or there is no progress, the person gets stuck." José spoke about the importance of medication: "Sometimes medication is necessary when some of the immediate symptoms are disrupting your life. Herbal medicine is slow acting and takes a little time. Western medicine, in the right doses, in the right regulation, can be helpful."

Several participants felt they had the knowledge and ability to intervene through psychotropic drugs. However, when working in the United States, they referred clients who needed psychotropic drugs to psychiatrists due to U.S. laws. José described his collaborative process in these cases: "There are times when I think it's better for the psychiatrist to do it, because even with Indigenous knowledge, we need to use certain psychotropic drugs, and I'm not authorized to do it here."

Compliance With U.S. Laws

Some study participants earned degrees or certificates in areas such as biomedical mental health, certified massage therapy, holistic practice, and naturopathy to practice legally in the United States (see Table 1). This showed the traditional healer's ability to navigate both Indigenous-centered and biomedical spaces through code switching when necessary.

Of the participants who did not have a degree in biomedical mental health, most said they referred clients to a physician when they felt it was warranted. For example, José, a traditional healer employed by a hospital, stated:

> Sometimes, I work with a traditional therapist [because] I believe in the team approach. So, I like to know what kind of treatment, what kind of medication … what their therapist, the doctor is doing and complement or work as a team with them.

The Need for Structural Equity in Collaboration

The participants described establishing a relationship between the therapist and the traditional healer as intertwined with structural equity. Francisca said, "I believe many things are possible, but for me, collaboration means that people know each other as equals. For this reason, the initial connection should express a level of respect on the part of the therapist." Griselda explained how relationships are ideally initiated from a position of structural equity:

> Well, you [the therapist] call them [the traditional healer], you honor them by acknowledging something about the work they do, that you've heard positive things about the types of interventions they do that you need their help, that you have someone you're working with who you think needs culturally appropriate interventions, that you know you can't do, or that you don't know enough about, and that you would like them to talk to this person to see if they can help.

The participants also stressed the importance of having connections to whom they refer. Many stated that they must know the agency to which they send a client and only refer to therapists with whom they can develop relationships and feel comfortable with. This established connection fosters trust in traditional healers who are committed to the well-being of the people they serve. Francisca said she had never collaborated with a psychologist and expressed reluctance when asked if she would collaborate: "Maybe, if I see what the psychologist does, if he or she is really doing what he or she should be doing, and if he or she is managing the patient properly, but if they are not, I would not agree."

The participants emphasized that collaboration should be reciprocal, and that a lack of initiative on their part can hinder it by preventing a sense of mutual exchange. Although Albert has received referrals, collaborated with psychiatrists and medical doctors, and has received

clients from psychotherapists, he has not initiated collaboration with therapists because "If I put a lot of time and energy into obstacles, because there are many, it probably won't help a lot of people." He added,

> I haven't gotten into the subject of psychotherapists because I understand that I have my forms of treatment, it's not like I know about [psychotherapists'] knowledge, what's good work, what's not, it's that person's responsibility, and I understand that. There is no framework, they cannot comment on my work, they cannot give an opinion about the work I do. They can say that I am not a professional, I have my job, I have my mission, I have my vision, I have my responsibility and my respect.

Because of how she was treated in past interactions, Francisca, an elder from the Zapotec tribe of Oaxaca, Mexico, said she would not refer to a biomedical mental health provider but did give evidence of referring to physicians. She described a lack of empathy in biomedical practice resulting in maintaining a distance between psychologists and clients, which is different from the ways traditional healers use their hearts and spirit to connect with the people they serve: "Especially when I worked with these psychologists, it grieved me greatly because they had sickness of the soul."

Negative views such as these cannot be separated from the structural violence of the medical industrial complex, which has traditionally stigmatized and marginalized traditional healers. One feeling among the study participants was that biomedical mental health professionals believe traditional healing practices are not credible due to the noninstitutionalization of Indigenous practices. Griselda stated, "Particularly the psychiatrists, who called me as a last resort, I was a woman, Native and short, and they were skeptical, arrogant in their behavior, so that was always difficult."

Griselda described biomedical arrogance as a feeling of knowing everything or a form of law that reflects the qualities of Eurocentric hegemony (ideology) in biomedicine. Ultimately, it is other forms of healing as prescribed by traditional healers like Griselda simply because they

are not evidence-based. As a "last resort," Griselda recalled her intersectional identities as a

Zapotec woman that marginalize her and how aging in the community allowed her to adopt an

assertive communication style and develop critical awareness. Alberto gave a concrete example:

> In my case, I suggested some treatments [using a particular drug] that are the same
> treatments that a doctor would suggest, and he can [prescribe] it because he's a doctor,
> and I'm not authorized to [prescribe it], and there were people that day who said, "Why
> do you suggest this guy?" So in cases like this, they [the doctor and the client] don't think
> I'm a professional.

Although Alberto and the other healers are, at worst, perceived as unprofessional, they

externalize oppression by reminding themselves and others that they know enough about

biomedical interventions and can code switch between these two spaces.

Establishing Relationships With Other Providers

The participants detailed key steps for establishing relationships with biomedical

providers, including assessing the need for services, defining the scope of work, and determining

the linguistic and cultural competence of collaborators. Defining the provider's scope of work is

a critical step in collaboration. José said, "For me, I like to know where the therapist is going

with this person, what their plan is." Similarly, Francisca emphasized the importance of

redefining the scope of work, stating,

> We need to see the value of what each of us is doing, that we share information and that
> we have similar goals in mind, that we understand objectives and goals, that we
> complement [each other]. My role is not to replace anyone else's work but to
> complement. The client will benefit, and the family will benefit, the community will.

Francisca's view aligns with Albert Marshall's two-eyed seeing approach to seeing the world,

described in Moorman et al. (2021) as being able to understand and use Indigenous forms of

healing and the biomedical model.

Defining the scope of work may also encompass awareness of one's limits in training, knowledge, and necessary licenses and generally describes a sense of cultural humility in the healers' perceptions of themselves. While expressing frustration with the biomedical and governmental gaze that limits what he can do as a traditional healer, Alberto also embodied a humble approach in acknowledging when his knowledge of the body and wellness has peaked:

> I have the confidence, the ability, the experience, the energy to do it, the plants are similar, but I can't. The same governmental state law here will not allow it. In my case, I respect that. I respect this law.

Language and Cultural Humility

Determining language and cultural humility is also important. Both are potential obstacles to collaboration, such as when a traditional healer speaks an Indigenous language and the therapist is unable to engage in dialogue with the traditional healer. Understanding the cultural language of distress is necessary to recruit a traditional healer who can adequately address the client's needs. Alberto noted the importance of having nuanced explanations of health and healing related to a specific culture, a better cultural understanding of idioms of distress, and the negative outcomes of treatment if a therapist does not employ a traditional healer:

> Most people never had the confidence to share that [culturally specific explanation of distress] with the doctor, male or female doctor, and there are times they don't; for example, the Indigenous peoples in Mexico, and the Maya, the Indigenous peoples of the South, such as Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, Colombia, Panama. The character of Indigenous peoples is that they don't give confidence [to mainstream practitioners] very quickly. If you are not a person from your own culture, they will not share information.
> 	The other thing is that the language of the individual is important. [For example], the thought of Indigenous peoples, that the heart is in the navel of the person, and so the person will tell you that their heart is causing them pain, and while you wait for them to put their hand on their chest, they put it upside down, and that means that the heart is the center of the person, in the middle of the person. Most Indigenous people talk that way, and therefore the therapist, the doctor, the professional will not understand issues like that. We must also understand the perspective of Latinés, of Indigenous peoples. How

they classify, the names they use, their forms of healing, meanings. For example, the meaning of color, as for cultures here the danger is red, but in the Indigenous culture it means hope and light.

Knowledge of Culturally Based Syndromes

Traditional healers expressed knowing that people have cognitive cultural constructs or worldviews that align with traditional healers as an important element in establishing relationships with other providers. Using therapists who do not understand clients' cultural worldviews or who cannot properly integrate traditional healers' practices into their own can lead to negative psychiatric outcomes. Griselda gave a specific example: "Because, particularly the community [name of the specific region], there are Mexicans, immigrants, and they still carry those forms [beliefs in traditional healing] with them."

Traditional healers do not expect therapists to know how to address culturally specific symptoms and syndromes. Alberto noted that "[psychiatrists] don't understand many parts, for example, [people with schizophrenia] … They didn't find the answer with the analysis, the examination, the labs, and they want to understand the client's part of the disease." As Harriet stated, "Particularly for mental health professionals, not everything they are taught in their classes, like psychopathology or whatever, is universal, there are some experiences and responses to those experiences that are culturally specific."

Challenges to Collaboration and How to Overcome Them

An obstacle to effectively using the knowledge of traditional healers is that clients perceive marginalization by biomedical professionals and Western society at large and do not disclose the use of traditional healing practices. As a result, biomedical providers remain closed to possibilities for collaboration. Griselda said, "You know, if you ask [the client] if they use

traditional healing, they'll probably say no." She described why individuals would not disclose the use of a traditional healer: "They would feel that the doctor, the nurse, the therapist would think less of them [for using curanderismo]."

Several traditional healers noted concerns about using people who are not traditional healers but who present themselves as such as an obstacle to collaboration, which also speaks to concerns about the legitimacy of traditional healing practices in the eyes of the majority. Harriet emphasized the importance of being trained in the traditional way: being identified as a child as having the gift, undertake an apprenticeship, and then dedicate one's life to practicing traditional healing. She identified a negative consequence of legitimizing practices through research being that it could allow people who are not trained by traditional healer-elders to present themselves as traditional healers: "Yes, that's my concern because then what does it become? And then someone will take three workshops and be ready to go as a traditional healer, truth? Some of these magazines are really like, 'Come to a shaman's workshop.'" Harriet discussed the acculturation and commodification of curanderismo, including tensions between curanderas who are trained through family learning and curanderas who are trained by mentors or on their own.

If people do not recognize the practice as valid for a community, traditional healers will not be available. Griselda explained:

> So, I see it as a problem of the system, and also the system again recognizes it [curanderismo] as a legitimate intervention, which has validity for certain groups of people. Which means they recognize something else, apart from Western psychology and Western theory, and we're not there yet.

Alberto, who has directly experienced questions about his validity as a healer, said, "I've been repeatedly asked what grade I have, [questions like] 'Is that [traditional healer] something that is studied by degrees?' 'Who is your master?' Respect, it will still be years before the knowledge of Indigenous peoples is recognized." He added, "I think I mentioned that the domain of

professionalism is very strong [as an obstacle to collaboration], saying that curanderismo

classifies the individual as having no empirical knowledge, knowledge that is not approved

because it is not recognized in any state."

Guadalupe discussed the possible source of the negative views of curanderismo in her

community:

> We have, here in the south of [specific region], a bonesetter who was treating people at home. It was very popular; I mean, people were in line and then one day someone died at his table when he was adjusting his neck; He was in jail immediately. He was deported and everything, and he was covered very badly in the news for someone who practiced without a license. But the Mexican community knew something else was going on with that person [who died]. Yes, because anything that isn't provided by the mainstream, is seen with a certain amount of, you know, guilt, really, or at least illegal, you know.

In this tragic situation described by Guadalupe, there are several theoretical concepts to point to,

including state surveillance of traditional healers and how this incident was deliberately removed

from its context to criminalize the huesero rather than exploring the totality of the situation and

the various factors that played a role in the death of the person who sought traditional healing

services.

Difficulties with documentation and other forms of medical bureaucracy are other

common obstacles to collaboration. Insurance-related obstacles can arise when a therapist

incorporates a traditional healer into the treatment and writes a note for insurance

reimbursement. For example, the biomedical physician's organization may not receive

reimbursement for services if insurance auditors do not approve the documentation, and

traditional healing is a service that may not be allowed. José said, "When you work with a

government agency, bureaucracy, hospital, private practice, they have certain guidelines, they

may not recognize the work. In fact, they don't, because they don't pay for it."

Some participants discussed navigating potential deallocation by insurance companies by using insurance-friendly language in existing charts and forms. Harriet described her experience working alongside mental health professionals:

> Now, the graphics are specific, but I would say, 'A cultural intervention using traditions that are familiar to this person.' Maybe now you can say 'I prayed with them,' but they're rigid because of funding, but I think you can say prayer because it reduces symptoms and they can manage their anxiety.

In addition to obstacles to collaboration with biomedical health providers and ways to overcome them, participants outlined several strategies for sustaining their healing work, using resources from academic research and funding, and helping to train future generations of biomedical health providers.

Obtaining a License to Practice in the Host Culture

Having a license in a related field helps traditional healers practice legally in California. Cristina explained, "It's a somatic certification to touch someone; otherwise, you can't touch people." She described how this helps her in her practice: "That [sobada] usually consists of touching the person with massage or bodywork, you know, under the temazcal [sweat lodge], you know, a variety of things. Therefore, it requires physical contact." Cristina also explained that paying for a credential, such as a massage license, could be difficult for traditional healers: "Most of the people who do this work, they would never be able to [pay for education to get the license] because [the traditional healer] barely manages, they live with very modest [means], they can't spend $2,000 or $3,000 to get that certificate."

Needing to seek state-level licenses to achieve professional legitimacy supports another form of surveillance between credentialed and uncredentialed traditional healers. Study participants provided examples of attempts to address biomedical mental health providers'

perceptions that traditional healing is not a legitimate health practice, including education and

publishing research that promotes traditional healing.

Education

The participants discussed education's importance in preventing obstacles to

collaboration, citing numerous ways they have educated mainstream practitioners. José described

his process for educating biomedical practitioners about his practices:

> You have to be very patient, and you have to be willing sometimes even to come back
> and not take that personally. That it says something about your work, that you practice
> [curanderismo], you don't take it personally, but you probably get out, and that's the
> open support, to help them, to educate.

José noted that he uses "language that will be more easily accepted, with a counselor, you know,

the traditional healer is a teacher and a counselor as well." Harriet also described an approach

she took: "I developed a project [specific name]. I found funding, two big conferences where 15

traditional healers gave talks and workshops."

Harriet, who speaks at medical school conferences, discussed how doing so decreases

stigma and raises awareness: "Medical school, when I go there, most of the people who go to the

workshop are very interested, but some other people, I know they think 'this is a bunch of

curanderismo.'" She named the spectrum of openness to curanderismo in biomedical spaces and

highlighted the benefit of including curanderismo in the teaching curriculum in medical schools

and in biomedical mental health training, to name a few.

In Mexico City, the National Autonomous University of Mexico has introduced the

course of Medical Anthropology and Interculturality to medical students since 2010, which

includes topics of medical pluralism and place-based medicine (Maya & Vega, 2021). There is

also an optional course of Mexico, Multicultural Nation, where an exclusive session on

Indigenous health and traditional Mexican medicine is offered to university students pursuing

various careers.

Editorial Research

Traditional healers identified published research as a way to lessen the stigma related to

traditional healing. Griselda described her belief that academic research demonstrates the

efficacy of traditional healing practices: "So this thing that happens around the battery, what

NIMH did, they call legitimate community intervention." She continued,

> It's like an oxymoron. If you want evidence-based [treatments], how about 5,000 years
> for acupuncture and about 10,000 years for these interventions, we try to grid these things
> that come out of another system. With the battery it was possible because people, over
> the last 10 years, have been studying brain activity and what affects brain activity. They
> did it with drugs with different things, they started looking at vibrations, and so they were
> able to show that certain frequencies of vibration at certain levels of vibration had
> impacts on certain parts of the brain.
>   So, I don't know if you read [a psychologist's dissertation]. He wrote his
> dissertation on that [the healing effects of percussion]. He was the one who started it at [a
> specific agency]. There was already some evidence from researchers in general, the same
> research on prayers, and what that meant, and some other things they had done in Russia
> around auras and made it possible.

Discussion

We strove to understand the experiences of traditional healers when working with

biomedical professionals. The findings highlight the role of cultural preservation when Latiné

migrants seek out a traditional healer as a form of resistance against the Latiné health paradox of

poorer health the longer they are in the United States. They also highlight the complexity of

migrants' emotional and mental well-being; specifically, how revitalizing Indigenous wellness

approaches mitigates structural determinants of health. The core values of humility, respect, and

reciprocity can help dismantle the power differentials between traditional healers and biomedical providers.

Overall, the study participants indicated positive value working with biomedical professionals. However, structural challenges to collaboration were evident in the healers' lived experiences. They gave multiple accounts of being called by biomedical professionals when these professionals were unsure of how best to understand and/or treat clients with alternative worldviews, which highlights their critical roles as knowledge keepers and cultural bearers. Similar to the notion of structural vulnerability in Quesada et al. (2011), the participants described class-based economic exploitation and cultural, gender, and racial/ethnic discrimination, including complementary processes of formation of depreciated subjectivity. The negative experiences between the two opposing worldviews caused some traditional healers to only receive referrals and not to refer because of anticipated retaliation if something went wrong and the culture of surveillance embedded in Western health systems.

Study participants identified the value of increasing language proficiency when working with biomedical providers, as they (traditional healers) often speak Indigenous languages that may not be easily accessible to biomedical professionals. Understanding and being able to explain alternative views and causes of disease is an important value that traditional healers have. Previous research has shown that biomedical professionals use traditional healers not only to understand worldviews but also to access community and build relationships with the people they work with (Hoskins & Platt, 2021).

Although the participants gave multiple accounts of being contacted by biomedical professionals, they were concerned about practicing in the United States and being subjected to institutionalized and internalized forms of surveillance. Some obtained alternative licenses that

allowed them to practice. Whether traditional healers can legally work in the United States and employ culturally specific treatments is an ethical dilemma to which the American Psychological Association must respond.

Research continues to focus on the medicinal and measurable properties of Indigenous treatments (Chamorro & Ladio, 2020). While discovering new forms of pharmacology and psychotropics seems beneficial, the participants expressed concerns over biomedical professionals attempting to use traditional healing treatments without understanding the rituals and ceremonies that accompany their use, thus decontextualizing the practice from traditional healers' Indigenous roots. For example, earth-based ceremonies or prescribing herbs can be helpful for people with Indigenous worldviews. However, we argue against biomedical professionals employing these practices and propose collaborations that are with, by, and for traditional healers who embody transgenerational apprenticeship.

Sadly, what the traditional healers' stories strongly illustrated were multiple experiences of subordination, marginalization, and oppression by biomedical professionals. The traditional healers did not feel they or their knowledge, were taken seriously. The negative interactions they had experienced led some to eschew collaborating with biomedical professionals. In addition, it was evident that the patients tend not to share their belief systems and traditional healers' engagement with biomedical professionals due to the lack of legitimacy of traditional healing in the United States. Research has shown that the utilization of medicinal properties from traditional healing, or alternative medicine, continues among a high percentage of Latiné, Polynesian, African American, and Asian populations (Hoskins & Platt, 2022; Ouma et al., 2023). Research has also documented harmful effects when combining treatments (Fakeye et al.,

2009) and has provided credibility for the concern that all parties involved (the traditional healer, the biomedical professional, and the client) should work in tandem.

On the other hand, and independent of the settler–colonial and hegemonic ideological aspects of Western medicine, Latiné families who have migrated to the United States still preserve the place-based medical culture in the figure of grandmothers and mothers, where knowledge and practice on the most frequent diseases linked to culture (e.g., evil eye, fright, courage, nerves) are still recognized in the home environment. In Latiné families, medicinal plants are used; rituals are made without the need to go to medical providers as caregivers (e.g., mothers, grandmothers) are readily available to provide them.

Clinical Implications

The traditional healers in this study gave voice to both integration and collaboration with biomedical professionals for reasons including adequately addressing clients' cultural worldviews, clinical stagnation, and the proven efficacy of practices such as the medicinal properties of herbs and drum circles. Furthermore, it is clear that the biomedical profession has encountered culturally specific expressions of distress as cultural responses to experiences but possesses limited knowledge of how to have a positive impact (see the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* [*DSM-5*], American Psychiatric Association, 2013). When clients exhibit culturally specific reactions that need to be addressed through culturally specific methods, as noted by Hoogasian and Lijtmaer (2010), biomedical mental health professionals may have difficulty conceptualizing and treating these individuals. Similarly, not working to incorporate a client's worldview and beliefs into treatment can involve further cultural trauma. For example, when a client presents as *embrujado* (haunted), if the

mental health biomedical professional denies this explanation or medicates the client, he or she inadvertently dismisses the client's cultural vision.

This study provides clinicians with guidelines for incorporating the assistance and expertise of traditional healers. Biomedical professionals should keep several points in mind when collaborating or considering collaboration with traditional healers. First, clients tend not to share their use of traditional healers. Therefore, it may be more important to assess preferences in forms of healing than to ask specifically about traditional healing. Biomedical professionals may share their own past experiences or show interest in connecting with alternative providers. Indicators of collaboration may include the cultural idioms of distress in the *DSM-5*. When speaking with a traditional healer, a biomedical professional should express respect for the healer's practice. Traditional healers have unique skills that biomedical professionals must evaluate to match collaborators to client needs.

Critical dialogue is a way to understand how to incorporate traditional healers into biomedical mental health. While there are apparent legal and philosophical difficulties in fitting traditional healing practices into a Western medical paradigm, this becomes a social policy issue that the American Psychological Association, along with other medical and mental health professional organizations, can address. One way to address legal and ethical guideline concerns is to investigate the regulatory systems in university environments in Mexico and Latin America in general. For example, Mexico legalized traditional Indigenous medicine in the second article of the Mexican Constitution in 2001. Since 2006, the General Health Law, at the federal level, established the government's obligation to recognize, respect, and promote traditional Indigenous medicine (Campos-Navarro, 2015)

Study Limitations

Our sample of eight traditional healers was small. Therefore, generalization is difficult, and it is important to note that traditional healers are not a monolith. All practitioners were located in California, and there was obvious selection bias as many were referred by other traditional healers. We found that traditional healers had been integrated into community hospital clinics to help biomedical professionals in addressing alternative worldviews. However, there was limited dialogue regarding how this integration was implemented.

Recommendations for Future Research

One recommendation is to conduct clinical trials within their cultural context to evaluate the purported medicinal properties of herbs. Another is to include a control group of individuals with culturally linked syndromes, comparing the efficacy of treatment by traditional healers versus biomedical providers. Additionally, research on the empirical knowledge and practices developed by Latina migrant grandmothers and mothers with respect to culturally related diseases connected to mental health—such as the evil eye, nerves, and fright—would be valuable, particularly where medicinal plants and specific rituals are used. Lastly, it is recommended that research on Indigenous healing practices, such as curanderismo, be conducted by, with, and for Indigenous peoples, in partnership with Indigenous scholars.

Data availability statement: The dataset used and analyzed during the current study can be made available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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'My You're a Great Man': A Wâkôhtowin Exploration of the Changing Indigenous Masculinity

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Abstract

When it comes to examining Indigenous boys, men, and masculinities, much of the research remains theoretical in nature, with few scholarly explorations of how diverse, place-specific Indigenous nations engage in processes of recuperating and sustaining the Indigenous values, roles, and responsibilities of boys and men. In this paper, we present research emerging from a five-year "community-first Land centred" project with Ochêkwi-Sîpî (Fisher River Cree Nation), which is located in the territory today known as 'Canada'. The findings in this paper foreground the stories of eighteen Elders that were gathered through sharing circles and intergenerational interviews. The findings are analyzed using a relational ontology, and more specifically the Cree concept of wâkôhtowin (being related). In so doing, we were able to see how an ethic of relational accountability to self, community, nation, and more-than-human relations was woven through the stories of the Elders, as they envisioned what Cree masculinities could be.

"Each person in our families and nations is a medicine. Differently abled people, trans, queer, and two-spirit people, and those that use substances and, live with addictions, all have gifts to offer." (Konsmo & Recollet, 2018, p. 242)

Introduction

Settler scholar Sam McKegney (2021) provocatively asks "what if Indigenous masculinities themselves were conceived as medicines?" (p. xii). What if, in other words, Indigenous masculinities were to be upheld as part of the process of healing and re-building Indigenous nationhood? Such a line of questioning is indeed a dangerous one because colonialism has always been—and continues to be—a gendered process (Barker, 2017; Goeman, 2013; Hokowhitu, 2015; Pyle, 2020). With the historical and ongoing conditions of gendered colonialism in mind, Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) is concerned that foregrounding Indigenous masculinities, as McKegney (2021) suggests, might "reinforce the colonial gender binary centering cisgendered straight men (who are already the centre of everything) instead of dismantling heteropatriarchy" (p. 137). This tension between, on the one hand, affirming Indigenous 'maleness' and 'masculinities,' while recognizing the destructive effects historical and ongoing processes of gendered colonialism have had on Indigenous communities, on the other, has resulted in somewhat of an *impasse* within scholarly examinations of Indigenous masculinities, especially healthy Indigenous masculinities. Within this context, it has been easier to write about unhealthy Indigenous masculinities, where Indigenous men are either characterized as violent victimizers (Innes, 2015; Innes & Anderson, 2015) or themselves as victims of poverty, addiction, or absenteeism (Sinclair & McKegney, 2014). Either way, such constructions reduce Indigenous masculinity to pathology, foreclosing considerations of how Indigenous men either challenge or creatively negotiate settler conditions of possibility to their own purposes (Hokowhitu & McKegney, 2014), much less any thought as to how Indigenous masculinities might themselves be conceived as medicines.

Notwithstanding the risks, Cree-Métis scholar Kim Anderson maintains that engaging

healthy Indigenous masculinities is critical work because Indigenous communities are only going

to be as healthy as are the men. Thus, Anderson's work is guided by a "vision for healthy

families and communities" that sees Indigenous men as having gifts to offer and thus being

pivotal to realizing this vision (Anderson & McKegney, 2014, p. 92). However, this is not an

uncomplicated vision to actualize because it involves unearthing place-specific values and

practices as a pathway to both dismantling heteropatriarchy while at the same time re-thinking

and re-building healthy relationships with land and kin in the service of Indigenous nationhood[1]

(Anderson et al., 2015). Anishinaabe scholar Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair outlines a three-

phase process for conducting this difficult work. The first phase involves interrogating the

historical settler colonial regimes of "dispossession, disenfranchisement, and social engineering"

that continue to constrain the contemporary conditions of possibility for Indigenous boys and

men (Sinclair & McKegney, 2014, p. 232). In the second phase, Sinclair suggests that we seek

out nation-specific knowledges about healthy Indigenous masculinities that continue to exist

within the community, although often obscured by "invented traditions" of Indigenous

masculinity (Hokowhitu, 2015), by engaging Elders and knowledge holders. In the third and

final phase, the knowledge gained in the first two phases can, alongside a critical awareness, be

implemented in "imaginative ways that might engender a variety of possibilities for non-

dominative yet empowered Indigenous masculinities" (Sinclair & McKegney, 2014, p. 232). In

this paper, we engage with the first and second phases by sharing the stories of eighteen Elders

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[1] Nationhood, as we use it in this paper, is not the bounded colonial nation-state that divides inside from outside, but rather draws on the notion of kinship or wâkôhtowin -based (being related) practices of peoplehood that are inclusive of diverse human and more-than-human relationships (see Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000; Kolonpenuk, 2020). Here, Cree peoplehood or sovereignty is not governed by the possessive logics of Western capital, but being in relation, which animates Ininiwak [Cree] peoplehood whereby each individual is a synecdochal part of the whole" (Kolopenuk, 2020, p. 10).

involved in a "community-first, Land-centred" (Styres & Zinga, 2013) research project with

Fisher River Cree Nation (*Ochêkwi-Sîpî*).

Before turning to these stories, we discuss what Indigenous and Cree masculinities *could be* when embedded in practices of relational accountability or wâkôhtowin and follow this with an overview of the existing theory and research emerging from Indigenous feminist, gender, and sexuality studies, with a particular focus on the impacts settler colonialism has had on Indigenous gender formations broadly and Indigenous masculinities more specifically. We have elected to organize the paper this way, privileging the aspirational and practical over theoretical and historical accounts of trauma, in an attempt to "unsettle and disrupt…the regime of theory over practice" that characterizes dominant Western-centred approaches to research and scholarship (Walsh & Mignolo, 2018, p. 9). We are also hopeful that such a move creates space for the emergence of desire-centred research, where strengths, yearnings, and continuities of those involved in the research are foregrounded, as opposed to historical and ongoing traumas (Tuck, 2009). We follow this with an outline of our methods and then turn to three over-arching themes emerging from the project, including: an exploration of *Ininiw* [Cree] masculinities; an examination of how these masculinities are evolving in relation to the changing social, economic, cultural, and land environments within the community; and finally, a brief overview of gender expansiveness within Fisher River Cree Nation. We conclude the paper by turning, once again, to community Elders and knowledge holders who offer a pathway for a Cree-centred futurity for Indigenous masculinity (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Relationally Accountable Roles and Responsibilities of Boys and Men

According to a relational worldview, which is a common worldview amongst many

Indigenous nations, the self is continuously becoming through the diverse human and more-than-

human relationships that one holds and is accountable to. Cherokee author and scholar, Daniel

Heath Justice (2008), speaks of this relational worldview in terms of kinship, suggesting that:

> kinship isn't a static thing: it's dynamic, ever in motion. It requires attentiveness; kinship is best thought of as a verb rather than a noun, because kinship, in most Indigenous contexts, is something that's done more than something that simply is. (cited in McKegney, 2021, p. 154-5)

Here, the self is in a perpetual state of becoming in relation to, and through participation in, "an

ongoing and dynamic system of mutually affecting relationships" (Justice cited in McKegney,

2021, p. 157). The Cree use the word *wâkôhtowin* to describe the kinship laws that guide

respectful and "mutually affecting relationships" within the community, where community is

understood broadly and is inclusive of human and more-than-human relations. Here, one is only

as healthy as are their relationships and thus following the laws of *wâkôhtowin* leads to deeper

inter-connectedness within the community, and ultimately to *mino-pimatisiwin*, a Cree term used

to refer to the good life. For Ininiw (Cree) people, 'the good life' is not a destination, nor is it a

static state of being, but is an ongoing journey of healing, learning, and being-in-relation (Hart,

2002). *Mino-pimatisiwin* is rooted in a number of foundational concepts, including *wholeness*,

where all aspects of life—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual—are incorporated into being

in a *balanced* (thoughtful consideration of all aspects of life) and *harmonious* (respectful

relations with self and others) manner. When practiced well, *mino-pimatisiwin* leads to growth

and healing (Hart, 2002), which is conceptualized more broadly as the practice of continuously

striving to learn about and restore the "person, community, and nation to wholeness,

connectedness, and balance" (Reginer, 1994, p. 135). Healing holistically from a *mino-

pimatisiwin* way recognizes that it is more than about a person, or generation of individuals, but

is linked through intergenerational responsibility to previous generations and the generations to

come. When applied to Indigenous masculinities, the pathway towards healthy masculinities

means dis-investing from some relations (e.g., settler colonial constructions of individualism and heteropatriarchy) and remembering *wâkôhtowin*, or "how to think relationally, to know relationally, to speak relationally: to be in relation" (Kolopenuk, 2020, p. 67). This remembering is heavily reliant on learning of traditional practices, whether ceremonial, practical, or otherwise.

Crucially, to suggest that the self becomes through continually becoming ever more integrated into the group does not mean that there is no room for agency or individual freedom. In fact, quite the opposite is the case. As one of the authors of this paper has described elsewhere, a relational worldview is guided by "a sense of communitism *and respectful individualism*" (emphasis added, Hart, 2010). Within a relational worldview it is acknowledged that the individual is accountable to the broader needs of community, as opposed to self-interest alone, and as long as one's self-expression contributes to the greater good, they are accorded considerable freedom as to how their contributions manifest (Hart, 2010). The form an individual's contributions take are diverse and are not ascribed based on one's gender identity, but rather represent the unique gifts the individual possesses, and these unique gifts are understood as a strength of Indigenous societies, not a weakness, as they foster "a diversity of highly self-sufficient individuals, families, and communities" (Simpson, 2017, p. 129). Simpson writes that "people were expected to figure out their gifts and their responsibilities through ceremony and reflection and self-actualization, and that process was…the most important governing process on an individual level—more important than the gender you were born into" (2017, p. 4). Simpson later explains that once the individual asserts their identity and the expression of that identity through their gifts, it is then the community's responsibility to support that identity, carving a role for them within the community, provided that identity does not encroach upon or impede the self-expression of others. Within *wâkôhtowin*-based societies, roles

should be approached as a system of values that inform everyone's, including men's, responsibility to (re)generate, maintain, and strengthen the broader web of intimate relationships with diverse human and non-human actors, inviting relationships across various differences and generations. This is a central point, because we are mindful that "heteropatriarchy is often present even when we attempt to decolonize…attitudes towards gender and sexuality" (Pyle, 2020, p. 110). Indeed, calls to reclaim traditional and authentic Indigenous masculinities have, at times, resulted in fixed colonially defined constructions that have entrenched gender binaries, thus privileging some Indigenous men at the expense of women, Two-Spirit, and gender diverse peoples (see Hokowhitu, 2015; Laing, 2021; Pyle, 2020).

Indigenous Feminist, Gender, & Sexuality Studies

Across Indigenous feminist, gender, and sexuality studies, it is understood that the targeted disruption of nation-specific gender systems was not merely a by-product of settler colonialism, rather it was—and continues to be—at the very core of the Canadian nation-building project (see Morgensen, 2010, 2015). This means that diverse and expansive gender systems were targeted for destruction as a means of disrupting Indigenous ways of being and dispossessing Indigenous lands (Barker, 2017; Smith, 2005). Crucially, this was a relational process, as settler scholar Scott Morgensen (2015) argues, because in order for what he calls "colonial masculinity to achieve dominance it had to be *invented*" (p. 39). This means that "European modes of manhood arrived on Indigenous lands, changed as they participated in colonial violence, and became entrenched as methods of settler rule" (p. 37). In other words, colonial masculinities are "creations of conquest" and there is nothing static nor neutral about them, but rather as settler logics of domination shift, so too do colonial masculinities

(Morgensen, 2015, p. 39). In the Canadian context, settler logics of gendered colonialism have operated through a range of overlapping, albeit diffuse, discursive, and non-discursive technologies. Some of the more prominent examples of these technologies of gendered colonialism include: the imposition of gendered economies such as the fur trade and farming that sought to dismantle family and community as economic units by undermining the contributions of all genders to the well-being of the family and community; the formation of the inherently sexist Indian Act, which sought to govern all aspects of Indigenous life in accordance with settler logics of heteropatriarchy (see Carter, 1990; Cannon, 2019; Lawrence, 2004; Van Kirk, 1980); the Indian residential school system, which was structured around and sought to forcibly impose a colonial sex-gender system on the children within the schools (see Norman et al., 2019), and; the reproduction of colonial simulations of Indigenous masculinity that constrain and fix the lived diversity of Indigenous gender expressions within the narrow confines of the colonial imaginary (see McKegney, 2011). These gendered creations of conquest continue today as pivotal technologies upholding the settler nation-state through power relations that incite Indigenous peoples to disinvest from their knowledge systems and invest in settler colonial relations. Cree scholar Robert Innes (2015) suggests that these settler colonial relations are rooted in White supremacist heteronormative patriarchy that continue to colonize "Indigenous peoples' bodies, minds, and lands" (p. 53), negatively impacting not only Indigenous boys and men, but girls and women, Elders, and people of diverse genders (see also Tatonetti, 2021). What is particularly pernicious about settler colonial gender logics is that they not only govern existing Indigenous gender formations, but also constrain the imagination, foreclosing the ability of Indigenous peoples to envision alternatives to the heteropatriarchal norm (Innes, 2015). On this point, Kanyen'kehá:ka scholar Marie Laing (2021) explains that the opportunity for Indigenous

communities to "philosophize are constrained by the violence of settler-colonialism and the ways in which Indigenous communities are kept in crisis by the settler state" (p. 135).

This attack on the imagination is precisely why scholars and community-based activists suggest that the task is not just to decolonize or get 'rid' of colonial masculinity, but also to draw on Indigenous knowledge systems as a pathway for prying open ways of doing Indigenous masculinity otherwise. That is, re-situating masculinity as medicine, where masculinity "belongs and is in service of kin and community rather than a masculinity that exists solely as personal expression of the self" (Justice cited in McKegney, 2021, p. 160). Here, the sort of masculinity being hailed is "less about anatomy and more about ethics" (McKegney, 2021, p. xvii). However, shifting the focus from bodies to ethics does not guarantee a masculinity that is relationally accountable to kin and community. Indeed, the affective 'pull' of the "false promise patriarchy," rooted as it is in neoliberal individualism (McKegney, 2021, p. 189), cannot be overestimated (see Hokowhitu, 2012; 2015). In this version of masculinity, men are incited to pursue an entrepreneurial ethics of the self, where the promise of the 'good life' is to be found through individual expressions of power and authority in its many forms, including hypermasculine violence, consumption, (hetero)sexual conquest, and the attainment of bodily beauty ideals, to name a few. When positioned alongside the promise of heteropatriarchy, and with few alternative pathways available—even at the level of the imagination, as Innes contends—for Indigenous boys and men to accrue power and authority under oppressive conditions of settler colonialism (see Hokowhitu, 2004), a relational ethic of responsibility to kin and community may comparatively seem somewhat less appealing, if not increasingly difficult to practice (Anderson et al., 2015; Sinclair & McKegney, 2014). Nevertheless, an ethic of relational accountability as recognized within *wâkôhtowin* is precisely what Indigenous scholars, activists,

community members, and settler allies are suggesting we pursue in scholarly and community-based work on Indigenous men and masculinities, and below we outline how we approached this task methodologically.

Methods

Story work has always been an essential tool in Indigenous peoples' reclaiming the power and authority to define themselves, as it has been critical to Indigenous ways of knowing (see Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2009). In this way, the power of story is not just the purview of recognized 'storytellers,' such as acclaimed writers, poets, and scholars, but has been, and continues to be, part of the everyday fabric of the mutually affecting relationships that are constitutive of Indigenous societies. When it comes to studying Indigenous masculinities, this is an important point because the conversation tends to centre the voices of university-trained and funded story-tellers (for exception, see Anderson et al., 2012; Anderson et al., 2015) and, as Niigaan Sinclair cautions, we must include "our brothers and uncles who are not in those places when we have these discussions about what it means to be an Indigenous man" (Sinclair & McKegney, 2014, p. 237).

With this caution in mind, we set out to gather stories of what it means to be an Indigenous man within the place-specific context of Fisher River Cree Nation (*Ochekwi-Sipi*), which is located in Treaty 5 territory, about 230 kilometers north of Winnipeg, Manitoba. The project was informed by an Indigenous-centred, community-first research design (see Styres & Zinga, 2013), which means that we took a number of steps to both foreground Indigenous knowledge systems (see Absolon, 2011; Kovach, 2009; Lambert, 2014), and specifically Swampy Cree knowledge (see Hart, 2002, 2009, 2010; Wilson, 2008), while also centering the priorities of the community. These steps included: the formation of a five (sometimes six) person

Community Project Committee (CPC) who oversaw and guided the research process; a research team composed of both Indigenous (M.A. Hart & C. Sinclair) and Settler-ally (M. Norman & L. Petherick) scholars; and, a circular research design that involved ongoing and recursive cycles of knowledge gathering (i.e., sharing circles, intergenerational interviews) and knowledge sharing (i.e., community feasts, an Elder-facilitated Land-based heritage camp, and a community-based book). Elsewhere, we elaborate on our research design (see Norman et al., 2018). After a year of meetings with the CPC, in the fall of 2015 it was decided that knowledge gathering would begin with Elder sharing circles. Between the fall of 2015 and the spring of 2017, thirteen Elders participated (eight men, five women) in four sharing circles, with two Elders participating in more than one circle. Sharing circles were facilitated by recognized knowledge holders from the community with one or more members of the university research team present. After the first three Elder sharing circles, additional sharing circles were hosted with adults, youth, and children. Sharing circles lasted between 1.5 hours and 3.5 hours, depending on the number of participants and what they had to share. Additionally, seven inter-generational interviews were conducted, where a community youth or adult interviewed an Elder (six men, one woman), with two of the Elders participating in both a sharing circle and an interview. Intergenerational interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 1.5 hours. A total of 75 people participated in one or more of the research activities associated with the project. The over-arching objective of the project was to access the place-specific values, roles and responsibilities informing what it means to be a Cree man in Fisher River. Those who participated were asked to reflect on and share their life experiences, changes within the community, and the evolving values, roles, and responsibilities of Cree boys and men. Participants were also asked to share their vision for a healthy community and the role boys and men might play in such a community.

As Angie, one of the members of the CPC, shared in an adult sharing circle she facilitated, the lessons carried within a particular story are not necessarily straightforward, which means that the listener is not passive in the story-telling process. Rather, the listener must actively engage in processes of coming to know, and based on their own experiences and situation in life, come to some understanding about the lessons carried in a particular story. As Angie explains of her experiences speaking with Elders, sometimes you think to yourself "just give me an answer!," but:

> …it's not that simple with Indigenous people…It's not that straightforward answer. You'll never get that straightforward answer. It's what you find in…what they're sharing—the answers are there…The Elders can guide you and give that encouragement and advice through stories, [but] you'll have to find what you're looking for [in their stories].

Angie's approach to stories is consistent with an ethic of respectful individualism, where lessons are not prescriptive, but rather interpretative. As such, the listener can bring their own unique gifts to the meaning-making process, thus opening opportunities for a range of interpretations and perspectives that foster, as opposed to foreclose, the diversity that ensures the strength, resilience, and adaptability necessary to sustaining the larger group, and in turn the community. We would offer this ethic of respectful individualism for readers of this article as well. Although we have interpreted the stories shared in relation to the place-specific context of Fisher River, as well as in relation to our own experiences and positionalities, we encourage readers to build their own relationship to the stories in this article. We remind individuals that such work within respectful individualism is always seen in relation to community. Hence, as you build your relationship with the stories, that we are committed to act "respectful" to ourselves *and* the communities involved.

This process of coming to know through respectful individualism and sharing our internal reflections for the benefit of the group, and in turn the community, was followed within our interpretative synthesis process as well. Each of the authors carefully listened to the recordings and read the transcripts of those who shared their stories with us, and then personally reflected on what was shared from our own place in the world. We came together to reveal our interpretations with one another, and synthesized these interpretations to develop a common understanding, which we share below.

Ininiw Masculinities

In the intergenerational interviews, Elders were asked about what 'masculinity' means to them. Without exception, the Elders answered this question by contrasting dominant Euro-Western versions of masculinity with their experience of the values, roles, and responsibilities of Cree men and boys. As Sherman shared, "when you say [masculinity] in Cree it has a deeper meaning," and it is those deeper meanings that we were interested in hearing more about in this project. As opposed to the strong, muscular, neoliberal ideal of Western culture, the Elders spoke about a 'strong' man being one who is accountable to all of their human and more-than-human relations. For Dorothy, the English word 'masculinity' conjured the notion of a "warrior or strong person," but she elaborates on her response, suggesting that,

> a warrior doesn't have to be only a person who goes to war. A warrior could be a person who helps you lead a good life. A warrior helps to protect you from danger and also to protect you, and even provide for you, the things you need in life, that's a warrior.

As we alluded to earlier, Indigenous masculinity is overdetermined by colonial simulations of the hyper-masculine "bloodthirsty warrior" (McKegney, 2011; see also Klopotek, 2001), but Dorothy conjures a Cree articulation of the warrior that goes beyond the Western colonial imaginary. Here, the warrior is not defined by the embodiment of physical strength and violence,

but by their ability to protect and provide a 'good life' for others—that is, to seek *mino-pimatisiwin* with the context of community. As such, the warrior is not an identity, but rather a dynamic and affective enactment of *wâkôhtowin*. A little later in the interview, Dorothy elaborates, this time using the Cree word *napewiwin* to articulate a more holistic understanding of the roles and responsibilities of men, explaining that,

> a long time ago when a man became a man, you know, and he goes hunting and brings food back, […] an Elder will say [said in Cree] "my, you're a great man," because you bring us all this food—to the community, to feed us. He's a great provider and protector, you know, it's all of those things connected to masculinity.

In an intergenerational interview, Sherman Sinclair offered a similar elaboration on what masculinity meant to him from a Cree perspective:

> I know what stands out [about the word 'masculinity'] is somebody big and strong, but I think it's a little bit more that that…I think it goes a little deeper than that for me. I think it's somebody being strong—it doesn't matter if he's a big man. I think when one stands strong for his community, for his family and his friends, especially in a time of need, he has heart to help people. That's how I see it…he's somebody who's being strong for somebody else who is not strong.

And finally, Bill T., an Elder who participated in an inter-generational interview, shared that masculinity sometimes involved being tough, as circumstances required, but such toughness was not about elevating oneself at the expense of others, nor was it tied to narrow constructions of hegemonic masculinity (see also Anderson et al., 2015). Rather, masculinity was more about relational accountability then it was about individual status and dominant norms of hypermasculinity.

> …the word masculinity, you know, seems like someone who thinks they are superior…But I don't know if that fits my role or fits anybody's role in this world, in an Indigenous life…You know guys go [commercial] fishing. You need to have some masculinity to do that. But you're out there making a living for you and your family…I like to think I've provided for my family all these years, you know.

These more holistic narratives of masculinity are similar to those shared with Anderson, Swift and Innes (2015), where the Indigenous men in their study spoke about the role of 'protection' as

being part of Indigenous men's responsibility to the larger community. However, Anderson and colleagues (2015) observed that participants seldom described what being a protector might entail, leading them to speculate that their notions of protection might remain rooted in patriarchal relations of domination and masculine status. However, the Elders in our study did describe the values informing the roles and responsibilities of Cree boys and men, including those of sharing with others and supporting and sustaining *mino-pimatisiwin.* You will recall that *mino-pimatisiwin* refers to the commitment to restore the person, community, and nation to wholeness, connectedness, and balance" (Reigner, 1994, p. 135). As such, greatness is not found in individual acts of conquest, bravery, or heroism, although these are sometimes part of the process. Rather, greatness is found in the contributions, whatever form they may take, to creating and protecting the conditions for the good life for both oneself and members of the community.

This sense of responsibility extended beyond human relations, as Russell Sinclair explained in an Elders sharing circle:

> It *hurts* when you read stories [about pollution] and see where our lake [i.e., Lake Winnipeg] is going—our water is going—it's being polluted…And yet, you know, we always hear that Native people are the *keepers of the land*—that's what I hear from the Elders—that's our role on this earth, is to look after the land and the resources. [cited in Norman et al., 2020, p. 97]

Indeed, the effects of settler colonialism come in many forms, with climate change and environmental degradation being among the "shape-shifting" (Corntassel, 2012) ways it continues to disrupt Indigenous ways of being (Wildcat, 2017). As we have argued elsewhere, anthropocentric environmental change is enabled by a Western worldview that conceptualizes land as a resource to be harvested in the service of capital accumulation (Norman et al., 2020). Within such a worldview, land is approached as inert matter that does not have value in and of itself, but comes to be valuable as it is *re*-sourced though human intervention into a commodity. This is a radically divergent perspective from a relational worldview, where land—which is

inclusive of earth, air, and water (Styres & Zinga, 2013)—is part of the intimate web of human and more-than-human relations that are constitutive of *wâkôhtowin* -based peoplehood. Therefore, when Lake Winnipeg—which is the body of water on which Fisher River is located— is polluted through human activity (i.e., farm fertilizers seeping into the rivers that empty into the lake, extractive industries, such as peat mining, and the aggressive development of the watery scapes of the Lake Winnipeg basin), this has a deep affective impact—it is felt in one's very being—put simply, it *hurts*. It hurts because it disrupts the web of affective relationships which is both constitutive of the self and to which one is relationally accountable. In other words, environmental degradation forcibly disrupts the performative responsibility of Cree boys and men to embody their role as "keepers of the land". Indeed, stories about how change has impacted the roles and responsibilities of boys and men were common, as we explore in the following section.

Changing Communities, Changing Masculinities

The Elders spoke about a number of factors that continued to disrupt and erode the intimate web of relationships that were constitutive of a Cree way of life. These factors included: the introduction of 'welfare' as diminishing independence, the intensification of technologies (e.g., television, smart phones) as eroding inter-dependence, environmental degradation as disrupting relations with Land, standardized Euro-Canadian education curricula as troubling intergenerational mentorship relations, and finally, they spoke of the ideal of the nuclear family as disrupting Cree kinship relations. Although the Elders did not necessarily use the language of settler colonialism, we nonetheless see each of these challenges as different strands that, when taken together, comprise the settler colonial assemblage (Barker, 2021) that targets Indigenous relationality for destruction as a means of gaining access to Indigenous lands and fortifying white

settler belonging and entitlement. While these challenges threatened the community more

generally, it was acknowledged that they jeopardized the roles and responsibilities of Cree boys

and men in specific ways, as they undermined pathways for boys and men to remain relationally

accountable to the larger group. At the root of these challenges is the changing economy of

Fisher River as it shifted from a primarily land-based economy, where men engaged in practices

of hunting, fishing, trapping, lumbering, and farming to one based in wage labour where workers

increasingly require post-secondary education or specialized credentials to secure work. As

Dorothy Crate explains, the decline in the land-based economy has had a rippling effect

throughout the entire community:

> …most people do not live off the land too much anymore. They don't go hunting, they
> don't do fishing too much, they don't do trapping at all. All these changes and we don't
> live off the land very much anymore. And the families are not really doing too much
> together anymore […] Everybody has their own things going on in their own little selves.
> We don't mingle as much as we used to a long time ago.

Other Elders shared similar sentiments, explaining that living off the land was a very communal

way of life, where several families would hunt, trap, fish, gather, and prepare food together and

share food with others. However, factors such as environmental degradation and the subsequent

decline and contamination of animal populations, the privatization of land, various land

development projects, and state-sanctioned hunting and fishing regulations, to name a few, have

made it increasingly difficult to sustain a land-based way of life (see also Anderson et al., 2012).

These changes have implications for boys and men who, at one time, were able to fulfill

meaningful and relevant roles and responsibilities within these land-based contexts, are now

increasingly forced to adapt to changing economies, which have given rise to different

masculinities (see Cariou et al., 2014).

Indeed, the jobs available within increasingly globalizing conditions of advanced capitalism often pull men away from the local community context to larger urban centres or other distant locations at the same time that they seduce—if not incite—men to take up a neoliberal, corporatist value system, as Simon explains of his experiences working in the financial sector:

> …I worked in a bank…and at that time money was everything for me. That was it. I thought I must try and make as much money as I can. But later on in life, I asked myself 'why am I pushing myself to try and make as much money as I can? It's not making me happy…' After a while I kind of went, 'oh, it's not all about money'.

Simon goes on to explain that he and his family had all of the accoutrements of a so-called 'good life' according to the logics of late capitalism, but ultimately the promise of happiness went unfulfilled and he left his job at the bank and has filled the void by focusing on his relationships with family, friends, and community, a decision that he does not regret.

As others have argued, advanced capitalism has sought to erode the structures of place and identity, where individuals are re-imagined as entrepreneurs of the self who are incited to take responsibility for their own success, ultimately transforming themselves into marketable commodities within the global flow of capital (Beck et al., 1994). Here, the assumption is that the individual is able to transcend their 'place' in life, whether that be their place in gender, racial, and class hierarchies or—and more importantly for our paper—the transcendence of geographical place by becoming the dis-embedded, hyper-mobile, (neo)liberated subject of advanced capitalism. However, the romanticization of mobility and placelessness in both dominant discourse and in some critical theories is itself a Western fetish that does not readily translate into place- or land-based societies (Grande, 2015; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). Indeed, when identity is always already a relational becoming, the notion of dis-embedding oneself from place is not seen as freedom, but rather as another biopolitical regime of settler colonialism

designed to further fracture Indigenous relationality. This was apparent in how several of the Elders spoke about the decline of land-based economies and the local knowledges they sustained had the effect of disrupting intergenerational mentorship relations. In particular, they noted how the increased emphasis on formal education and the rise of credentialism served to erode local knowledges and intergenerational relations.

> I think one of the roles and responsibilities of boys and men today…would be mentorship, but I don't see as much of that today as compared to the past. I find it's a lot different, more technical…Years ago, there were a lot of jobs that you didn't need an education. You had to build that reputation for yourself, you know. A good worker that people can depend on.

Whereas the value of a worker was once defined locally and in relation to their reputation within the community, increasingly value is defined according to a globalized elsewhere through, for example, standardized, formal education.

> It's getting more technical today than it was years ago. It seemed simple before, but there are things that I learned, they got so that they were deep-rooted within me and they helped me to be a role model and support others even though I didn't have my full education.

Here, the interdependence that was associated with land-based societies 'a long time ago' is being replaced by standardized and distant formal education, where people, and in this case boys and men specifically, have to leave the community to get the credentials necessary to acquire marketable skills in the new economies of advanced capitalism[2]. This is not to suggest that the Elders necessarily saw formal education as a 'bad' thing. Indeed, most suggested that education was necessary and were thus encouraging of youth pursuing an education. Nonetheless, they did see formal and standardized curricula as presenting unique challenges for local knowledges and the place-specific values, roles, and responsibilities of boys and men. To this point we have

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[2] Similar tensions between local knowledges and the abstract knowledge of standardized formal education, along with the different masculinities associated with each system, have been described in commercial fishing communities on the east coast of Canada (see Corbett, 2010; Norman et al., 2015).

highlighted the stories about Indigenous men and masculinity, but as we elaborate below,

masculinity was not fixed to men nor the male body.

Gender Expansiveness

While the participants primarily spoke about the roles and responsibilities that were

associated with boys and men, there was nonetheless considerable fluidity within these roles, and

the over-arching goal was not reducible to clearly defined and distinct gender roles, but rather the

focus was on sustaining the intimate relational network that is constitutive of a Cree way of life.

In an adult sharing circle, Lori described how this fluidity played out within her family, where

she "took it upon" herself to pass along the hunting knowledge she had learned from her father:

> When I had my children, I ended up having two sons and their father was a workaholic.
> He didn't know about hunting or anything like that. He was raised by his grandmother so
> he had the baking and you know that sort of thing. So, I took it upon myself to go and
> take my sons hunting because I enjoyed that with my dad. I ended up getting a 4-wheeler
> and I would take my sons out and make a tiny picnic for us. Put one little boy in front of
> me and the other behind and make them hang on tight and we would just go riding. I
> would take a little .22 [caliber rifle] and put little paper targets on the willows and teach
> them to shoot.

Lori goes on to describe that she, along with two men in the community, eventually formed a

land-based program in the community that brought youth onto the land, teaching them hunting,

fishing, trapping, and other land-based knowledges. Throughout the sharing circles and inter-

generational interviews, there were other similar stories shared, where women saw a need within

the community and worked to address this need quite irrespective of gender. On this point, Lisa

Tatonetti (2021) writes that "Indigenous women's labour is not an anomaly, but a common

occurrence—women do what needs to be done to support their kin networks and nations, and

such work is complementary to the work done by folks of other genders, not contradictory" (p.

111; see also Anderson, 2000). Indeed, accounts of strong women "doing what needs to be done"

were woven throughout the stories shared for this project, although tellingly it was mostly

women who made these reflections. Nevertheless, highlighting how Indigenous gender

expansiveness continues to live on in the community, quite irrespective of the narratives

circulating within dominant culture, is one strategy for queering the colonial sex-gender

imperative, as it refuses to render Indigenous roles and responsibilities reducible to a binarized,

static gender identity.

Change, Continuity, & Indigenous Futurities

We 'conclude' this paper with the theme of continuity, which came up in many of the

participants' stories. Indeed, there were many stories of change (e.g., the decline in land-based

lifestyles) and loss (e.g., the loss of the Cree language), which were described as challenges that

threatened the ongoing and dynamic relationships integral to communal continuity. However,

concerns about change and loss were more often than not embedded within complex and layered

narratives of continuity, where simplistic 'either/or' binaries (e.g., present/absent,

traditional/contemporary) were challenged, as Angie explains.

> A lot of our stories aren't, you know, picture perfect. Like when I was taking Indigenous
> studies courses in university, I would think 'oh, we're all wonderful people who are all
> very traditional'. But that's not the reality. I strongly believe, and always have believed,
> that our community is very strong in tradition. Not necessarily the ceremonial part of the
> tradition, but the tradition that you share what you have and you give what you know
> […]. And sometimes I forget the human part of us—that we're perfectly flawed and to
> accept that and keep going, you know. Our community is so strong and, in our culture—
> not the glamorized portrayal of our culture, like where everybody lives in teepees and
> should all know this and how to do that—it's not like that. It's those teachings, those
> laws, I guess. You know, having respect for each other, loving each other—and I'm not
> saying it happens all the time, but it is still there in the community.

Angie's reflection pushes back against a number of problematic colonial constructions, including

static and categorical notions of identity, reified representations of culture, and binary thinking

that contrasts traditional and contemporary ways of life (see Liang, 2021). Indeed, to reify

culture is to render a culture static, fixed, and stuck in the past, emptying culture of an existential

being in the here and now (see Hokowhitu, 2015; Stinson et al., 2014). Such articulations of

culture perpetuate notions of 'authentic' or 'genuine' Indigeneity, leading to prescriptive

understandings of what it is to be a 'true Indian,' prescriptions that foreclose diverse and

dynamic possibilities that we have argued are critical to the strength and resilience of Indigenous

communities. Moreover, such authentic Indigenous identities are an impossibility, as Angie

explains, because they do not allow for the 'perfectly flawed,' complex, and messy dimensions

of being human. When taken together, colonial simulations of culture, identity and time serve

settler colonial logics of elimination by refusing to acknowledge the continuity between past,

present, and future, and the ways in which change for Indigenous societies is not the death knell

of some romanticized and wooden notion of culture, but is in fact itself culture in motion as it

adapts and responds to the conditions in which it exists (Friedel, 2011; Liang, 2021).

We close the paper with this quote by Angie because we feel that it reflects a poignant

pathway forward. Indeed, Indigenous masculinities as they are practiced in the place-specific

context of Fisher River Cree Nation are complex, contradictory, and "perfectly flawed". Given

this messiness, one would be remiss to foreground romanticized notions of what masculinities

once were without at the same time acknowledging *what they are now,* where settler logics of

heteropatriarchy have become firmly embedded within the community. However,

acknowledging the manifold ways in which heteropatriarchy has come to disrupt the relational

accountabilities of Cree boys and men, and the destructive consequences this has for Cree and

Indigenous communities, should not be confused with ascribing an all-powerful, determining

force to settler colonial gender logics. It is, in other words, critical to remember that Cree values

of respectful Individualism, communitism, and relationality—or the laws of *wakohtowin*—

continue on within the community, even if obscured by more dominant colonial forms of masculinity. In this regard, the stories we tell matter (King, 2003; McKegney, 2021) and if we want to push back against colonial simulations of Indigenous masculinity as stuck in the past and thus dying, on the one hand, or as pathologically addicted, absent, or violent, on the other (see Klopotek, 2001; McKegney, 2011), we must remain optimistic—albeit critically so—in foregrounding stories of continuity, flawed and messy as they may be.

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"I Can Stand Tall and Be a Métis Person and Just be Proud of it": Pathways to a Flourishing Métis Identity

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Abstract

The Métis are one of three recognized Indigenous groups in Canada and are defined by their mixed First Nations and European ancestry. In this grounded theory study, sixteen (n=16) Métis participants in Bawating[1], Ontario, Canada were interviewed to share their experiences as Métis people. Participants described common themes of being disconnected from their Métis identity in childhood, which contributed to a sense of loss and confusion. Following their experiences of having languishing identities, participants shared their complex and life-long journeys towards a flourishing identity. This journey involved learning and sharing cultural knowledge with others, connecting to the land, and engaging in traditional practices. The ultimate integration of these findings was an overwhelming and hard-earned sense of pride in being Métis.

Introduction

One of three recognized Indigenous group in Canada, the Métis People are known for their distinct culture, language, and heritage. Limited research exists on the unique experiences of Métis people in Northern Ontario. This, and the first author's experience of witnessing Métis students fear stigma and discrimination in the classroom, inspired this study on Métis identity.

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[1] Bawating, meaning rapids in Ojibway, is the original Indigenous name of Sault Ste. Marie, a city of 72,000 people located in Northern Ontario, Canada

The sixteen (n=16) Métis participants in this study shared common experiences of feeling disconnected from their Métis culture in childhood, before embarking on a journey of identity discovery in adulthood. In individual interviews and sharing circles, participants explored factors that contributed to a flourishing identity.

Two authors, one of whom is Métis and the other of whom is Anishnaabekwe, independently reviewed and coded the transcripts before coming together to elaborate on the themes that had emerged. These themes were as follows: connecting to culture, connecting to other Métis people, and connecting to the land.

As exemplified by participants in this study, when Métis People are in touch with their cultural practices, community, and the land, they can be proud of their identity. To support Métis wellbeing, it is imperative that educators, healthcare and mental healthcare providers, researchers, and policymakers are knowledgeable of the importance of cultural continuity and intentionally resist colonial practices that prevent cultural practices from being transmitted between community members and generations.

Background

Early exploration journals provide evidence that a mixed Indigenous-European population existed in the Lake Superior region of Ontario as early as the mid-1700s (Henry, 1966 [1809]). These first Métis people in Ontario were the product of close economic and personal relationships between French fur traders and Indigenous families (Gaudry, 2009). The children of these relationships gradually forged shared customs, practices, and a way of life that was distinct from their Indigenous and European ancestors.

Métis culture richly blends European and Indigenous traditions. In dance and music, Métis fiddling and jigging are performed at competitions, powwows, and community gatherings. Fiddling is also a regular practice in many households (Dueck, 2007). Métis artwork integrates Indigenous beading with European floral designs. Michif is the Indigenous language of Métis people in Canada and the northern United States (Iseke, 2013). While multiple variations of Michif are spoken across Canada, the language is most rooted in Cree, Ojibwe, and French (Rosen, 2008). In the 21st century, Ontario has the largest Métis population, with approximately 135,000 citizens representing 21.6% of Métis living in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2022).

Claiming a Métis identity often means having your identity questioned, being misunderstood, and having your rights to exist as a people challenged (Iseke, 2013). In 2002, the Métis National Council General Assembly stated that Métis means "a person who self-identifies as Métis, is distinct from other Aboriginal peoples, or is a member of the historic Métis National Assembly Ancestry, and who is accepted by the Métis Nation" (Métis National Council, n.d., para. 2). The 2003 Powley Case confirmed this definition of Métis identity. This case, which concerned Métis hunting rights, established legal criteria surrounding who qualifies as a Métis rights-holder. This case clarified, for the first time, that the Métis people are distinct and separate from First Nations and Inuit peoples in Canada (Reimer & Chartrand, 2004). This clarification has the potential to open the doors for the further extension of Métis rights, including expanded harvesting and fishing rights, as well as possible self-governance. Unfortunately, some people of Métis origin have been excluded from the definition of Métis that was adopted following the Powley decision. This is an important concern that needs to be addressed in the future to not fragment the broader Métis community.

This extension of Métis rights became a reality in June 2019 with the Métis Ottawa Accords. These self-government agreements between the federal government and the Métis Nation of Ontario, Métis Nation of Alberta, and Métis Nation-Saskatchewan permit Métis nations to develop their own constitutions to govern their communities. Métis were also granted jurisdiction over citizenship, leadership selection, and government operations (Tasker, 2019). While constructing a cohesive Métis identity is a first step in determining the scope and application of Métis rights, government-ascribed definitions can also exclude individuals who have European and Indigenous heritage and self-identify as Métis, but do not meet the necessary criteria. This can contribute to Métis people feeling like they do not belong among their own people. Identity formation is a complex and lifelong journey for many Métis people. This paper shines a light on the unique individual experiences of identity formation for a small sample of sixteen Métis people, geographically located in Bawating, Ontario.

In addition to the desire to address the glaring gap in literature on the topic of Métis identity, the current study was strongly motivated by the first author's experience as an educator, teaching Métis students in a faculty of social work in Northern Ontario. The first author noticed that students were reluctant to share their Métis identity openly in the classroom setting. The students would disclose their Métis identity in written assignments to the first author, who is openly Anishnaabekwe. In these class assignments, the students were explicit that they were uncomfortable with being identified as Métis by their fellow students because they feared being devalued and experiencing stigma.

Methods

This study is a grounded theory study of Métis identity and is part of a larger study with Métis people living in Bawating, Ontario. The sample includes sixteen (n=16) participants who self-identified as having Métis ancestry. Participants were between the age of 18 to 65, and were living in Bawating, Ontario. Fourteen participants were female and two were male. One participant chose to attend a sharing circle as a non-participating witness.

Non-probability sampling techniques were used to recruit the participants who would provide the necessary knowledge-base and life experience to enrich our research. Fliers were posted on bulletin boards at local organizations. The snowball technique allowed participants to share the content of the flier through word-of-mouth. The Ethics Committee Certificate of Approval #2014_RC_#24 was granted on May 9, 2014, and to end on May 8, 2015. The data was gathered between June 8 to August 28, 2014.

Six interviews and four sharing circles were conducted to provide a venue for participants to verbally share their life experiences and knowledge. The individual interviews were conducted at various locations including participant homes and gathering places in the community. The sharing circles were hosted in a board room at the Métis Nation of Ontario and were three hours long. There were eight (8) questions asked and the participants had the opportunity to talk about their history, childhood, way of life, heritage, family structure, and identity. Participants chose to either use their own name or choose a pseudonym for the purposes of transcription. These names and pseudonyms are also used in this paper.

Informed consent from each participant was completed prior to conducting the interviews. Verbatim responses from participants were audio recorded, transcribed, and the transcripts were subsequently verified by each participant. In keeping with grounded theory

methodology (Charmaz, 2014), two of the authors (one of whom is Métis and the other of whom is Anishnaabekwe) independently reviewed and coded several transcripts to develop themes in Nvivo 11 for Windows. These authors then met together and discussed and elaborated on the themes which had emerged. These two authors kept a research journal in which they wrote memos on the emerging themes and their explorations of potential patterns between the codes. They systematically compared codes and categories as they emerged using the constant comparative analysis technique. The authors felt theoretical saturation had been reached because no new themes emerged in the last two transcripts analyzed. Once all the transcripts were analyzed and the themes were identified, a summary report was shared with the external advisory committee which consisted of two Elders, one Métis and one Indigenous, and a Métis young adult, for member-checking.

A Métis Elder was present for all the interviews and sharing circles. Within Métis communities, Elder denotes a respected position within the community. Elders are invited to share their wisdom and provide guidance. Indicative of the esteemed position of Elders in Métis communities is the fact that, at many Métis gatherings, there are tables or rooms designated for Elders, where younger Métis attend to their needs (Cooper et al., 2020). The Métis elder who attended the sharing circle is a highly respected and established member of the Bawating community. They were invited to the sharing circles to highlight to members of the Métis community that this research project is legitimate, collaborative, and a safe place for Métis people to participate. Along with having an Elder present for the interviews and sharing circles, participants were also provided a medicine tie, a beverage, and a snack.

Identity Languishing

Many participants were not in-touch with their Métis identity as a child or did not know they were Métis until later in life. Respondents described experiences of being kept in the dark about their Métis identity. Some were excluded from aspects of their heritage – such as their French or Native ancestry – while others were unaware that their families were Métis.

Most commonly, due to stigma and shame, participants were excluded from aspects of their Native ancestry. One participant, named Mary described this experience: "...we grew up just like Aboriginal, but [we were] told we were white. I never found out until I was really old." Tabitha also described not knowing they were Native in their childhood: "...all my childhood... people asked me if I was Native and I said no, because I didn't know."

Other participants knew they had Indigenous ancestry but were forbidden from participating in aspects of their Native culture. Jeanne said, *"*My mother would say to never to do that... never to smudge." Michelle described a similar sense of shame in her Native grandmother: "Other than the hunting, fishing, trapping, the food and gathering... it was almost like my grandmother wanted to wipe that kind of lifestyle from her children." Lisa described hearing her family talk about being Native under the cover of night:

> ...always in the late dark of the night the discussion about the Indian in the background... when you are a kid, and you have big ears, and they're talking about it again, you know hearing all of the different stories... and then the laughter, and sort of the shame. You know, I've picked that up, there was shame that they were Indian. And they never talked about being Métis. That wasn't a word they used.

On the flipside, Jeanne was in-touch with her Native ancestry, but was excluded from her European roots: "I could acknowledge my Cree, but I couldn't my French... It was a big thing not being told who you are: having French background."

Other participants, while aware of the different parts of their identity, did not know that these parts constructed a whole, and that this whole was Métis. For example, Michelle said:

> It was actually in high school, grade eight or nine, when we [my family] realized that we were Métis... no one honestly knew what that meant... [my] French teacher in grade eight is the one who educated me as to what Métis was... she brought in a little fiddle music... and it just clicked.

Participants described Métis culture and language as being a part of their childhood, but not knowing that it was Métis. Michelle said, "We called it bush French. We were later told it was Michif but we grew up knowing it was bush French." Michif, a language created by the Métis People, integrates French nouns with Cree or Ojibway verbs to create a unique, separate language (Bakker, 1997).

The experience of Métis participants having their identity fragmented is well-documented. Throughout Canadian history, the Métis have been relegated to the margins of society, occupying a space that is neither fully Native nor fully white (Logan, 2018). Over the course of one life, a Métis person could be considered Native, non-Native, Métis, and then non-Native again, depending on changes in legislation. This experience, shared by participants, of being disconnected from parts of one's heritage is intergenerational. Métis people experience the colonial legacy of residential schools, forced adoptions, dislocation of land, and the denial of existence that sought to separate the Métis people from their identity. These repeated traumas have been associated with "stigma with being Métis" (Standing Senate on Aboriginal Peoples, 2013, p. 15). This history of assimilation and disconnection from one's heritage has likely contributed to the sense of shame and identity confusion shared by participants.

This experience of identity confusion felt like a loss for participants. Lisa said, "I feel cheated in many ways because I think that there is so much more that I could have learned... I lost my culture... the government tried to snuff [it out]." In a study on Indigenous cultural

connection, participants who were disconnected from their culture during childhood and adolescence experienced the emotional struggles of feeling lost, detached, and isolated (Lucero, 2010). Despite this, Métis culture continues to exist. Lisa, who was disconnected from her culture in childhood said: "It [our culture] didn't die. We spoke English [and] my grandmother spoke Michif."

Identity Flourishing

While participants shared experiences of being disconnected from their identity, they also spoke about how they came to understand and appreciate their Métis heritage in adulthood. Through their discussions about wellbeing, the participants described three key factors that contribute to a flourishing Métis identity: connecting to culture, connecting to others, and connecting to the land.

Connecting to Culture

Many participants connected to their Métis culture for the first time in adulthood. This bolstered their sense of wellbeing and allowed them to feel more confident in their Métis identity. One participant, Ellen, shared her experience of connecting to her heritage in adulthood: "I like learning about my culture. I did not know that I was Metis until about eight years ago. So, this is all new to me." Theresa echoed this sentiment: "I never really learned how to jig, I guess. It wasn't explained to us. So today... there is a desire in me to practice my cultural traditions."

Tabitha described that, while they were not taught Métis cultural practices as a child, they discovered how to engage in these traditions on their own:

> I was never really raised with culture, per say... I have found out that, by digging deep, I can use some of my blood memory... I made a drum and gave that drum away... I don't really practice smudging every day, but if I feel like I need to, I'll smudge.

Auger (2021a) found that it is common for Métis individuals to connect with their identity in adulthood. Given a history of assimilation and cultural genocide, Métis ancestry and family stories are commonly hidden for protection, leaving individuals to discover their identity outside of their families. Richardson (2006) speaks to identity epiphanies, when Métis people first discover who they are, despite always knowing on a deeper level who they are.

A common theme among participants was that practicing cultural traditions improved their wellbeing. Lisa said, "...making a sash or doing beading... I did all that when I was younger, and my mother did all of that [as well] … I am very connected to that kind of work, and I like it. I see it as a part of my mental health."

For Theresa, practicing cultural traditions is a route to personal fulfillment and community:

> The reasons why I do that are fulfillment: spiritual fulfillment, mental fulfillment, and physical fulfillment, and of course, learning from others in terms of feeling good about myself and giving back. The whole idea of reciprocity; you share what you know.

For Laura, engaging in traditional practices simply feels good: "I have gone to different sweat lodges... I felt squeaky clean when I came out... I felt good. And to be honest I can't wait to go again."

Cultural continuity is conceptualized in Indigenous health research and emphasizes the importance of passing traditions on to subsequent generations through intact families and engagement with elders (Loppie Reading & Wein, 2009). Cultural continuity is a social determinant of health for Indigenous Peoples in Canada, is associated with strong self-esteem, and plays a role in fostering strong families and communities (Greenwood & Leeuw, 2012). Iwaska, Bartlett, and O'Neill (2005) found that Métis women who participated in group

genealogy projects and craftwork experienced improved coping and healing. While the natural

transmission of culture through generations was not possible for all Métis participants, cultural

continuity can also include the maintenance of a collective memory (Oster et al., 2014). This

engagement in collective memory was reported by many participants who turned to community

members in adulthood to connect with their Métis identity and experienced subsequent benefits

to their health and wellbeing.

Connection to Others

For some participants, learning about their family history allowed them to increase their

acceptance of their Métis identity. This was the case for Ellen:

> ...my grandmother back five generations [was] a Cree princess. When I learned all this...
> it just makes me feel good... There are a lot of people that didn't want to be [Métis] or
> didn't want to say they were and shunned it. I am just the opposite. I am accepting it
> wholeheartedly.

For Lisa, learning about her ancestors opened up new possibilities for practicing her culture: "I

practice both traditional medicine and alternative medicine... I found out that... my great aunt

was a medicine woman." For Michelle, knowledge sharing with her family was an integral part

of her Métis identity:

> To be Métis is to have a lot of family, have a lot of connections... you go to Grandma to
> learn how to make pie crust; you go to Dad to change the oil on your car; you go to
> Grandpa to learn how to plant cucumbers. It is knowledge sharing. For me, that is an
> important aspect for me being Métis.

> For other participants, connection comes from being with other Métis people. As stated

by Laura: "I feel like when we go down to the MNO [Métis Nation of Ontario] down there, I feel

closer to them to be honest. I feel the connection, similarity, and laughter. I feel I connect with

them." Laura also expressed that sharing with other Métis participants during this research

project was liberating and helped her to feel like herself:

> [By] admitting that I'm Metis and being a part of it... it's setting me free more to be myself... You know, we're doing this all together, it's like we're all holding each other's hands and we're supporting each other in a very positive way. And for me, I feel good enough, I feel it's a piece of the puzzle that... some of the puzzle was missing and... coming here and reconnecting with everybody, and talking about this stuff, just getting real about things, and putting it on the table, and just being myself and not being phony.

For a Métis person living in the modern world, communing with other Métis people can take various forms. Auger (2021b) interviewed Métis people in British Columbia and found that visiting family, engaging in local politics, attending potlucks, and connecting on social media were all sources of meaningful Métis community engagement. Many participants reported that being a part of a Métis community contributed to feeling grounded, connected, and valued. This echoes the sentiments of participants in this study, who reported feeling "free more to be myself" and "accepting wholeheartedly" of their identity through Métis community engagement.

Participants commonly shared that teaching their Métis culture to others helped them to be more confident in their own Métis identity. Michelle recounted a memory from high school where she taught her class how to make dream catchers and medicine wheels. She said, "It was one of those teachable moments for myself as well. I got to explain to someone else what my culture was and that it is not just First Nations that believe these beliefs – it's Métis people too." Tabitha said, "...over the past few years I've come to understand and have been told that... it's important to... learn the culture and pass it on to others."

Lastly, identity flourishing for some participants comes from sharing their Métis traditions with their children. Michelle said:

> I am starting [to] venture out and learn Michif... my family has changed a lot because we went from being so ashamed and so quiet about it [being Métis] to my daughter being quite a decorated dancer, a Métis dancer, a jigger if you will... she grew up being proud whereas I grew up not knowing.

 Ellen spoke about intentionally passing on knowledge to her children: "I make a lot of homemade salves and healing medicines... I am writing them down so I can pass them on to my

children." Isabel said they want their children to feel that they can explore their own Métis

identities too: "the circle of exploration... I've left it open for my kids... It's [about] overcoming

that fear that was instilled [in us]."

Edge and McCallum (2006) speak to the importance of role models and mentors within

communities who participate in knowledge sharing. In an Indigenous context, storytelling has

been described as medicine; it can strengthen culture and restore a sense of belonging for Métis

people who have been disconnected from their heritage, often for generations (Auger, 2021b).

Participants describe both the experience of receiving teachings and sharing their knowledge

with others as affirming of the Métis identity.

Connection to the Land

Another pathway to identity flourishing for participants was connecting to the land. Laura

shared that being in the bush is relaxing and grounding. She said:

> When I am all stressed out, I will go out in the bush... it is like taking a relaxing pill for
> me. I go for a little walk... I get re-grounded. You smell the leaves, smell the ground.
> Touch it. Go in the water... I feel rejuvenated just talking about it.

Michelle spoke about her family's trap lines and her understanding of life and death as a child:

> The importance of the land: we knew from an early age. My mother's father would bring
> us along the trapline in March and he would have the rabbits... that was our teaching.
> That is why those animals were there: to feed us.

Peter echoed this sentiment, describing how the land was central to his childhood: "With my two

stepbrothers, I was always in the woods... when it comes to land, it felt like it was kind of a part

of us."

Participants who did not have the opportunity to settle on the land with their families in

childhood felt that being in nature was a spiritual experience for them. Isabel said:

> I'm from the big city, and I've always been attached to the land whether it's water –
> which is a big thing for me – and small animals and things like that... my kids are [also]

> very connected to the land and we talk about cycles of dragonflies... to be able to stop and look at that, that's important to me. To just stop everything so I can take in what is greater than me... for me, that's God. That's my spirituality, that's my creator.

This idea of nature as spirituality was echoed by many participants. One described how she struggled to understand religion until she connected to the land in adulthood. Lisa said:

> I know that when she [my mother] brought me to church all those years, I used to pray that I would find a God that I could believe in. I still remember, I was probably eight, because I could go every Saturday or Sunday, sitting there thinking, there's got to be something, this is not it. It wasn't until I was in my early thirties that I found it. And that was more a connection to the land, and that's the type of spirituality which has made me feel balanced, because there has always been a piece missing.

Métis people have been severed from the land through hundreds of years of assimilative policies. Métis people have been excluded from treaty processes and the majority of Métis communities lack a legal land base (Teillet, 2013; Dyck, 2009). Métis people have also faced threats to their cultural identity through challenges to their hunting and harvesting rights (*R. v. Powley*, 2003). Research shows that relationships with the land are vital for Métis health and wellbeing (Kermoal, 2016; Loppie et al., 2009). Participants illustrate this clearly, describing how connecting with the land is central to their spirituality and way of life as a Métis person.

Métis Pride

In conclusion, Métis participants in this study shared a common experience of being disconnected from their identity as a child. The ultimate integration of these experiences is an overwhelming sense of pride in being Métis. Laura shared that her Métis pride has been made strong despite years of identity confusion:

> ...I always felt I was like the odd ball or the black sheep. Whatever you want to say; I don't feel that way anymore. I feel like the puzzle there is some pieces missing but by admitting that I am Métis; it is those pieces that I thought that the dog chewed or got blown in the wind; well, I didn't know where the heck they were. They were just gone. There was a big hole. And not complete. I feel complete being Métis. Like the missing pieces in my heart and my soul and they are in me, and they are in others, and it is the

> connection with one another. That is the miracle. It is like the Higher Power - the Creator
> - God brought us all here to be, to support one another to say: I am Métis, me too, I am
> Métis too. It is a miracle, and I am proud to be a Métis.

Participants commonly shared how their Métis pride was about accepting all the different pieces

of identity that contribute to them being Métis. Jeanne described how carrying all the pieces of

her identity together is what allows her to shed the shame of the past and be a proud Métis

person.

> It just kind of adds onto the shame that was carried from generation to generation. And
> then you go, ok. Listen. I need to shed some of this because I am who I am, and nobody
> can tell me anymore that because I have Cree in me, or I have French in me, or I have
> Irish in me that I have to be one or the other... I carry it all. And I learned little bits from
> different members of my family and all of that makes me, in a nutshell, who I am. Métis.
> Mixed.

Laura echoed this sentiment and said that her pride comes from: "... acceptance [of the] French,

English, Native all in one. That I am good enough... So, I can stand tall and be a Métis person

and just be proud of it. It gives me an identity of who I am." Michelle added that holding all the

pieces of her identity together, as a whole, is a source of her pride. She said:

> I consider myself to be a very proud Métis woman. When I talk about nationality –
> especially when I go into the schools to teach the kids – I will break it down. However, I
> don't always see myself as fractured that way.

This Métis pride emanated from participants and affected those around them. Jeanne shared how

she shared her Métis identity with her children: "Now that I have recognized it [my identity as

Métis] .... I can teach my children to recognize it and to take pride and to be supportive and to be

strong together."

Flaminio and colleagues (2020) studied the wellbeing of Métis women and found that

pride in their Métis identity stemmed from gathering in the name of cultural continuity. Women

found confidence in themselves through sharing and bolstering one another. In our study,

participants also found pride in sharing teachings with others. Another source of pride for

participants was visibility. As a direct result of colonization, many families were forced to hide their Métis identity (Auger, 2021b). Participants in this study testify to the fact that when a Métis person can "stand tall" and be visible in their identity, shame is dispelled, and pride can take its place. Participants in this study shared a common experience of being disconnected from their identity as a child and reconnecting to their Métis self in adulthood through practicing their culture, connecting with others, and being with the land. While the journey of self-discovery has no end for these participants, the reward reaped from this journey is an overwhelming sense of pride in being Métis. As Laura said: "Oh I am Métis, and I am proud to be who I am."

Recommendations

Participants noted the connection between cultural engagement and improved mental health. It is crucial that mental healthcare providers adopt a practice of "Cultural Safety". First defined by Ramsden (2002), Cultural Safety means that quality care for people of different ethnicities must align with the cultural norms and values of the individual receiving care (Koptie, 2009; Wepa, 2015). Mental healthcare providers must seek to understand how Métis community members understand and make meaning of their own individual identity. Service providers can also provide opportunities for Métis People to teach their own culture and integrate land-based engagement into their programming.

Across all areas of practice, including community engagement, health and mental healthcare, education, and policy-making, it is vital that people engaging with Métis populations recognize the importance of cultural continuity in Métis wellbeing and resist colonial practices that disrupt cultural continuity in Indigenous communities across North America.

With respect to implications for research, any studies including Métis participants would benefit from using Ethical Métis Principles (National Aboriginal History Organization, 2023).

These principles emphasize fostering reciprocal relationships with Métis communities, creating a safe and inclusive research environment for Métis participants, and understanding relevant Métis history before proceeding with research.

Conclusion

In this research project, Métis participants described experiences of feeling disconnected from their Métis identity early in life, leading to a sense of loss and identity confusion. In sharing circles and individual interviews, participants shared their life-long journeys towards understanding their identity and having a sense of pride in being Métis. This journey of identity discovery involved learning and sharing cultural knowledge with others, connecting to the land, and engaging in traditional practices.

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Mā Te Ara Wairua, Ka Kite He Oranga: Presenting Three Baskets of Spiritual Healing Knowledge for Social Work

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Abstract
This paper presents the findings of a doctoral study titled 'Mā te ara wairua, ka kite he oranga: A Kaupapa Māori study into the development of traditional healing knowledge and spiritual concepts in social work'. The research involved sixteen in-depth interviews with traditional Māori healers and social workers, to get a better understanding of how spirituality and ancestral healing knowledge is developed in the profession. Exploring these perspectives was important because there is a significant gap in knowledge where very little is known about the integration and application of Indigenous healing and spiritual concepts in social work. As such, this PhD asked the question–What is the role of traditional Māori healing knowledge in social work? The study was underpinned by Kaupapa Māori theory, and its methods combined both qualitative approaches alongside the Ara Wairua analysis tool to help explore the experiences of participants. This research is profound because it yielded twelve important findings to inform social works' epistemology and provide nuanced understandings into cultural healing concepts, the transference of ancestral knowledge for non-Indigenous workers, actualising spiritual responsiveness, and the application of Indigenist social work. This paper aims to specifically highlight the study's findings and its implications for social work. There are three baskets of knowledge presented in this article, and each basket contains several recommendations for the profession. The study's methods and analytical processes are explained along with an outline of the research problem which further positioned the research in an academic context.

Introduction

Limited research has been done in relation to social works' inclusion of Indigenous spirituality and even less is known about the actualisation of traditional healing concepts in social work from a Māori perspective (Fox, 2024). I, Dr. Levi Arana Fox present the findings of my PhD, which highlights several key recommendations for social work, thus addressing a

significant gap in knowledge. The primary research question guiding the study's exploration was: What is the role of traditional healing knowledge in social work? As a Kaupapa Māori study, the research was underpinned by cultural philosophy, ontology and subjectivity. That is, I write this paper from an insider's perspective to emphasise my positionality as a researcher with whakapapa Māori (Māori ancestral connections) and worldviews that have been shaped by my kaumātua (elders) and kuia (grandmother). This experience also allowed me to share in meaningful kōrero (discussions) with participants over many years through processes of whakawhanaungatanga (relationship building), contributing to the Māori healing community in workshops, prolonged iwi (tribal group) engagement and community development research with Māori social work practitioners and organisations over the past 10 years. I will discuss my positionality and its alignment with the study's methods later, however, it is worthy to note here that all sixteen participants described strong themes of spiritual autonomy and mana (authority/power) alongside the praxis of thinking, being and doing in everyday practice. The study's kaupapa (themes) will be highlighted in this article to give more context to the findings, but first, this section will explore some of the gaps in social work's knowledge base.

Considerable research has shown the importance of cultural models of wellness, the origins of suicide from a Māori perspective, multimodal practice frameworks and spiritual knowledge within the helping professions (NiaNia et al., 2016; O'Connor, 2007). Phillips (2014) described how social workers in one study, exemplified spirituality and highlighted how this flowed into their practice. In another paper, Boynton and Vis (2014, pp. 199–200) suggested that increasing applications of spirituality and a conceptual shift in social work was needed to provide more holistic models of care. Holistic models of care from an Indigenous paradigm positions the spiritual dimension as a cornerstone for community and individual wellbeing (NiaNia et al., 2016). This was highlighted in another study by Mark and

colleagues (2017), which sought to address issues around healthcare using traditional knowledge and Western medicine across the broader health services. However, these papers further point out an issue where spirituality is often misunderstood in a Western system due to ignorance and colonisation (Kopua et al., 2020). To that end, it has been argued that Western theories and practices such as sustained reliance on biomedical models of health have caused significant damage to the retention and applicability of Indigenous healing frameworks for Māori (Fox, 2021; Kopua et al., 2020; NiaNia et al., 2016). Brave Heart and colleagues (2011) identified the restoration of kinships and spiritual authority as being a fundamental part of healing communities who have been directly impacted by colonisation and policies that perpetuate oppression. These claims indicate real-world challenges Indigenous Peoples endure every day. However, my PhD research seeks to understand how ancestral healing knowledge is constantly transforming in society, and how this shapes the relationships between communities and broader systems. There were several specific gaps in the literature that required further critical analysis and examination.

The majority of studies focused on strategies for addressing psychospiritual illness, but there was often no mention of social work in these papers and no research, until now, which showed how Māori healing traditions could translate to social work. For example, mana-enhancing practices (Ruwhiu, 2009) and Ngā take pū (applied practice principles) have been explored with some alignment to Māori healing, such as tohunga (experts) who draw on ancient healing techniques to help those recover from sexualised violence. However, nothing more was related specifically to social work, which begged the question: if social work struggles to translate Indigenous spirituality in practice, how might we develop a better understanding of culturally nuanced approaches? There is ample research into how traditional healing practices apply in mental health and suicide prevention, but the notion of spirituality is scant in social work around the world (Canda et al., 2019). In addition, social workers lack

the training required to apply basic principles of spiritualty into their practices, and there is currently no literature that explicitly identifies the value of Māori healing knowledge within social work practices (Fox, 2024). As various themes emerged in the literature review, it was clear that much of the research done in this area has been a response to epistemic injustices, lack of education and limited connections to worldview. My PhD was an attempt to address these gaps in social work's knowledge base and to provide further baseline evidence for the development of spiritual concepts and healing traditions in the profession. To help explore this area, the research was guided by three key objectives:

1. To examine the role of Māori healing and spiritual concepts in social work

2. To determine how Māori spiritual concepts are developed in social work

3. To critically analyse how processes of decoloniality inform social work

Developing a doctoral study based on these gaps was important to me as a 'pracademic' (practitioner and academic) because my spiritual essence is a critical component of Indigenous frameworks as well as my ontological positioning. That is, that my wairua (eternal spirit) and intuition guides my perception of reality at an intrapersonal level when working with communities in need. I will demonstrate this further in the methodology section. However, NiaNia and colleagues (2016) suggest that Māori conceive different levels of metaphysical processes that comprise the spirit world. This PhD needed to come from my wairua because as Indigenous peoples, we position ourselves in the world while writing about the world (Fox, 2024). Hence, I did not want to artificially remove myself from this experience. Instead, I developed an analytical tool that allowed me to position myself within the study—alongside participants, their stories of ancestral healing and spiritual concepts. The next section introduces the specific research methods and data analysis protocol.

Kaupapa Māori Theory and Research Practices

My doctoral journey began early 2021 and was completed at the end of 2024. The University of Sydney Ethics committee approved the research prior to commencement and the overall project was funded by the Australian Research Training Program. The initial stages of building my project required methodological rigour and a conceptual framework to underpin every aspect of the study's exploration. I adopted Kaupapa Māori theory to help ground the study's epistemology in cultural values and ancestral knowledge. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) suggested that Kaupapa Māori theory interweaves Māori and Western ways of knowing, histories, methods, aspirations and economic needs. This description resonated with how I wanted to complement Māori views of healing with Western qualitative methods (Fox, 2025). To that end, reflexivity and deep awareness were part of the initial stages of establishing my conceptual approach, as the concept of kaupapa implies a way of structuring how one thinks about ideas and practices (Smith, 2012).

In relation to the research practices, I integrated both Māori values and qualitative techniques such as thematic analysis, coding systems, categorising subthemes and observational practices (Azungah, 2018). However, weaving Māori and Western ideas needed to be done with great caution so that the essence of mātauranga and Kaupapa Māori values were kept intact. As Smith (2012) suggested, we cannot simply slot Māori ways of knowing with Western perspectives, thus it was not my intention to contaminate our ways of doing research but to show how mātauranga can also be part of complementary research designs. I will explain the methodology and application of the Ara Wairua analysis tool in a later section. However, once the methodological foundation was established, I applied Kaupapa Māori theory to guide the study's techniques.

The recruitment of participants was completed by mid-2022 with individuals across Aotearoa-New Zealand and Australia. A participant information sheet was disseminated to

approximately 25-30 potential interviewees outlining the basis of my research and my contact details (Fox, 2024). The selection criterion was specific and used a purposive sampling technique to recruit participants. Non-Māori were excluded because the research sought to explore the worldviews of people with identified whakapapa. This was crucial because whakapapa is a construct of our collective realities as well as a metaphysical framework to help place oneself within the world (Mahuika & Mahuika, 2020). From an insider's perspective, whakapapa is how we relate and connect with each other including our relationships with the land and ancestors.

With regard to recruitment, participants needed a formal social work qualification, whereas traditional healers did not require formal credentials but were selected based on their spiritual healing skills (Fox, 2024). The recruitment process yielded interest from 16 participants who provided verbal consent to take part in the study. Most interviewees chose to use their real names instead of a pseudonym. The interviews were in-depth and guided by a schedule I developed based on the research aims, allowing for a more open conversation.

Regarding the integration of Kaupapa Māori theory in the research processes, we began each interview with karakia (incantation) and spoke at length in a wānanga (shared space) setting. I travelled all over Aotearoa to speak with participants face to face at their whare (homes) or marae (traditional meeting places). Meeting face to face was important to establish rapport and intrinsic connection with participants. As Mahuika and Mahuika (2020) suggest, wānanga occurs in a spiritually grounded environment, emphasising relational connection where reciprocity and co-operation flourish. The notion of reciprocity was actualised by way of koha (gifting) for the participants' time and aroha (love).

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) further aligns co-operation with the value of whanaungatanga (relationships) and manaakitanga (care) in Kaupapa Māori research. In terms of holding space, each interview was recorded and the audio and visual materials

captured for analysis to take place at a later stage. Although most participants were able to meet in person, some could only engage via Zoom due to time constraints and availability (Fox, 2024). Recording the raw data allowed for observation and I kept a field journal to take notes of participants' reactions, their body language and facial expressions during the interviews. Stage one of the Ara Wairua tool, Kare-pū-toro, is where I began making sense of wairua through the practice of observation and how participants were emotionally attached to their pūrākau. Approximately 1200 minutes of raw data was transcribed verbatim, demonstrating the depth of each discussion and highlighting the participants' full engagement in a meaningful exchange of mātauranga. This next discussion outlines the analytical procedures used to examine the participants' narratives.

Methodology and Analysis of Materials

A cultural analysis framework was required to examine the perspectives of sixteen Māori healers and social workers who operate from a traditional point of view. I developed the Ara Wairua data analysis tool (Figure 1) using a four-phase process underpinned by pūrākau (narrative) methodology (Fox, 2025). Pūrākau is a Māori storytelling approach that allowed me to capture the experiences of my participants (Lee-Morgan, 2019). Pūrākau also refer to our oral traditions such as pakiwaitara (mythology) and kōrero tāwhito (ancient stories). The narratives of participants are what contains insights whereas ancient oral traditions contain philosophical thought and worldviews (Lee-Morgan, 2019). In my PhD, the pūrākau are the raw excerpts that have been kept intact and written verbatim into my thesis. The excerpts were then analysed using the Ara Wairua tool, which was unique to my research, as each phase was developed around concepts of Māori healing and the hinengaro (human mind). No other Indigenous research analysis tool has done this before (Fox, 2025). To briefly summarise: Stage 1) *Kare-pū-toro* involves analysing raw research data through observation of content and participants' emotional attachment to their pūrākau; Stage 2)

Whatumanawa involves intuitive thinking to develop open codes and themes in relation to the research question; Stage 3) *Kāre ā roto* requires deeper analysis of emerging kaupapa (themes), with the result being the development of subthemes from each category; Stage 4) *Tihei mauri ora* is the final stage, which is where I integrated my memos (noted interpretations) with literature to discuss the findings (Fox, 2025). The Ara Wairua tool allowed a continual movement across each analytical stage to review those claims as I evaluated and interpreted each excerpt.

Figure 1: The Ara Wairua data analysis tool adapted from Fox (2025)
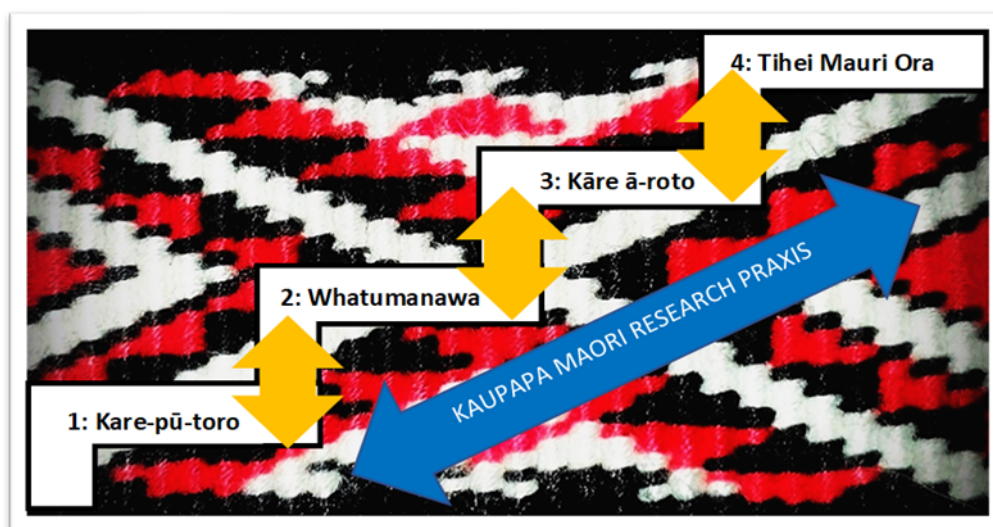
Producing the Ara Wairua tool was important because computer software programs such as NVivo would not have been able to capture the true essence of Māori words, expressions, the human elements of pūrākau. More importantly, I did not want to be artificially removed from the analytical experience of engaging with the participants' wairua. Bergin (2011) points out the issue with NVivo distancing researchers from their data and thus distorting the analytical process. Bundjalung Goenpul woman, Mareese Terare (2020), also

found NVivo did not support her study's data analysis claiming that the program limits processes of reflexivity, which is a critical part of Indigenous research. While NVivo has its benefits for achieving robust interpretations of data, it was important to decolonise the analytical aspects of my PhD. However, the Ara Wairua tool has its own limitations, as it requires researchers to actualise intuition, which is contentious in research because intuition is a type of knowing that is invisible (Hodgkinson & Healey, 2008). While I acknowledge this is a limitation, the Ara Wairua tool also has valuable strengths in that intuitive knowing is what kept me fully connected to the participant's stories (Fox, 2025). Once the pūrākau were analysed, the next task was to study the themes and elicit the aka matua (research findings).

Key Kaupapa and Aka Matua Results

My study yielded six key themes and twelve key findings, which were then synthesised with relevant literature to help address the research problem. The following kaupapa organically emerged from the pūrākau and philosophical kōrero during in-depth wānanga.

1. Ngā whakaaro o te hinengaro: Mental health concepts from a Te Ao Māori worldview

2. He mauri tū, he mauri ora: Displacement and relational healing principles for praxis

3. Ma te ariki, ma te tauira: Disseminating knowledge for non-Indigenous practitioners

4. Te hua ā ngā rangatira: Occupying space with responsibility and spiritual sensitivity

5. Apiti hono tātai hono: Creating nuanced understandings of two worlds for wellbeing

6. Ki te whei ao ki te ao marama: Indigenising social work through systemic change

Using codes and memos helped me to get from topics and questions to the actual analysis. This process is likened to praxis which, Kaupapa Māori theorist Graham Smith (1997) suggested is the cyclic process of thinking, being and doing in an adult educational context.

Smith borrowed the term conscientisation and praxis from Paulo Freire (1970, 1974), which

is a combination of action and reflection across the learning journey. My interpretation and

reflection of each kaupapa similarly prompted reflexivity and deep listening to understand the

metaphors and proverbs contained within the pūrākau. In doing so, the process of praxis and

linking theory to practice helped draw out a number of key findings that emerged from each

of the kaupapa listed above. For example, kaupapa 1) *Ngā whakaaro o te hinengaro*: Mental

health concepts from a Te Ao Māori worldview were a core theme extrapolated from various

pūrākau, and within that theme, emerged two key findings: (1) Traditional healing is

embedded in Māori epistemology and ontology, and (2) Healing is the practice of

unconditional aroha (love) from the heart. Table 1 highlights twelve key findings, which

helped informed my study's research problem and address gaps social works' knowledge

base.

Table 1: Research findings for *Mā Te Ara Wairua, ka kite he oranga: A Kaupapa Māori study into the development of traditional healing knowledge and spiritual concepts in social work*'

Theme		Aka matua: Research findings
1	1	Traditional healing is embedded in Māori epistemology and ontology.
	2	Healing is the practice of unconditional aroha (love) from the heart.
2	3	Social workers ought to acquire an understanding of wairua (eternal spirit) and whakapapa (ancestral connections).
	4	Healing in social work is centred on tapu (sacred)-enhancing practices.
3	5	Māori healing knowledge must be included in all levels of social work, within a framework which is taught in accordance with tīkanga (cultural protocols).
	6	Non-Māori practitioners cannot integrate traditional Māori knowledge with Western social work, but they can apply cultural humility and be indigenist.
4	7	Social work is at increased risk of isolating traditional knowledge.
	8	Traditional healing can only be actualised when accepted by mainstream.
5	9	Traditional healing requires financial support from governments.
	10	Healing knowledge in social work is a process which sustains whakapapa.

| 6 | 11 | Social work must reinstate traditional Māori healing knowledge as a core part of tertiary education and cultural supervision in Aotearoa. |
| | 12 | Social work must advocate for mana motuhake (divine authority) and the protection of traditional Māori healing knowledge. |

Presenting the baskets of knowledge for social work

This section presents three baskets of knowledge containing useful insights, spiritual views and recommendations for social work. The first basket of healing knowledge is called Te kete whakapapa, which is the basket of genealogy. The baskets are symbolic of the psychospiritual journey our ancestor Tāne-nui-a-rangi undertook to acquire knowledge for humankind from Te Kaihanga (The Creator/God). Doing a PhD was also an inner journey of discovery into Māori spiritual concepts and the end result being knowledge production for the social work profession.

Te Kete Whakapapa: The Basket of Genealogy

The basket of genealogy weaves concepts such as the value of whanaungatanga, whakapapa knowledge and principles of cultural humility into social work. Cultural humility encourages social workers to actualise their own unique worldviews and to be willing to learn rather than rely on what one already knows (Foronda et al., 2016). Participants argued that Māori healing concepts cannot be used in a tokenistic way but must be informed in a tikanga (cultural protocol) based way. Examples from the themes mentioned earlier include building whanaungatanga with community, promoting spiritual belief systems with whānau, connecting people with kinships as part of healing, and having a commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique. Exercising cultural humility is how non-Indigenous practitioners can integrate aspects of Indigenous knowledge to their work while having a critical awareness of their limitations in terms of who they are and what shapes their attitudes and

beliefs. Good cultural manners are about applying principles of whanaungatanga in such a way that practitioners can perceive the spiritual world (Fox, 2021). Aka matua (6) reinforces this sentiment suggesting that non-Māori practitioners can apply cultural humility and be relational with others. In addition, the study highlighted how participants not only apply whanaungatanga, whakapapa, and cultural humility in everyday life, but their ability to critically analyse intangible principles and knowledge to practice. These practices give the same mauri (life force) to the environment and humans while binding all creation to the cosmic centre (NiaNia et al., 2016). The basket of genealogy centralises the findings of this work around those relationships with community, the physical and spiritual worlds, and fulfilling the obligations of tūpuna (ancestors) to raise whakapapa consciousness.

Whakapapa consciousness and awareness is about deep knowing. One of the issues with social work is that the profession generally tells us how to think, act and behave within the parameters of Western knowledge and theory (Dominelli & Hackett, 2012). The research findings, aka matua (3), social workers ought to acquire an understanding of wairua and whakapapa, and aka matua (10), healing knowledge in social work is a process that sustains whakapapa, shows us that a deeper sense of knowing depends on the social worker's acquisition of their epistemology, values and skill to understand someone else's cultural frame of reference (Fox, 2024). The acquisition of whakapapa knowledge is very much part of healing work, as some participants insisted that these teachings cannot be used by those who do not hold an Indigenous worldview. However, there is potential for others to apply aspects of traditional healing knowledge to practice with cultural humility and relationality.

When we talk about soul wounds, these are the experiences of colonisation resulting in intergenerational trauma and pain carried across multiple kin and community manifesting as suicide and mental illness (Brave Heart et al., 2011) The loss of whakapapa through high Indigenous suicide and "the loss, disruption or displacement of traditional healing practices

went hand-in hand with the undermining of worldviews and the destruction of a way of life" (Kirmayer, 2012, p. 253). Non-Māori do not experience soul wounds like Indigenous Peoples do; however, they can have a willing heart to work from a place of cultural humility and appreciate that this reality does not go away but informs where our future takes us (Fox, 2024). As such, the role of traditional healing knowledge in social work, is to develop cultural identity, combat the sociohistorical impacts of colonisation and interact with spiritual concepts in a meaningful way. This sentiment is vital because the profession lacks the confidence to integrate spirituality in education and practice resulting in serious concerns about the diversity of social work (Canda et al., 2019). As such, further work must be done in terms of how spiritually responsive practices are positioned within social work and the way in which non-Indigenous practitioners operate using cultural humility and relationality.

Te Kete Wairuatanga: The Basket of Spirituality

The basket of spirituality emphasises strengths-based approaches, wairua knowledge and aroha in social work. Wairua has transient meanings, but it can be understood as the ultimate reality for Māori whereas aroha is the unconditional love for all things (Mark et al., 2017; NiaNia et al., 2016). Other cultures have insisted that we need to find ways of "seeing through engagement with mind, body, and spirit in order to develop a different consciousness" (Aluli-Meyer, 2006, p. 263). As I have argued, wairua is generally omitted from social work, but aroha on the other hand has some contextual relevance to the profession. Many participants described common expressions that people can relate to such as love, connection to Te Kaihanga, the sacredness of individuals, and their inherent worth (Fox, 2024). Some analysed their own understandings of aroha and transferred this concept to examples such as healing from soul wounds and establishing interventions for the treatment of spiritual afflictions. For example, research participant *Bonnie* stated that "Wairua is a knowing and a feeling, and you cannot measure that. I guess the emotion that we can link it to

is aroha…the divine breath of the Creator within us" (Fox, 2024, p. 111). In addition to these examples of aroha and wairua knowledge, aka matua (1) supports the claim that wairua experiences are often pathologized, resulting in the misdiagnosis of spiritual phenomena in our communities. This is problematic because the ongoing neglect of spirituality in social work, coupled with the sustained reliance on Western diagnostic criteria for experiences of wairua, results in further damage to our ways of dealing with grief and healing. Hence, my research shows that aroha and wairua are part of the person-centred interventions in social work and have a critical role to play in mental health assessments, but also highlights how spiritual concepts require transparency into other ways of seeing the inner and outer worlds.

The basket of spirituality also informs a critical part of the research problem whereby, if social work struggles to translate and adapt Indigenous concepts in practice, how might healing knowledge assist with developing culturally nuanced approaches for the profession? What the study indicated is that we ought to get a better understanding of how to interpret spiritual experiences and how to reconnect people with their culture and aroha. Mark and others (2017, p. 84) affirmed that "aroha is the most important, powerful tool that's ever used because it's part of your love that helps with the healing as well." As social workers, we are 'spirit workers' because we work at an intrinsic level with people and communities (Fox, 2021). As Māori social workers, we also provide space for whakatangi (crying) and releasing emotions, whakapuaki (sharing stories), whakaratarata (setting healing goals with potential solutions for healing from grief), whakaora (taking control of one's wellbeing) and whakaoti (celebrating wellness; Ihimaera, 2004). Spirituality is embedded in these ideas and emerged in my PhD as a point of reference in aka matua (4), where healing in social work is centred on tapu (sacred)-enhancing practices.

These findings illustrate how healing is interpreted and how participants adapt to a changing world. Indigenous healing is focused on wellness, warmth and the conceptualisation

of change from a spiritual and loving stance (Fox, 2024). Research participant *Nikorima* further spoke about wairua and its relationship to health. He asked the question "…how do we validate claims by whānau who are saying that they are experiencing mental illness verses spiritual famine?" I believe that Te kete wairuatanga provides a basis for normalising Indigenous healing concepts in social work because it gives directions for operationalising both wairua and aroha as part of holistic interventions with Indigenous peoples and community. As mentioned above with the term whakaora, taking control of one's wellbeing and the praxis of healing knowledge in social work, appreciates wairua to bring a sense of wellness. Māori practitioners are in a constant process of thinking, seeing and doing, which gives effect to our obligations enshrined in whakapapa (Fox, 2024). That is, restoring a sense of wellness, bringing comfort and warmth to whānau and reconceptualising change from a spiritual and loving stance.

Te Kete Mohiotanga: The Basket of Philosophy

The basket of philosophy connects diverse understandings of Kaupapa Māori theory to practice and our resistance to colonial policies, which diminish traditional healing knowledge in social work. My doctoral study has argued that Indigenous spiritual concepts have a place in social work both locally and internationally. Royal (2012) supports this claim suggesting that the revitalisation of traditional knowledge is about understanding our future and our past. Indigenous Peoples seek resolutions to issues and promote restoration by reimagining the future and enacting mana motuhake (Fox, 2024). This was highlighted by the finding aka matua (7), social work is at increased risk of isolating traditional knowledge, and aka matua (8), traditional healing can only be actualised when accepted by mainstream.

The majority of participants pointed to how Māori healing knowledge provides possible solutions for mental health, spiritual and planetary wellbeing. Ruwhiu et al. (2008) argued that is important for the mainstream to recognise Māori assessment frameworks and

healing knowledge, while NiaNia et al. (2016) inferred that the spiritual side also requires equal attention. That said, Indigenous epistemology is associated with principled approaches to combat cultural dissonance by reframing a critical gaze of traditional knowing (Fox, 2021). Enacting mana motuhake and increasing spiritual healing knowledge make up the dimensions identified by participants as a local expression of experiences uniquely filtered through a Māori worldview. An example is with the 'Ngā tohu o te ora' research, which pointed out that the application of Māori healing knowledge, reflects the significance of local diversity in terms of understanding wellness domains at each stage of intervention (Ahuriri-Driscoll & Boulton, 2019). The basket of philosophy also provides evidence for capacity building in terms of social work supervision and cultural expertise in practice with newly qualified workers. Fox (2024) suggests that cultural supervision is vital to Māori social work practice and traditional healing should be part of supervision frameworks.

This is critical to highlight because two-thirds of social work is currently made up of non-Māori practitioners; therefore, ongoing workforce development must incorporate mana-enhancing approaches to service delivery (Ruwhiu, 2009). Participants spoke to their professional frameworks and the delivery of cultural supervision; however, an important finding was that kaumātua and tohunga are often called into this process, drawing on their knowledge of life and death. I found that spiritual knowledge is localised and a direct perception of reality or real practice wisdom that can only be developed when spiritual awareness is emphasised at all levels of social work. Moreover, the use of pūrākau provides a slice of life into participants' stories of survival, their struggles and their resilience, which is exactly what social work emphasises (Lee-Morgan, 2019; Fox, 2024). Thus, aka matua (11), reinforces how social work must reinstate traditional Māori healing knowledge as a core part of tertiary education and supervision.

Illuminating the Possibilities for Future Work

The implications of my PhD for social work are quite profound in that this work privileges Indigenous voices in a predominantly Eurocentric profession. The study also affirms the legitimacy of healing knowledge in practice, expands on whakapapa concepts and reframes cultural ways of knowing and doing. The three baskets of knowledge have created space for non-Māori practitioners to critique and re-define Western perspectives of healing and therapy when working with whānau seeking social work input. Several recommendations are outlined below.

Whakarongo: Active Listening

Social work must listen to the concerns of Indigenous practitioners, healers, and community leaders by critically appraising the processes and policies, which tend to favour a one-size fits all paradigm. At a minimum, social workers must value traditional healing knowledge as part of the interventions when working with community.

Whakamanawatia: Empowerment

Social work should empower practitioners and educators, to develop the application of traditional healing knowledge in practice by prioritising and coordinating effective programs that can enhance cultural initiatives and meaningful engagement across government sectors.

Whakapono: Belief

Social work should seek to maintain cultural humility and create spiritually responsive practices in its design and frameworks. If wairua knowledge is not part of our assessments involving basic human survival, then there is critical problem with spiritual inclusion in social work.

Whakahonohono: Connection

Social work should aim to reconnect people with their worldviews and ways of being by contributing to piloting work and establishing initiatives that connect service users to cultural identity, whakapapa and mana motuhake.

Whakamarumarutia: Protection

Social work ought to commit to the ongoing protection of traditional Māori healing knowledge in practice and education by critically analysing how the sector enables tino rangatiratanga (sovereignty) and shields mātauranga the harms of cultural misappropriation.

Whakatumatuma: Advocacy

Social work must advocate for the utility of traditional healing knowledge in health care, justice, education systems through ongoing consultation with local government bodies and find ways to enhance biculturalism with the broader community.

Whakawhitingia: Interconnectedness

Social work must ensure that the intergenerational weaving of knowledge, genealogy, experience, and culturally nuanced strategies are part of the movements towards creating healthier relationships between service users and Indigenous Peoples globally and locally.

Trustworthiness of the Research

The trustworthiness of my PhD was enhanced by aligning aspects of the research with Guba's (1981) Trustworthiness of Qualitative Research model. Guba identifies four aspects of enhancing trustworthiness: (1) truth value, (2) applicability, (3) consistency, and (4) neutrality. Truth value is established by having prolonged engagement with participants. As explained earlier in this paper, I started workshops with healers in 2008 and built

relationships in that way. Applicability refers to the degree in which findings can be applied to other contexts. For example, the basket of genealogy and suggestions for social work namely, whakahonohono (connection), reiterates that the findings are conclusive and provides evidence for non-Māori to be relational through cultural humility and linking theory to practice (Fox, 2024). In terms of consistency the Ara Wairua analysis tool allows the methodological processes to be replicated and used by non-Indigenous researchers (Fox, 2025).

Trustworthiness was also enhanced through peer debriefing with Indigenous mentors and supervisors, ensuring that observations were recorded and raw data was systematically analysed using the Ara Wairua tool, which further supported the consistency and applicability of my study's findings. The final point Guba (1981) makes is with the notion of neutrality. As a researcher with Māori whakapapa and connections to participants through prolonged engagement in the healing community, it is difficult to be neutral in research. I explained my positionality, emphasising the importance of staying connected with the analytical experience. Rather than striving for neutrality, I remained 'natural,' ensuring that my claims of knowledge were validated through a cultural lens, keeping our pūrākau intact and keeping wairua as the central theme that bound each story together.

Conclusion

A wide gap in knowledge existed where we knew very little about the integration of Māori healing concepts and traditional views on spirituality in social work. This PhD set out to establish critique and describe our understanding of cultural practices and Indigenous epistemology as it relates to holistic health and the wellbeing of communities locally and internationally. '*Mā te ara wairua, ka kite he oranga'* means by the spiritual pathway, we shall see wellness. This paper presents three baskets of spiritual healing knowledge for social work and explains the analytical processes employed to source this knowledge from the

perspectives of sixteen participants who are living and breathing whakapapa. Social work is a profession that emphasises connections between people, our interactions with the environment and the way in which we relate with others. The central question that guided the study was: what is the role of traditional Māori healing knowledge in social work? As such, several key recommendations emerged, one of which was whakawhitingia (interconnectedness) and how social work must ensure that intergenerational weaving of knowledge, genealogy, experience, and culturally nuanced strategies are part of the movements towards creating healthier relationships within the spheres of social work. We do that by reframing aroha as an authentic practice of love, bolstering whakapapa as a healing modality, embedding cultural humility and praxis to support non-Indigenous practitioners and creating spiritually responsive approaches working with the mainstream and government services. The findings of this research affirm social work is at increased risk of isolating traditional knowledge and the fact that traditional healing can only be actualised when it is truly accepted by mainstream systems. This research provides possible solutions to issues where Indigenous lives matter. *Tihei mauri ora* - Let there be life.

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The Sustainability of Ubuntu as a Philosophy of Education in a Postcolonial and Globalising Zimbabwe: A Hermeneutical Study

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Abstract

This inquiry was motivated by a great deal of debate that surrounds Ubuntu (also called 'hunhu/unhu' in Shona or 'botho' in Sotho), a philosophy specific to Sub-Saharan Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular. The study was, therefore, a critical examination of the sustainability of Ubuntu as a philosophy of education in a postcolonial and globalising Zimbabwe. The current inquiry took a qualitative research approach, which is informed by the interpretivist research paradigm - a research worldview considered more successful in inquiries of a human-social nature. As a case study, the field inquiry was conducted in 3 schools and a university within Masvingo Urban, Zimbabwe. The research participants included 3 school teachers, 3 deputy heads, 3 heads, and 4 university lecturers. Despite the criticism that the Ubuntu philosophy is a postcolonial utopia invention as well as narrow Bantu philosophy without continent-wide resonance, the current inquiry discovered that the said philosophy is well-positioned to salvage Zimbabwe's education system from the negative influences of globalisation and Euro-American modernity. It was, therefore, concluded that Ubuntu remains a sustainable philosophy guiding instruction in a postcolonial and globalising Zimbabwe. This inquiry, thus, recommends the escalation of education for Ubuntu in order to advance the social-cultural-moral formation of the Indigenous Zimbabwean learners.

Introduction

Ubuntu (also called 'hunhu/unhu' in Shona or 'botho' in Sotho) is a wellspring flowing with African ontology and epistemology (Ramose, 1999). Ontology is the science of being (the existence aspect) whereas epistemology is the theory of knowledge (the knowledge aspect). The ontological position of Ubuntu is located within the 'onto-triadic structure of being' which articulates human existence in the three levels of 'the departed' (African past), 'the living'

(African present), and the 'yet to be born' (African future) – the golden principle being the maintenance of 'virtue' (ethical or moral probity) throughout the three levels of human existence (Ramose, 1999; Manda, 2009). The epistemological element of Ubuntu manifests in African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKSs). Hence, the Ubuntu philosophy is on the whole the torchlight of life and certainly of education in Sub-Saharan Africa. It should, however, be reminisced that this home-grown philosophy is not without critics. For instance, some Africans conversant with it (Ubuntu) may tend to dismiss it as an overly abstract, idealistic, romanticist, illusory, and impractical philosophy (Nabudere, 2005). The current inquiry, therefore, sought to glean fresh and critical insights from the relevant participants on the sustainability of Ubuntu as a philosophy of education in a postcolonial and globalising Zimbabwe.

Background

The year 1890 marked the onset of exploitative settler colonialism in the land between the Zambezi and Limpopo Rivers which is now known as Zimbabwe. From 1890 to 1980, Zimbabwe was under full-blown colonialism, the British being the colonisers. This colonial epoch can be further broken down into the British South Africa Company rule (1890-1922), the Settler or Responsible Government (1923-1964), and Smith's Rhodesia Front Government since the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (1965-1979). Thus, colonial education, as informed by the Western philosophies whose roots had been laid by missionaries well before 1890, was in place in colonial Zimbabwe then known as Rhodesia from 1890 to 1980. Before the onset of colonialism, Zimbabwe's precolonial customary education was informed by the Ubuntu philosophy. However, education for Ubuntu was interrupted by the onset of colonialism. In fact, education for Ubuntu was replaced by colonial education. It is this colonial experience which occasioned the de-traditionalisation or de-Africanisation of Africans, cultural dissonance,

uprootedness, alienation, mimetic philopraxis, and existential vacuity (Wuta, 2020) – cancers

that continue to threaten Africanness in Zimbabwe even in the postcolonial dispensation.

Globalisation and neo-colonialism, thus, serve to exacerbate this alienation and uprootedness of

Africans in contemporary Zimbabwe.

At the dawn of the Third Millennium (Year 2000 going forward), the Government of

Zimbabwe realised that the country needs a decolonising philosophy to inform her education,

which was and still is bedevilled by the colonial logic (coloniality) – the darker side of the Euro-

North American-centric modernity. Building upon Nziramasanga's (1999) recommendation that

Zimbabwe's education be informed by the home-grown philosophy of Ubuntu, the Government

embarked on a curriculum review exercise in 2014, an undertaking that birthed the Curriculum

Framework for Primary and Secondary Education 2015-2022, which decreed the Ubuntu

philosophy to provide the philosophical foundations for education in postcolonial Zimbabwe.

The Curriculum Framework for Primary and Secondary Education 2015-2022 later morphed into

Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Curriculum Framework for Primary and Secondary Education

2024-2030, which, according to Secretary's Circular No.4 (2024), aims to "strengthen measures

to mould the pupils to cherish and practice the Zimbabwean philosophical orientation of Ubuntu"

(p. 3). This Heritage-Based Curriculum Framework, thus, maintains Ubuntu as Zimbabwe's

decolonising philosophy of education within the postcolonial dispensation.

However, scholars are caught on the horns of dilemma as they endeavour to evaluate the

Ubuntu philosophy in terms of sustainability amidst the unrelenting and ever-intensifying forces

of globalisation. Hence, this philosophy is couched in ambiguity and shrouded in mystery since it

is at the epicentre of debate, which is worth the effort of academic engagement. Whilst some

scholars view the Ubuntu philosophy as a true African voice within the globalisation agenda,

others deride the said philosophy as a postcolonial utopia invention and nebulous Bantu philosophy of no continental resonance. Those who allege that Ubuntu lacks continental resonance predicate their position on the understanding that the Khoisan (the earliest inhabitants of Sub-Saharan Africa), and the Bantu (who, through migrations from the North, arrived later and became the dominant people of the said region) are the originators of the Ubuntu philosophy. It is against this background of dialectical scholarly contestation that the current field-based inquiry weighed the evidence with a goal of estimating the sustainability of Ubuntu as a philosophy of education within the current world order driven by Western influences under the guise of globalisation.

Problem Postulation

The sustainability of Ubuntu as a philosophy of education in contemporary Zimbabwe is a topical subject worth the effort of academic contemplation and dialectical contestation, that is to say, it is worth the effort of scholarly engagement and rational argumentation. Hence, scholars (at global, regional, and local scales) have not yet reached a discernible point of convergence pertaining to the degree to which Ubuntu is sustainable as a philosophy informing the education systems extant in Sub-Saharan Africa in general, and Zimbabwe in particular. The current research endeavour, therefore, sought to estimate the sustainability of Ubuntu as a philosophy of education in a postcolonial but globalising Zimbabwe.

Conceptual Framework

Since the current reflection comes amidst the preponderance of Occidental philosophies in Afro-Zimbabwean education, it is, therefore, conceived within the purview of African renaissance. African renaissance is a window for Afro-Zimbabweans to reclaim the status of

their native meaning-making (African epistemology). In line with African renaissance, which

harmonises significantly with critical theory, Msila (2009) argues that an African philosophy

should be the foundation for education systems in Sub-Saharan Africa - a geopolitical region

which incorporates Zimbabwe. This expresses a call for the rebirth and rejuvenation of African

philosophy in general, and of African philosophy of education in particular.

According to Makgoba et al. (as cited in Msila, 2009), "African renaissance is a unique

opportunity for Africans to define themselves and their agenda according to their realities and

take into account the realities of the world around them" (p. 311). This demonstrates that African

renaissance seeks to combat what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) refers to as 'coloniality' or the

'colonial logic' (the darker side of the Euro-North American-centric modernity) and hence it

(African renaissance) is a decolonial ideal which carries with it the liberatory-emancipatory

project, of course, within the purview of globalisation.

Likewise, Makgoba et al. (as cited in Msila, 2009) declare, "African renaissance is about

Africans being agents of their own history and masters of their destiny" (p. 311). This

emancipatory inclination of African renaissance is endorsed by Mbeki (as cited in Marumo &

Chakale, 2018) who states:

> African renaissance should reflect the need to empower African peoples to deliver
> themselves from the legacy of colonialism and neo-colonialism through the advancement
> of African economic, political, or other pressures to control or influence other countries,
> especially former dependencies, and to situate themselves on the global stage as equal
> and respected contributors to, as well as beneficiaries of, all the achievements of human
> civilisation. (p. 180)

The notion of African emancipation, as inscribed and proclaimed in African renaissance,

is in sync with the thrust of redeeming Ubuntu - a decolonising African philosophy of education

and life. Thus, Makgoba et al. (as cited in Msila, 2009) advocate the reclamation of Ubuntu from

undue trivialisation, condemnation, and epistemic oblivion as orchestrated from the Euro-

Oriental perspective. For genuine African renaissance to materialise, an investigation into the sustainability of Ubuntu as a philosophy of education in a postcolonial but globalising Zimbabwe remains an exigency, not an option.

A Brief Review of Related Literature

The review of related literature was undertaken in order to unpack the dialectical contestation about the sustainability of Ubuntu as a philosophy of education in a postcolonial and globalising Zimbabwe.

On the one hand, Ubuntu is poised to continue guiding African education in the postcolonial dispensation and within the current world order driven by globalisation. For Tirivangana (2013), local education has to be guided by Ubuntu since this philosophy is the controlling ideology of Africans. Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru and Makuvaza (2014) also recognise the power of education for Ubuntu and argue that the home-grown philosophy of Ubuntu should provide the philosophical foundations for education in Sub-Saharan Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular. Likewise, Makuvaza and Gatsi (2014) maintain that education underpinned by Ubuntu is strategically positioned to salvage African youths and/or learners from the negative influences of globalisation. In the same vein, Bondai and Kaputa (2016) hold that the Ubuntu philosophy is a panacea for educational development in Sub-Saharan Africa. This connotes that Ubuntu is the answer to most of the challenges afflicting education in Sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, the aforementioned authorities are of the conviction that Ubuntu as a philosophy is worth adopting to guide contemporary education in Sub-Saharan Africa in general, and Zimbabwe in particular, because of its conceivable virtues and values. This Afrocentric thesis, therefore, affirms the view that the home-grown Ubuntu philosophy is sustainable and worth revitalising in a postcolonial and globalising Zimbabwe.

On the other hand, Nabudere (2005) and Manda (2009), observe some shortfalls in Ubuntu, notwithstanding the fact that they fundamentally acknowledge the centrality and primacy of this philosophy in education within Sub-Saharan Africa. "Indeed, some of those who are aware of it (Ubuntu) sometimes dismiss it as a post-colonial 'Utopia' invention and/or a 'prophetic' illusion crafted by the African political elites in the age of globalisation" (Nabudere, 2005, p. 1). This portrays Ubuntu as an abstract, idealistic, romanticist, illusory, and impractical philosophy, which, according to Manda (2009), has failed to provide pragmatic solutions to some of the socio-political challenges vexing Sub-Saharan Africa today. Implicit in this viewpoint is the position that this philosophy is to some extent unsustainable in the contemporary African context. The author, therefore, views this critique of Ubuntu as emblematic of the Eurocentric thesis.

It is this dialectical contestation that presents the author with a cloudy situation – a knowledge gap which warrants the undertaking of a field research, *id est*, gathering ideas directly from the field in order to confirm or disconfirm the foregoing divergent viewpoints. Informed by the ideal of African renaissance, the author sought to gather views from relevant participants, views with which to ascertain the degree to which the Ubuntu philosophy is sustainable in contemporary Zimbabwe. It is these views that have the potential to guide the re-vitalisation of the home-grown philosophy of Ubuntu within the current world order driven by the forces of globalisation.

Ubuntu: The Fundamental Philosophy as well as a Philosophy of Education

Samkange and Samkange (1980) translate the term Ubuntu to 'personhood', whereas Ramose (1999) defines Ubuntu with the use of alternative English words 'humanness' and 'being'. Beyond the use of synonyms, Ramose (1999) defines Ubuntu as "the root of African

philosophy…the wellspring flowing with African ontology and epistemology" (p. 49). This parades Ubuntu as the fountain of African essence, existence, and knowledge, which provides some justification as to why Ubuntu is referred to as the African philosophy of life. Ubuntu, therefore, is a controlling philosophy of Africans which essentially speaks to African values.

In the realm of education in particular, the philosophy of Ubuntu is underpinned by the following principles: holism, functionalism, communalism, preparationism, essentialism-perennialism, and humanism (Hapanyengwi, 2011). In terms of 'holism', which subsumes all the other philosophical principles, Ubuntu is a trinity. The trinity of Ubuntu is articulated by Nziramasanga (1999) where he declares, "the curriculum should provide for the education of 'the head, the heart and the hand' in developing Ubuntu" (p. 75), an ideal which constitutes holistic education. This is endorsed by Hapanyengwi (2011), who conceives 'education for Ubuntu' as "an education that addresses the felt needs of the people by focusing on *kurodza pfungwa* (developing the intellect), *tsika* (ethics, tradition, moral values, and customs), and *dzidziso dzemibato yemaoko* (the development of psychomotor skills)" (p. 31). This translates to academic-cognitive-intellectual development, moral-ethical-social development, and physical-psychomotor-vocational development, respectively.

In other words, the fact that education for Ubuntu was geared towards 'addressing the felt needs of the people' manifests functionalism or instructional relevance whereas *Kurodza pfungwa*, *tsika*, and *dzidziso dzemibato yemaoko* coincide with the education of the 'head', the 'heart', and the 'hand', respectively. It is, therefore, permissible to argue that the Ubuntu philosophy is a 'Grand Trinity', akin to Booker Teliaferro Washington's philosophy of the Grand Trinity, which he practically implemented at Tuskegee Institute, USA (Siyakwazi &

Machingura, 2018). Thus, Ubuntu and Washington's Grand Trinity are both versions of holistic

education in different but comparable contexts.

Critiquing Ubuntu: The Debates

At a continental level, Nabudere (2005) argues, "it does not follow that all the African

people propagate or are even consciously aware of the philosophy (of Ubuntu) as such" (p. 1).

This implies that Ubuntu is not a continent-wide philosophy. Hence, other sections of the African

society(s) question the practicability of the Ubuntu philosophy. The fact, however, remains that

in one way or the other all African groups of people *viz* the Bantu, the Khoisan, and the Nilo,

among others, subscribe to Ubuntu as their philosophy of life because of common beliefs, norms,

and values of family and community.

Nabudere (2005) reports, "some of the cynics even question the philosophy (Ubuntu) on

the grounds that, at best, it is a 'Bantu' philosophy not related to the ways of life and outlook of

other 'tribal' groupings of Africa" (p. 1). This cynic view implies that Ubuntu is nothing more

than a Bantu African worldview. In fact, the censure is that Ubuntu is not as pervasive as it

purports. Hence, Ubuntu is denigrated for being peculiarly a Southern (Bantu) African

philosophy. However, Professor Cheick Anta Diop of Senegal (as cited in Nabudere, 2005):

> …has traced the generic term for man or *ntu*, to be the same on other African languages
> with similar term *nit* in Wolf, *nti* in Egyptian, *neddo* in Peul. He argues that the
> designation of a people by a generic term meaning man has been general throughout
> Black Africa, starting with Egypt. (p. 2)

This, thus, suggests that Ubuntu is a continent-wide philosophy which is applicable,

recognised, and celebrated all over Africa.

At a regional level, Ubuntu is also under severe criticism for its failure to abate upheavals

in Sub-Saharan Africa where this philosophy is claimed to be the torchlight of life. This finds

testimony, for instance, in Rwanda, where there are people who are relatively conversant with

the philosophy of Ubuntu yet they allowed genocide to occur (Manda, 2009). On the one hand,

this philosophy may not be a foolproof remedy to socio-political challenges vexing Sub-Saharan

Africa, a viewpoint which serves to dismiss Bondai and Kaputa's (2016) claim that Ubuntu is the

panacea for sustainable educational development in Sub-Saharan Africa. On the other hand, the

problem may not be the philosophy but the people who fail to appreciate its importance and what

it requires if one is to truly be guided by its principles.

Further analysis shows that human tragedies have always occurred in other philosophies,

not just in Ubuntu. For instance, warfare is rampant in the Global North where there are people

who subscribe to philosophies other than Ubuntu - the Russo-Ukrainian War (since early 2022)

bearing good testimony. This salvages the Ubuntu philosophy from the criticism that it has failed

to solve the socio-politico-economic problems vexing Africa.

With the understanding that the humanistic philosophy of Ubuntu abhors wanton

termination of human life, the outbreak of the Rwandan genocide may not be attributable to the

failure of Ubuntu philosophy per-se but to the works of the foreign hand - although this line of

argumentation could sound like a conspiracy theory of some kind. According to Atkinson (as

cited in Wuta, 2020), the Belgians are accused of having given all sorts of privileges to the Tutsis

and discriminated against the Hutus whom they treated as inferior. This 'divide and conquer'

tactic in colonial Rwanda, therefore, created a time-bomb as it fanned ethnic resentment between

the Hutus and Tutsis. The Rwandan genocide is also known to have erupted due to the increasing

poverty provoked by the economic policies imposed on Rwanda by the World Bank and the

involvement of other Western countries (France, among others) in propping up the extremist

Hutus (Atkinson, as cited in Wuta, 2020). Therefore, attributing the outbreak of the Rwandan

genocide to the so-called weaknesses of the Ubuntu philosophy misses the point.

At a local level, Louw (as cited in Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru & Makuvaza, 2014) argues, "Ubuntu has a potential dark side in terms of which it demands an oppressive conformity and loyalty to the group" (p. 8), meaning that the philosophy represses individuality. However, Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru and Makuvaza (2014) dismiss this submission because tolerance of particularity and individuality is a virtue cherished in Ubuntu, a philosophy which goes against oppressive conformity. The foregoing is substantiated by Shutte (as cited in Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru & Makuvaza, 2014) who argues, "in Ubuntu, the community is not opposed to the individual, nor does it simply swallow the individual up, it enables each individual to become a unique centre of shared life" (p. 7). Thus, the Ubuntu philosophy is absolved from the allegation that it over-emphasises the superiority of the group over the individual.

While the concept of Ubuntu "sounds easily attainable at surface level, its identifiability and definability may not be as easy. This is due to lack of laid down standards or parameters for its enculturation" (Sibanda, 2014, p. 27). Thus, the concept of Ubuntu has remained a paradox, if not a mystery, to the younger generations. The above is affirmed by Ter Haar, Moyo, and Nondo (as cited in Sibanda, 2014) where they "complain of the vagueness and mystification of traditional African belief representations" (p. 27). Thus, Ubuntu is shrouded in mystery as evidenced by the obscurities that surround its definition. However, the foregoing deliberations do not suggest denial of the centrality as well as credibility of Ubuntu to the cultural philosophy as well as the education system of Zimbabwe.

Research Methodology

The field inquiry was informed by 'interpretivism' or 'hermeneutics', a research philosophy which seeks to understand situations through the eyes of the speaking and acting participants, *id est*, understanding phenomena from the perspective of research participants as

they are immersed in their natural settings. Hence, hermeneutics involves meaning-making in a

social context. According to Habermas (as cited in Cohen et al., 2007), interpretivist-

hermeneutical research simply seeks to understand situations and phenomena but does not

necessarily seek to transform them. To bridge this transformational gap, the researcher engaged

'critical theory', a school of thought which seeks to liberate human beings from the

circumstances that enslave them (Marcuse, as cited in Jessop, 2012). The circumstances, which,

in this context, seem to enslave Africans in general and Zimbabweans in particular revolve

around the negation of the African worldview embedded in Ubuntu. Critical theory, therefore,

was applied with a purpose of redeeming the Ubuntu philosophy from the margins and bringing

it to the centre of discourse on education in Sub-Saharan Africa. This is in accordance with the

ideal of African renaissance, which happens to be the conceptual framework of the current

reflection.

Since the topic is predicated on human-social phenomena, the most appropriate *modus

operandi* was to use research methodology within the qualitative approach informed by

interpretivism-hermeneutics. Qualitative research, thus, exhumes complete and in-depth

information as it seeks to study human beings in their natural settings, not under laboratory

conditions as in quantitative research. The field inquiry was conducted in 3 schools and a

university within Masvingo Urban, Zimbabwe. Therefore, as a case study which is qualitative in

outlook, the author employed the purposive sampling technique in which he handpicked the

participants that were included in the sample. In this technique, participants are selected on the

basis of the author's judgement of their typicality (Chiromo, 2006). Thus, the researcher selected

participants whom he deemed information-rich. The sample had a total of 13 participants. Such a

small and manageable sample size allowed for thorough interviews that were in a position to

elicit in-depth information. Broken down, this sample consisted of 3 schoolteachers, 3 deputy heads, 3 heads, and 4 university lecturers. These were interviewed individually and qualitative data was elicited. Textual analysis accompanied and buttressed these individual interviews thereby allowing for triangulation of research findings.

Data analysis was done in accordance with the thematic approach, which focuses on explaining research findings and concepts through identification and description of themes reduced and deduced from qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, there was familiarisation whereby the author immersed himself in the data. Thereupon, the author embarked on theme identification, theme review, theme refinement, theme interpretation, and reportage.

Indigenisation Statement

Being a local educator (lecturer in Zimbabwean institutions of higher learning), the author collaborates and identifies with fellow Indigenous educators *viz* the teachers, deputy heads, heads, and lecturers who participated in the current study. Pursuant to the agenda for indigenising education in a postcolonial and globalising Zimbabwe, the author undertook this work to glean fresh insights from fellow Indigenous educators about the sustainability of Ubuntu as an Indigenous philosophy of education. These Indigenous practitioners are sincerely acknowledged and credited for the valuable insights that they contributed towards the development of this study.

Findings

The interview question was: What is your comment on the sustainability of the Ubuntu philosophy in a postcolonial but globalising Zimbabwe? The theme deriving from this question

is '*sustainability of the Ubuntu philosophy in a postcolonial but globalising Zimbabwe*'. Here is

the key for participants' contributions: *T* – teacher, *DH* – deputy head, *H* – head, and *L* –

university lecturer.

To begin with, the 3 teachers' comments are:

T_1: A sober and normal African country should adopt Ubuntu as the bedrock of education. Even the Ten Commandments are related to Ubuntu. People with Ubuntu will be shining stars in the global village as the philosophy itself conditions them to shun vice.

T_2: The philosophy of Ubuntu is sustainable in as much as the global village requires our contributions as Africans.

T_3: The philosophy of Ubuntu is viable in this age of globalisation since it prepares us as Africans to tolerate foreigners. Ubuntu propagates the oneness of humanity as it shuns racial and ethnic discrimination.

The philosophy of Ubuntu, thus, remains viable in a perpetually globalising Zimbabwe.

T_1 in particular relates Ubuntu to the Biblical Ten Commandments that prescribe how a God-

fearing human being ought to behave. Ubuntu, therefore, emblematises the humanness of

Zimbabweans as Africans in a perpetually globalising world. Contributions from T_2 and T_3 value

social intercourse of peoples around the globe, which concurs with the oneness of humanity. This

is embedded in the principle of communalism which, in itself, is entrenched in the philosophy of

Ubuntu. In congruity with the ideal of African renaissance, this home-grown Ubuntu philosophy

is worth revitalising in a postcolonial and globalising Zimbabwe.

Comments from the 3 deputy heads are:

DH_1: The philosophy of Ubuntu is quite relevant and sustainable because it gives us as Africans our real identity, with which we can tell who we are and what we are meant for.

DH_2: The philosophy of Ubuntu is relevant and useful because it unites individuals. There is a sense of identity as we cherish our own values and morals.

DH_3: To some extent education for Ubuntu is viable as it cultivates moral probity among learners. However, to some learners Ubuntu may not take root because they may have been adulterated and corrupted by the negative influences of globalisation.

The consensual position emerging from the foregoing responses is that the decolonial and decolonising philosophy of Ubuntu is sustainable as a guiding epistemology of education in contemporary Zimbabwe, and the overriding theme is 'Ubuntu as a mark of Zimbabwean identity' in a globalising world. However, *DH₃* exhibited a measure of scepticism about the viability of Ubuntu when they expressed that Ubuntu may not help some learners who would have been adulterated and corrupted by global forces. Nevertheless, the philosophy in question is overall inclined towards counteracting coloniality or colonial logic and the related neo-colonial forces that continue to grip Zimbabwean societies within the postcolonial dispensation. In view of this submission, one can advocate for the re-vitalisation of Ubuntu as a deconstructive, decolonising, de-rooting, and reconstructive African philosophy of education.

Comments made by the 3 heads are:

H₁ : With our vibrant philosophy of Ubuntu, we must interact with others but with our own culture in hand. Even during the inauguration of the president in Zimbabwe in November 2017, he (in his speech) touched on Ubuntu and the dignitaries who attended the inauguration ceremony took the philosophy across the globe so that the world comes to have the socio-philosophical view of Zimbabwe. Countries of the world might want to research on this philosophy. Ubuntu, thus, cascades to other parts of the globe where it ignites further inquiry.

H₂ : The philosophy of Ubuntu is sustainable because it gives us our identity as an African country. It differentiates us from foreigners. We must value this philosophy because it fortifies us as Africans against identity crisis.

H₃ : The viability of the philosophy of Ubuntu is being threatened by globalisation but if we stand up to our virtues and ethos as Africans then we are bound to see it become sustainable. That way we are destined to be successful…Considering the way we distributed our land in Zimbabwe, we went against the global forces, we went on to distribute our land because to us it matters. We should be fortified against being swallowed by the forces of globalisation if at all Ubuntu is to be viable. There are certain elements of our culture which matter, which we should be able to defend because these are the ethos, the virtues, the values which make us a people and we should be able to defend them in the face of the global forces.

The sustainability of Ubuntu as a philosophy of education is, thus, appreciated unanimously. The response from *H₁* implies that the philosophy of Ubuntu could be subjected to

a 'global' or 'immortal' conversation whereby it is offered to other people so that they

interrogate it, thereby enhancing its feasibility and sustainability. H_2 envisions the sustainability

of Ubuntu in that this philosophy has the vast potential to fortify the young African indigene

against adulteration and the concomitant identity crisis. In other words, H_2 envisages the viability

of the Ubuntu philosophy in that it fosters African identity among Africans. H_3 is of the view that

Ubuntu could be more sustainable when Africans stand their ground against the advancing forces

of globalisation. Ideally, the emancipatory ideals embedded in Ubuntu should be cherished by

the Zimbabwean society, especially within the postcolonial dispensation. On the strength of its

decolonial, decolonising, and liberatory predispositions, the Ubuntu philosophy is deemed

worthy of revitalisation in Sub-Saharan Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular.

The 4 university lecturers also offered the following comments:

L_1: Virtues like respect, hard work, honesty, and other attributes of Ubuntu are universal, meaning that the philosophy itself is sustainable. We can fortify ourselves against being swallowed by the global village although we are a part of it. As Zimbabweans, we can borrow from the wider world but with Ubuntu we can guard against being swallowed by the global village. We can maintain our identity as Africans and still be part of the global village. The philosophy of Ubuntu has high chances of survival amidst the forces of globalisation because we can promote and expound it and still be a part of the global village.

L_2: While the debate on Ubuntu philosophy is quite contentious, in essence, this philosophy is quite relevant as a conduit to restore moral and character education. The key tenets of Ubuntu such as honesty, respect, love, and trust, among others, have the potential to develop more democratic and progressive citizens who can build better societies. Furthermore, through Ubuntu, African identity and legacy as responsible people may be appreciated provided it is taught by knowledgeable people.

L_3: Probably if we are looking at Ubuntu as a philosophy reflective of the desire to uphold humanness in whichever context, whichever group of people in a multicultural society, I find that worthwhile as a philosophy, at least the appreciation of the end product we target. Who is committed to Ubuntu? That will determine whether it will stand the tide of globalisation… is anybody committed to Ubuntu or it is mere rhetoric? Do we have the commitment from different groups of people in a multicultural society? If we look at it as reflective of a people desiring to come up with graduates who are sensitive to the ethos, the values of their given group, then it survives…

L_4 : Ubuntu becomes relevant in giving us the link with our past identity, our past voice. The question could be re-phrased as: Can Ubuntu be the true African voice within the globalisation agenda? The answer will be a resounding 'yes'. The survival of Ubuntu lies in the survival of the African, thus, it is within the bosoms of the Africans. This philosophy should be adapted to the modern concepts. Like any system, it will get better if and when it is truly aware of things against which it should guard itself. When it becomes solipsistic, that is, when it becomes self-inclusive, it suffers isolation and in isolation it may suffer defeat (The danger of solipsism) but if it is a part of the immortal (global) conversation then it becomes sustainable. This Ubuntu philosophy is, thus, not a sacred cow. It should be debated and criticised.

The above participants are also in unanimous agreement that the Ubuntu philosophy is sustainable in an eternally globalising world. L_1 and L_2 in particular see the sustainability of Ubuntu through the role it plays in safeguarding African identity and humanness. Hence, the decolonial inclination of the Ubuntu philosophy is herein conspicuous. L_3 is of the understanding that Ubuntu is sustainable because of its multicultural predisposition. Thus, if Ubuntu is to stand the tide of global forces, then it should be harnessed to uphold humanness in a multicultural kind of education. L_4 stresses that the philosophy of Ubuntu is the true African voice within the globalisation agenda. He, therefore, underscores that Ubuntu is bound to survive in a globalising world as long as the African survives and especially if it is situated within the immortal conversation. Hence, the Ubuntu philosophy could be persistently debated upon so that it keeps abreast with change. The author of this article is already engaged in the immortal conversation that interrogates Ubuntu and in the process he is contributing to the re-vitalisation of the said philosophy. Advocacy for the re-vitalisation of Ubuntu, therefore, is supported by the observation that this decolonial philosophy is capable of safeguarding African identity, humanness, and multiculturalism.

Discussion of Findings

The findings strongly reveal that Ubuntu is sustainable as a philosophy of education in postcolonial and globalising Zimbabwe, a position which confirms Wuta's (2020) conclusion that Ubuntu is strategically positioned to continue giving worthwhile direction to education in Zimbabwe. However, a measure of skepticism with education for Ubuntu found expression in the minority of participants, insinuating that the said philosophy may not work out for some learners who might have been irretrievably adulterated and corrupted by the wayward forces of globalisation. Nevertheless, this skeptic standpoint is disconfirmed by Makuvaza and Gatsi (2014), who anticipate and predict that Ubuntu will assist in checking the advances of 'mimetic philopraxis'. With particular reference to Ramose (1999), mimetic philopraxis "is the uncritical imitation of the life of non-Africans" (p. 10), which has invaded especially the Zimbabwean youths of today. Therefore, the fact that Ubuntu is predisposed towards checking the advances of mimetic philopraxis connotes that this philosophy is sustainable as it readily harmonises with decoloniality.

The position that the Ubuntu philosophy is sustainable in an eternally globalising Zimbabwe concurs with Makuvaza (2008), who argues that with the philosophy of Ubuntu guiding education, Zimbabweans are in a position to safeguard their African identity and humanness and are able to resist being swallowed up in the global village. The view that Ubuntu is more sustainable when Africans stand their ground against the advancing forces of globalisation is also consistent with Makuvaza's (2008) fundamental argument that Ubuntu is a decolonial, decolonising, and liberatory philosophy full of potential to fortify Africans against being swallowed up in the global village. As the true African voice within the globalisation agenda, Ubuntu is sustainable because it fosters and emblematises the African identity and

humanity, respectively. This is consistent with Makuvaza and Gatsi's (2014) argument that Ubuntu as a philosophy of education is capable of checking the advances of 'mimetic philopraxis', which has invaded the youths of today.

As emerged from the current study, the Biblical Ten Commandments are favourably related to the Ubuntu philosophy. This is supported by Sibanda (2014), according to whom, the Biblical Commandment 'thou shall not kill' is consistent with the humanistic principle of Ubuntu, which recognises 'the sanctity of human life'. This humanistic aspect of Ubuntu is endorsed by Ndofirepi and Ndofirepi (2012) who state, "life in the African community is based on the philosophy of live-and-let-live" (p. 18), and is further affirmed by Nziramasanga (C. T. Nziramasanga, personal communication, September 20, 2017) who expounds the concept of 'bioethics', which, as entrenched in Ubuntu, also says 'do not kill'. Since education for Ubuntu imparts the humanistic principles that align with the Biblical Ten Commandments, therefore, Ubuntu is sustainable as a philosophy of education in contemporary and postcolonial Zimbabwe which continues to be afflicted by the negative influences of globalisation in the form of greed, vice, strife, and bloodshed.

This field inquiry also established that the sustainability of Ubuntu as a philosophy of education reclines in its resonance with the notion of 'oneness of humanity'. This communalistic oneness of humanity ideal concurs with Okeke's (2008) concept of 'cosmopolitan citizenship', which is exemplified by Socrates (circa 470-399 B.C.), a Greek idealist philosopher, who once said 'I am not an Athenian, or a Greek, but a citizen of the world'. The notion of cosmopolitan citizenship, therefore, harmonises with the communitarian view of the world, which extols the building of one tolerant global society. It can, therefore, be inferred that the Ubuntu philosophy is global in outlook since some of its principles are compatible with some Euro-Oriental ideals.

The view that Ubuntu is more sustainable when subjected to an 'immortal' or 'global' conversation is an endorsement of Wuta's (2020) conclusion that this philosophy needs neither to be treated as a sacred cow nor kept in solipsism but to be persistently debated upon so that it keeps abreast with change. This call to subject the Ubuntu philosophy to a 'global' or 'immortal' conversation is with a view to enhancing its sustainability, a position which harmonises with a recommendation by Wuta (2020) that this philosophy be researched on and critiqued further so that it keeps abreast with change.

The multicultural predisposition of Ubuntu, which also makes it sustainable as a philosophy of education, concurs with Muchenje, Goronga, and Bondai's (2013) recommendation that, "classroom pedagogy should draw examples from all students' cultures" (p. 510). This penchant of Ubuntu towards multicultural ideals, therefore, is exigent for inculcating the ideals of harmonious living and oneness of humanity in learners at a tender age so that they grow up appreciating the fact that all human beings regardless of race or ethnicity do share equal membership of the world.

Conclusion

This inquiry reaffirmed the Ubuntu philosophy, which, from a literature point of view, works favourably well for a postcolonial Zimbabwe within the current world order driven by the forces of globalisation. Its findings warrant the conclusion that the Ubuntu philosophy is feasible and sustainable amidst the incessant Western-global influences. This conclusion confirms what has been raised in previous studies (as mentioned in the review of related literature) – the position that the home-grown Ubuntu philosophy is overall sustainable and worth revitalising in Sub-Saharan Africa in general, and Zimbabwe in particular. Though under criticism from some scholars, Ubuntu remains a viable, vibrant, and sustainable African philosophy with the virtues

and values that are harmonious with African identity, holistic education, bioethics, morality, humanism, communalism, multiculturalism, and oneness of humanity. This renders the Ubuntu philosophy way superior to the Western capitalist worldviews in the context of African education. Above all, Ubuntu is the true African voice within the globalisation agenda, it is a decolonial and decolonising philosophy of education for Sub-Saharan Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular.

Recommendations

The outgoing study, therefore, recommends the following:

1. Operationalisation of the Ubuntu philosophy be expedited as this home-grown ideology is well-positioned to salvage Zimbabwe's education system from the negative influences ushered through colonialism and globalisation, thereby giving worthwhile direction to education in Zimbabwe.

2. This reaffirmed philosophy of Ubuntu be customised to continue giving worthwhile direction to primary and secondary education so that it continues to raise complete individuals who are able to live and work productively whilst maintaining their African identity within a postcolonial but globalising Zimbabwe.

3. The Ubuntu philosophy be re-vitalised and continue being taught in teacher education institutions so that they continue to churn out ideal teachers for the 21st century and beyond, teachers who are intellectually-polished, morally-upright, and work-oriented – qualities which they then hand down to learners at school.

4. There could be ongoing research for further discourse on enhancing the sustainability of Ubuntu in accordance with the notion of immortal-global conversation, enabling the philosophy to keep abreast with change.

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Prevalence of Chronic Food Insecurity, Policies, and Redressal Patterns among the Indigenous community: A Case Study of Sahariya Tribe from India

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Abstract

Zero hunger and good health are two main goals for sustainable development, but when it comes to vulnerable sections of society, they struggle to meet basic needs. Sahariyas are a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) that faces numerous challenges in achieving food security and adequate nutrition. This study sought to comprehend the complexities of food and nutrition among the Sahariya Tribe. It also aimed to determine the coping mechanisms used by households to mitigate food insecurity. This study is the result of empirical data collected through fieldwork among 168 households in the Shivpuri district of Madhya Pradesh. Household surveys, interviews, participant observation, case studies, and focus group discussions were used as methods of data collection. The study revealed that Sahariyas are mainly landless laborers (80.95%), beggars and ragpickers (25%), and forest dwellers (61.31%). 69.12% of households migrated for food and money. Thus, Sahariyas are found to be food insecure; an immediate solution is needed for their survival.

Indigenization statement

As an anthropologist dedicated to ethnographic research, I conducted a comprehensive seven-month fieldwork study among the Sahariya tribe. This immersive engagement involved residing within their community, participating in daily activities, and fostering relationships built on mutual trust and respect. Throughout this period, I endeavored to understand their lived experiences, cultural practices, and the challenges they face concerning food security. While I am not a member of the Sahariya or Bedia communities, my research approach was rooted in ethical, decolonizing methods that prioritized the voices and perspectives of Indigenous populations. I adhered to cultural protocols, acknowledged diverse worldviews, and ensured that

the community's insights were central to the study's findings. This commitment emphasizes respectful engagement and the prevention of cultural appropriation. I am grateful for the Sahariya community's openness and collaboration, which were instrumental in the development of this research. Their contributions have been duly recognized in the manuscript, reflecting a partnership that honors their knowledge and experiences.

Introduction

Food is a fundamental requirement for human survival, serving as the primary source of energy. The type of food a person eats and their eating behaviors have a significant impact on their health and well-being. Food choices and eating behaviors are underlying factors that drive how food is acquired, prepared, stored, and distributed (Blake et al., 2021; Stroebele & Castro, 2004). Also, diseases and infections of the body are regulated through the food we eat. Therefore, it is necessary to consume enough healthy food for growth and activity. Access to nutritious food leads to better performance and a healthy, disease-free body with a strong immune system (World Health Organization [WHO], 2024).

Food → Nutrients → Energy → Growth and activity → Healthy Immune System ← Disease-free Body ← Better Performance
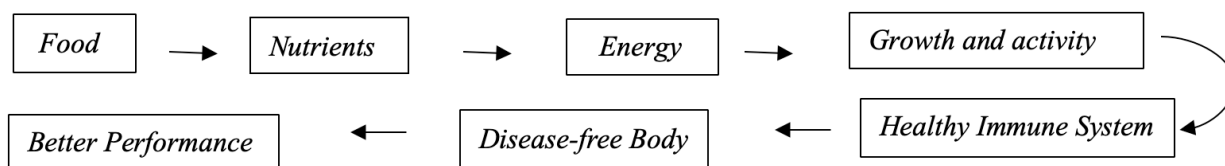
Access to food is considered secure when all individuals within a household have enough resources to obtain a balanced diet (quantity, quality, and diversity) (Jones et al., 2013). But, if we look towards the tribal sphere in India, especially those belonging to particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs) (See Appendix A for full list of acronyms), they have been struggling with hunger and food-related crises for centuries (Radhakrishna, 2009). The Ministry of Tribal

Affairs defines PVTGs as tribal communities with pre-agricultural technology, stagnant or

declining population growth, an extremely low level of literacy, and a subsistence economy

(Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2019). Studies have found that many Indigenous people in India are

not meeting their minimum recommended dietary allowances except for cereals (National

Nutrition Monitoring Bureau, 2017). PVTGs still rely on their surrounding environmental and

ecosystem services (direct and indirect contributions that ecosystems provide for human well-

being and quality of life) to meet their basic requirements because of the scarcity of permanent

access to stable sources of food and livelihood. Studies have supported the notion that wild and

biodiverse foods and non-timber forest products (NTFPs) play a crucial role in sustaining the

food and livelihood systems of rural communities (Angelsen et al., 2014; Powell et al., 2015).

The government of India has identified 75 such communities out of a total of 705 ethnic groups

and designated them as PVTGs (Vikaspedia, n.d.). These communities are afflicted with

quadruple disease loads compared to non-PVTG communities in addition to starvation, making it

an ongoing fight for them to find nourishment. As a result, children of lactating mothers are

suffering due to poor food consumption (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare & Ministry of

Tribal Affairs, 2018).

The aim of the study is to examine the prevalence of widespread food insecurity among

PVTGs and to explore how Sahariyas manage their daily dietary needs. It will also assess their

difficulties with food access and the functioning status of Public Distribution Systems (PDS).

The findings of this study will aid in the development of an evidence-based intervention that

meets the dietary needs of PVTGs while also being compatible with tribes' on-the-ground

realities.

Literature Review

According to estimates in the Food and Agricultural Organization's (FAO) 2020 publication, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World,* 189.2 million people in India are undernourished, and around 51.4% of women of reproductive age are anemic. India has been ranked 68th in the Global Food Security Index in 2022 out of 113 countries (FAO, 2020). This index is calculated through the pillars like affordability, availability, quality and safety, and sustainability and adaptation of the food material. The availability pillar had highest percentage impact at 62.3% compared to the other three pillars (Suri, 2021; The Economist Impact, 2022).

Food security is defined as access to enough food for all individuals at all times for an active and healthy life, and its foundation is the availability, access, and absorption processes (Department of Food and Public Distribution, n.d.). Food insecurity occurs when there is inadequacy in terms of the quantity, quality, and stability of food (Pinstrup-Andersen, 2009). Less land ownership, high wage labor dependency, drought/water scarcity, land degradation, loss of off-farm jobs, subpar technology, debt, social unrest, and fluctuating product prices are the key risk factors for the household level food security among tribal communities because they are not able to cope with these sudden changes. Ineffective system adaptation planning and policy initiatives are further contributing factors to food insecurity (Misselhorn, 2005; Khatri-Chhetri & Maharjan, 2006).

Chronic and transitory are the two types of food insecurity (Barret & Lentz, 2009), where chronic food insecurity develops when households cannot satisfy their food demands during normal periods due to a lack of sufficient income, land, productive assets, or because they have a high dependency ratio, chronic illness, or social impediments. Tribes of rural India have been victims of the above-mentioned conditions for a long time. Transitory food insecurity is a

condition caused by fluctuation in availability, access, and utilization of food (Barret & Lentz, 2010).

History of Public Distribution Programs in India

To combat the problem of hunger and food insecurity in India, the National Food Security Act (NFSA), also known as the Right to Food Act, was passed by the government of India in 2013 and was based on the idea of a subsidy for food grains. It is operated jointly by the central and state government. Food Corporation of India, a body under the central government, fulfills the major responsibility of the Act's allocation, procurement, and operation. The Act legally entitles up to 75% of the rural population and 50% of the urban population to subsidized grains under the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS). TPDS was launched in 1997 by the government of India with a focus on those who are unable to afford adequate food. It was previously named the Revamped Public Distribution System in 1992, which aimed to connect citizens in hilly, remote, and inaccessible areas. Under the PDS scheme, States were expected to develop and put into action concrete plans for the Fair Price Shop level's Identification of the Poor Program, transportation of grains, and distribution of those grains in a transparent and accountable way. It was intended to benefit around 60 million families living below the poverty line (BPL) over 72 lakh tons of food grains annually, which was increased to 103 lakh tons as per the requirement for BPL families. The allocation was based on the average consumption in the past ten years. Central Issue Prices were different for Above Poverty Line and BPL families. Further, Antodaya Anna Yojna (AAY) is a scheme by the Government of India which came into effect in 2000 to address hunger amongst the one million most impoverished people in the

country. Food grains were provided at a highly subsidized rate, such as wheat at 0.2 rupees per kg, rice at 0.3 rupees per kg, and so on (Department of Food and Public Distribution, n.d.).

On October 17, 2016, the government of India launched the Zero Hunger Program, placing special emphasis on agriculture, nutrition, and health. In 2018, Development of the Government of India launched the Prime Minister's Overarching Scheme for Holistic Nourishment [POSHAN] Abhiyan program, a major initiative with the goal of eradicating malnutrition in India by 2022. Due to a variety of reasons, these programs have not been translated into reality among PVTGs.

Circumstances of the Sahariya Tribe

Sahariyas are one of the PVTGs that live in the Indian states of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. They continue to be a socially, economically, and politically marginalized group who, having been uprooted from their traditional ecology, are forced to migrate frequently in search of resources to support their way of life. They used to be landholders of the area but a lack of literacy, awareness related to documentation, and financial needs led them to sell their lands and then migrate in the search of livelihood. Due to their isolation and remoteness, their nutritional situation is frightening. According to National Sample Survey Office (2007) data, the calorie consumption of the Sahariyas continues to be 30% to 50% lower than that of the financially privileged population. As a result of their involvement in more physically demanding work, they require a higher intake of nutritious foods. As per the 2022 Status of Adivasi Livelihood report in Madhya Pradesh, around 32% of Adivasi households, 27% of non-Adivasi households, and 61% of PVTG households were found to be severely food insecure. Also, only 50% villages of PVTGs have PDS outlets (Professional Assistance for Development Action [PRADAN], 2022).

Sahariyas are primarily dependent upon the PDS for food, which itself has its own shortcomings. According to data, 47% of the PDS' food is distributed unofficially, often involving malpractice. This diversion of food is done to non-beneficiaries, which leads to a shortage of food for the registered recipients (Drèze & Khera, 2015). Thus, there are numerous challenges among PVTGs related to food security, which are to blame for the Sahariya's vulnerable food systems.

This paper discusses the food security related challenges among the Sahariya (PVTGs) population in India. It also contains their mitigation strategies and how policy addresses these issues. At the end, some suggestions have been provided based on field work observations.

Materials and Methods

Study Area and Population

This study was conducted in the villages and settlements of Sahariya communities in Shivpuri district. It is a small district of approximately 10278 km^2 that is situated in the northwest part of the State of Madhya Pradesh, about 116 kilometers from Gwalior city. Madhav and Kuno National parks are in its vicinity. Two blocks (an administrative subdivision of a district in India), namely Shivpuri (district name as well as one of the block's names) and Pohri were selected due to their sizable Sahariya population (Figure 1). This region forms part of the Ajmer-Gwalior highland and is naturally bordered by the Malwa Plateau to the south and the Betwa River to the east. Administratively, the Shivpuri District shares boundaries with Rajasthan to the west, Gwalior to the north, Sheopur to the northwest, Guna to the south, and Datia and Jhansi to the east. The district comprises a total of 1,459 villages, 133 that have a desert climate and 15 that are forested areas. The region has sporadic, drought-like conditions and is semi-arid with rocky soil. The district has a water shortage.

Figure 1: List of the Villages and Urban Slums Selected for the Study from the Two Blocks of Shivpuri District
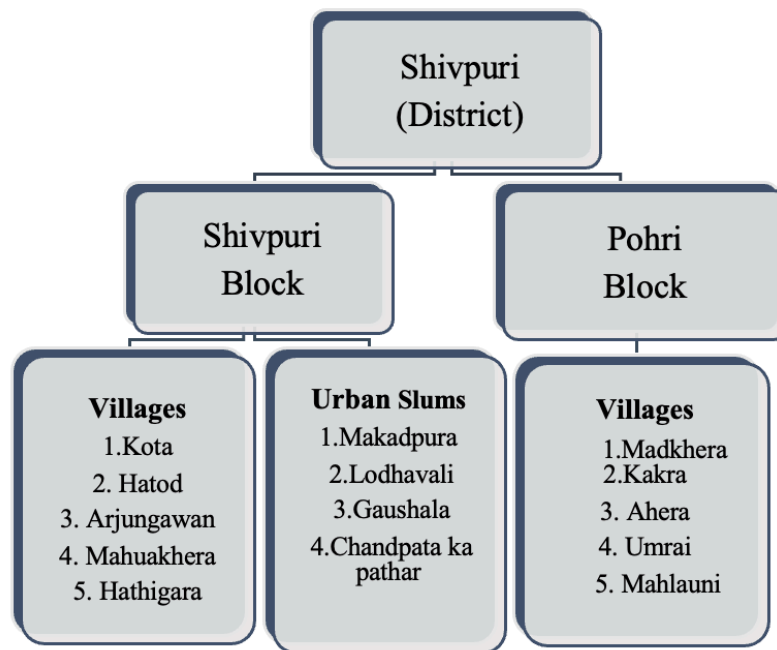
Study Population and Demography

In India, Sahariyas have a total population of 614,958, with sex ratio of 943 women/1000 men. (Government of Madhya Pradesh, 2011). The literacy rate is 42.1%, where female literacy is 32% lower than male literacy (51.5%). 44.9% of Sahariyas are a part of the working population (Government of Madhya Pradesh, 2011).

Sahariyas in Shivpuri District

About 40% of the population of Shivpuri District is made up of Indigenous people, especially the Sahariya and Bedia Tribes (Government of Madhya Pradesh, 2011). Sahariya is the main tribal community of Shivpuri district and constitutes 11.27% of the total population (Government of Madhya Pradesh, 2011). They originally migrated from the Malwa and Nimar

regions. Their total inhabited area within the district is only 102 km², situated between 25°21' -

25°32' N latitude and 77°7' - 77°32' E longitude, within the broader district area of 10,278 km².

The Bhil and Bhilala are other communities accounting for 3% of the population and inhabit

parts of the Badarwas Development Block in Shivpuri District. The landscape is characterized by

hilly, rocky, and forested terrain, with elevations ranging from 250m to 510m. Shivpuri District

experiences a semi-arid climate, with high temperatures during the summer months, occasionally

reaching up to 44°C in recent years. Winters are relatively mild, with an average temperature of

around 15°C. Rainfall is limited and primarily occurs during two months of the monsoon season,

mainly due to the southwest monsoon (Sati, 2015).

Sahariyas reside in the outskirts of the cities, in villages and nearer to forests. They speak

Hindi along with a mixture of some local dialects such as *Bundelkhandi*. They are also addressed

as *Adivasi,* which is also printed on their Adhar cards (a unique 12-digit ID for personal

identification provided by government of India). They live in a community place called *Sehrana*.

Their economy is based on daily wage-based labour, agriculture, and commodities like medicinal

plants, and plants for basket weaving gathered from the nearby forests. Due to absence of any

stable source of income, they were dependent upon these activities for their survival.

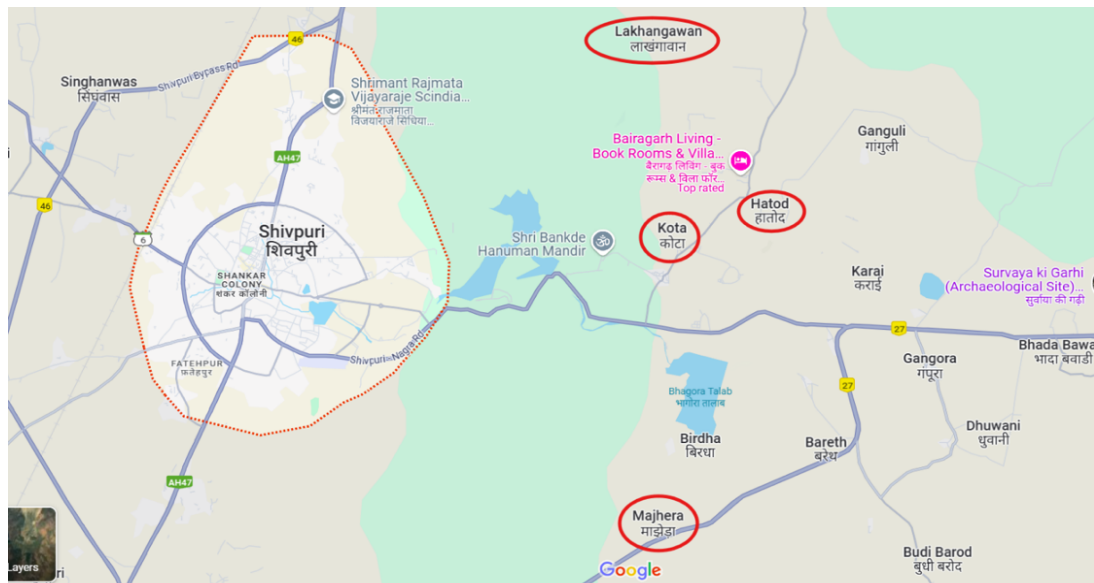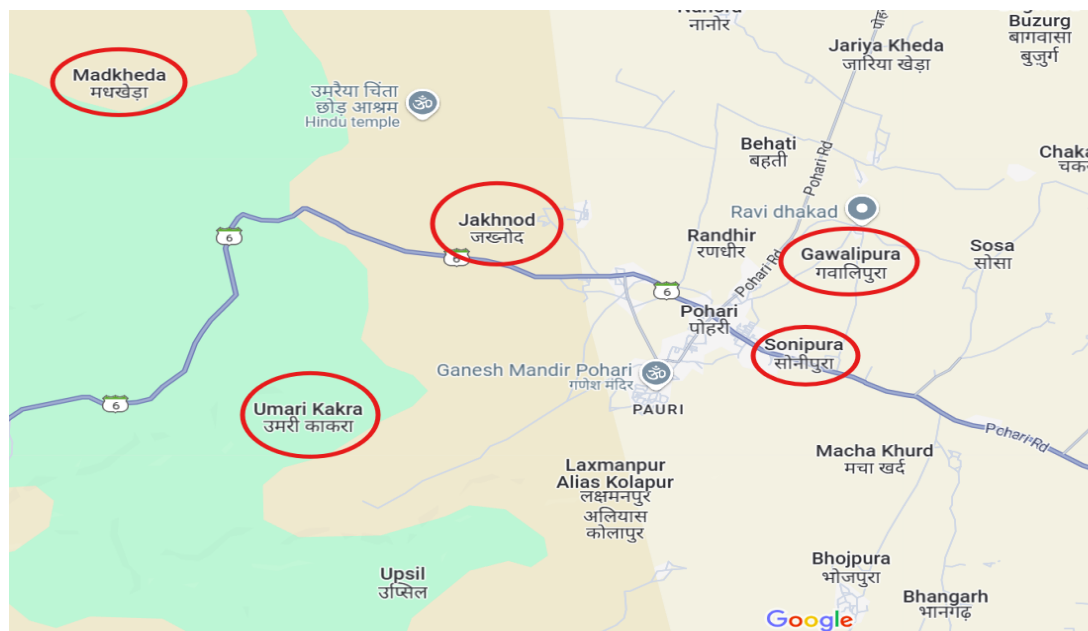Figure 2: Sample of the Studied Villages in Shivpuri Block (Source: Google Maps)

Figure 3: Sample of the Studied Villages in Pohri Block (Source: Google Maps)

Study Design, Sampling, Data Collection, & Analysis

The present study was a community-based, cross-sectional study of the food insecurity among the Sahariya (PVTG) community. The household was the basic unit of data collection that was included in the study based on a random sampling method.

Sample Size

The study included 168 households. Because of the dispersed layout, migration, and diminutive size of Sahariya settlements, it was difficult to identify additional households. Out of 168 households, there were 87 households from the rural Shivpuri block, 32 households from the urban slum area of the Shivpuri district, and 49 households from the villages of the Pohri block. The study incorporates data and information from the Sahariya population informants and additional stakeholders including district and block level officials associated with development. They are as follows: District Program Officer of Women and Child Development, Shivpuri, Officials of Adim Jati Kalyan Vibhag (A State body for tribal Welfare), the Sarpanch and Secretary of some villages, and the PDS distributor.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study reports on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in two phases: first, from December 20th, 2021 to January, 29th 2022, and secondly from February 7th, 2023 to June, 17th, 2023, and includes methods such as household surveys (to collect data for basic information), in-depth, open-ended interviews, (about issues related to food resources, availability, delivery, and redressal mechanisms [a mechanism to address food insecurity]), participant observation (daily life and practices), and focus group discussions (regarding policies and programs) with residents

and stakeholders. Additionally, case studies were used to explore land issues and food struggles. The data collected was analyzed thematically using narrative analysis. The study also conducted a comparison and percentage distribution analysis of resource availability for food and migration in villages and urban slums of the blocks.

Ethical Approval

Before commencing the study, formal approval was obtained from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee of Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, who conducted a thorough review of the research objectives, methodology, and ethical considerations. This approval ensured compliance with institutional standards and ethical guidelines. Following this, all participants received verbal and written informed consent forms, requiring signatures or thumb impressions to be taken for authenticity. They were provided with clear details about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including confidentiality assurances and the option to withdraw at any time without consequences. To safeguard their privacy, participant data was anonymized and securely stored in encrypted digital formats, accessible only to authorized personnel. In the case of minors, consent was obtained from the parents and the study was performed in their presence. Since children were not always able to describe things fulsomely, their parents and relatives were able to help explain the scenarios. All the names that have been used in this article are pseudonyms to protect the individual's identities and follow ethical guidelines. Ethical standards, particularly those concerning data protection and confidentiality, were strictly adhered to throughout the study, ensuring the rights and well-being of the tribal populations involved.

Results

Prevalence of Food Insecurity

This study presents compelling evidence of the widespread food insecurity experienced by the Sahariya community, which faces various obstacles in accessing food for their daily needs. Their primary source of income is wage-based labor, which is not consistently available. Findings show that approximately 81% (See Table 1) of the population engages in occasional labor work, with the highest demand for work occurring between March and May when they migrate to neighboring cities for agricultural work. Additionally, younger members of the community also migrate to megacities for work. According to the accounts of participants, including Kammo Bai, Shusheela Adivasi, Kamla: *"hamaye khon do wakhat ki roti naseeb naiyan aur rehan khon ghar"*, which means that they "do not have a secure house for living and two times meal in their fate". It was found that they were residing in thatched houses with limited access to food. Kammo Bai continued by saying that they go to bed without meals sometimes.

Table 1: Availability and Distribution of Resources for Food Among Sahariyas, Based on Surveyed Locations

Types of Resources for Food	Category	Shivpuri Block (Rural) N (%) = 87 (51.79)	Shivpuri Block (Urban Slums) N (%) = 32 (19)	Pohri Block (Rural) N (%) = 49 (29.17)	Total N (%) = 168 (100)
Agriculture	Own	17(19.54)	4 (12.5)	11(22.45)	32 (19.05)
	Other (Landless Laborers)	70(80.46)	28 (87.5)	38(77.55)	136(80.95)
PDS	Beneficiary	68(78.16)	21(65.63)	33(67.35)	122(72.62)
	Non- Beneficiary	19(21.84)	11(34.38)	16(32.65)	46 (27.38)
Wild Plants	Dependent	53(60.92)	14(43.75)	36(73.47)	103(61.31)

	Non-Dependent	34(39.08)	18(56.25)	13(26.53)	65 (38.69)
Begging and Rag-picking	Involved	15(17.24)	18(56.25)	9 (18.37)	42 (25)
	Not Involved	72(82.76)	14(43.75)	40(81.63)	126 (75)

The table data shows that only 19% of surveyed households had agricultural land, which was mainly in the rural area. The rest of the households are either landless or only use a fraction of land (unregistered land near their house or forest) which was not cultivable in some places due to climate conditions. So, participants were either migrating or working in labor-related roles such as agriculture or on a construction site. Thus, approximately 81% of households were without any reliable resources for their daily dietary needs. The situation was very grim among households in the urban slums due to family expansion, where PDS was the main food source for 72.62% of households. Still, 27.38% of these households were not getting its benefits due to a lack of registered land records and poor maintenance of the documents. Due to a lack of sustainable sources of vegetables and pulses, 60% of Shivpuri rural households, 43.75% of the Shivpuri urban slum households, and 73.47 % of households in the Pohri block's rural were dependent upon wild plant leaves (*Bhaji*) for their vegetable needs. These plant leaves were the most accessible option for their dietary needs just after the rainy season. Other than that, 42% of the population were involved in begging and rag-picking for their daily dietary needs.

For the mid-day meal, only chapati and vegetables or pulses were provided and in insufficient quantity. The Prime Minister's dream initiative, POSHAN Abhiyan, was launched in 2018 with the goal of providing mothers and children with nutritious food by 2022. However, only a small fraction of those who were eligible for the program received any food. Residents of Kakra and Hathigara have complained that they do not get adequate food because Aanganwadi (a government center responsible for adolescent food and nutrition related issues) is so rarely open.

Adim Jati Kalyan Vibhag of the Madhya Pradesh government gave an extra thousand rupees under the Ahar Anudan Yojna (AAY) to women of the Baiga, Sahariya, and Bhariya tribes to combat malnutrition. However, since the beginning of COVID-19, they have not received the benefits of the AAY scheme. All the programs collapsed due to COVID, which was an extra burden for them. In some places, Ujjwala gas connections have been provided, but they do not have money to refill them. So, they still use wood and dried leaves for cooking. Due to a lack of skill in using gas they have a fear of it. For example, Sangam from Madhkhera village burned down his house while cooking with gas, and nothing was left to him. He searched for aid, but did not get any substantive help.

Case Study No. 1: *Chandpata ka Pathar*, a fringe village, is situated in the outer vicinity of Shivpuri city near national highway number 27. There was sandy clay soil on the land. The area was adjacent to the forest and was dry compared to the other villages in the lower part of the Shivpuri block. There were around 50 huts made from grass and mud, with heavy stone slabs to protect them from the wind. I observed many people bringing sacks of discarded onions that had been thrown from a vehicle near the highway. The onions were rotten and had been dumped. The people were sorting out useful onions for their vegetable needs. Their staple diet consisted of chapati with salt and sometimes with vegetables (leaves of some wild plants). The elderly were seen complaining about their land and demanding only two meals of food from the government per day. They said that their ancestors were residing in this place and now forest officials are asking them to vacate. They shared that forest officials once burnt down their houses due to their unofficial settlements; they have already spent a lot of money fighting the case for their land since they were adamant that their ancestors had land here. Thus, they have been in a grim situation. In observation, most of the children, the elderly, and the women were found to be

skinny with continuous coughing. Sundar Adivasi, said that for us it is like "*roj ka kuwa khodno aur roj pani peeve*" (to dig wells on a daily basis and then drink water every day), which implies that they need to find a source of food on a daily basis in order to survive.

Lack of Dietary Diversity

For a healthy body and mind, there is a need for a balanced and nutritious diet. But Sahariyas mostly consume carbohydrate-based foods; protein, fat, and vitamins are in short supply. Participants were observed making huge amounts of chapatis in the morning, which they consumed throughout the day with salt and, on occasion, foraged herbs. Whenever they had money, they used to purchase vegetables like potatoes and onions. In some villages, people were given chicks for rearing to help with protein nutrition, but due to their proximity to Madhav National Park and wild animal attacks, chicken populations have plummeted to a finger count. Sometimes, during specific times of the year, they will go fishing on the nearby river. The children who frequented Aanganwadi centers were either going hungry or being given only a few ounces of porridge per day, as they typically receive wheat and rice from PDS. According to the auxiliary nurse midwife worker from Kota village, health difficulties among Adivasi women are caused by their inability to follow dietary guidelines during and after pregnancy due to food constraints.

Agricultural Crisis

Although Sahariyas did not have enough land to engage in extensive agriculture, a few of them had small plots of land on forests partially cleared by their ancestors. Agriculture was a significant source of income and food for some Sahariyas in the rural parts of Shivpuri. The

landholding was incredibly small in size (approximately 1-2 Acres). In other areas, the majority

of community members faced the widespread problem of not having *patta* (registered land) due

to a lack of documentation and fear of the dominant caste people. According to an official from

Adim Jati Kalyan Vibhag (a dedicated government body for tribal welfare), on the contrary,

"they are not interested in the land but rather in money, their mental block is the cause of their

condition, and they are less ambitious individuals. Since 2001, the government has not allocated

any land [to them]." This shows the divide between the officials and tribals. Thus, most tribal

residents of the Shivpuri district lacked land ownership and relied on hired farm labor. Further,

drought and flooding were wreaking havoc on the land, rendering typical farming techniques

unfeasible. In addition, due to documentation issues, people who owned land were not receiving

the monetary support promised under the Kisan Samman Nidhi program. Following COVID-19,

the program was halted and has not yet resumed service for those who were previously receiving

it.

 Case study No. 2**:** A case study was conducted in the four villages of the Shivpuri block (Hatod,

Kota, Arjungawan, and Hathigara) on the ongoing topic of land alienation and the agricultural

crisis among the Sahariyas. Hatod and the surrounding villages became well-known thanks to

colonel G.S. Dhillon, a member of the Indian Army. According to Sikh community members, he

lived here. However, Sahariyas claim that although Sardars and Gurjars arrived during the reign

of G.S. Dhillon and took control of this region, it was formerly home to their ancestors.

According to the evidence, the government allotted four to five *beeghas* of land to each Sahariya

family in Piproniya, around 11 kilometres away from their communities.

It has been claimed that the Gurjars and Sardars rule the area. They employ large tracts of

land for agriculture. Sahariyas are unable to use it, though, as members of the dominant caste

have threatened them in the past. They passed statements like "*Agar ettai kadam bhi rakho tumne, hum tumhaye pairan ko alag kar dainge*" which roughly translates as "if tribals will try to use the lands, we will break their legs," (as said by Shiv Adivasi from Hatod village). The distance of the given land from their communities is also a contributing issue. Therefore, agriculture did not also meet their diet-related needs, leading them to work for the Gurjars and Sardars on their farms for a meagre 200 rupees per day. They had been using mortgages to fund medical expenses, marriages, and other necessities, ultimately running out of money and losing their farmland.

Smoking and Alcoholism

Out of 168 households surveyed, 112 households had an average of one person per household who consumed alcohol and an average of two people per household who consumed tobacco (*ghutkha*). Most of them were males of adult age. Children of adolescent age were also found to be using chewing tobacco. As per the respondents who used to drink alcohol, smoke and chew tobacco, these substances use to provide relief from long day tiredness. It further exacerbated their financial strain, domestic violence, societal brawls, and more, ultimately resulting in decreased productivity.

Dependency and Discrepancies in PDS

Most Sahariyas were economically disadvantaged, as evidenced by their inability to grow enough of their own food to sustain themselves and their widespread landlessness. Because of this, most of them had to rely on the government's food stamp program (PDS) and were allotted a budget for subsidized food. Although the PDS' functioning status was satisfactory, further

issues remained which posed challenges for community members. Some issues are highlighted here:

I.   *Beneficiary list exclusion:* Since around 81% of Sahariyas were landless or did not have registered land or cultivable land, they were sometimes left off the beneficiary list and instead received ration cards. Authorities expected them to proceed with the cards, but they were unable to do so due to a lack of understanding of their function and no instruction. Conditions were even worse in urban slums. According to data from the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (2015), 49% of beneficiaries are still not identified by the state government. Early marriage also created issues in list creation.

II. *Lesser quantity:* As per the NFSA report (n.d.), 2.5 crore households (approximately 12-13 crore individuals) of the total population of India are vulnerable to hunger and food insecurity, are unable to secure two meals a day, and sometimes sleep without eating (Department of Food & Public Distribution, n.d.). Even though Sahariyas are entitled to TPDS, Savita, a local lady, shares that they used to get around 20kg of rice, 10kg of wheat, and sometimes 1kg sugar per family, which was not sufficient due to their large extended families. In Lodhavali and other urban slum areas, many of the Sahariya's families were not receiving rations, leaving them dependent on labor. In Arjungawan and villages in the Pohri block, irregular distribution was found. Overall, it was in accordance with government regulations, but it was only observed among a small number of Sahariya families at certain locations. Many of them were even unaware of the distributor's identity. They did not get every listed food item, only wheat and rice.

III. *Food Divergence:* Food was frequently misdirected to those who were not beneficiaries. This was caused in large part by power dynamics: according to participants' accounts,

those that are strong and capable found the supply to be consistent for them. Even though they were not entitled to the food, they were receiving plenty promptly. Distribution was occasionally skipped, and sometimes distribution was done only on paper, rather than in person. By seeing their ration cards, I found that they were not mentioning the quantity of the food they were entitled to receive in their cards and this lack of information was used to justify the distribution of lesser amounts of food.

IV.   *Improper Treatment by the Distributor:* Many community members expressed dissatisfaction with how the distributor, who typically comes from a non-tribal group, was treating them. When they left without the required documentation for obtaining food, he used to yell at them. Because of their appearance, they have been pushed away and intimidated. People from higher castes were typically given preference. As per the wording of Jamuna, a local old lady says, "*Humkhon kuttan ki naiyan bhaganven, aur gareeban ko sabre pagal banaven hain*," which translates to "we are treated like dogs, and everybody makes a fool of poors". This sentence was pointing out that Sahariyas are treated like dogs when they acquire their food through PDS. It also reflects their anger, that "poors like us [Sahariyas]" can easily be made fools by others when seeking government-aided support. Thus, issues of the public distribution and parallelly the expansion of the family size leaves Sahariyas vulnerable to food insecurity, compelling them to enact various strategies for nutrition, some of which were not ideal (Table 1).

Redressal Mechanism

The concept of food self-sufficiency has been a longstanding strategy employed by individuals and communities alike. The World Bank, for instance, has developed the concept of

social risk management, which involves a comprehensive range of formal and informal, proactive and reactive risk management strategies at the individual, group, national, and international levels (World Bank, 1986). The goal of this approach is to assist vulnerable households in achieving greater stability, managing risks, and reducing their vulnerability to welfare losses through social protection measures (World Bank, 1986). Within the context of the Sahariya community, there is evidence of both natural resource-based and non-natural resource-based strategies being employed to address their daily dietary needs. Sahariyas have adopted various coping strategies, some of which are unsustainable in the long term. Thus, the community's response to food insecurity are as follows.

I.   *Reduce the frequency of meals in a day.* In the urban slums, those involved in labor work consumed food only twice a day, which consisted of plain chapatis with salt or onion. A lady was found making a pile of chapatis in the morning, and when asked, she said that it was for the whole day and the next morning. In the villages, some people shared that sometimes they have to sleep without food or eat barely once a day. Children who are in higher education and above skipped meals due to school time.

II.   *Using wild plants:* In the village regions, they ate the tubers, roots, and leaves of wild plants. Due to the availability of *bhaji* (gram's leaves), *sarso* leaves (mustard), and *matar* (pea) during the winter season, farm workers used to pluck those for their vegetable needs, and were yelled at if caught. They also consumed wild plants such as *sahijana* and *batu* (local name), as well as the fruits of some wild plants.

III. *Selling and consuming forest products:* In villages, community members collected and sold forest woods, NTFPs, and medicinal plants such as *appo* and *sona ki jad*, *ghamira, aanwri, nai, kareri, dhanvantar, piya bans*, *kinja*, and so on. They fulfilled their

vegetable and other essential food item needs with the money acquired from these sales. They also consumed forest-based products to meet their dietary needs. Examples include *sahijana* (drumstics) and *tendu* (persimmons) fruits.

IV.   *Migration:* A high rate of seasonal migration was found in almost every studied village due to community members' inability to fulfill their dietary and monetary needs properly in their home villages. As per my survey during fieldwork, 69.12% of studied households used to migrate for agricultural and labor related works (Figure 4). Migration was toward cities and states like Gwalior, Punjab, Jhansi, Goa, Muraina, Dhaulpur, Delhi, and Lalitpur. On average, 20-22 households from each village migrated to earn their living at the time of my field visit. They used to migrate seasonally during Rabi and Kharif agriculture seasons. Most of the time, the whole family migrated together, and only brought food items instead of money back home from work. Sometimes, they faced many adverse conditions when living and working on farms such as food item scarcity, poor living quality and sanitation, health related issues, and more. They have even been tortured when they are not able to perform as per owner's expectations.

Figure 4: Percentage of Migrated and Non-Migrated Sahariyas for Food and Resources
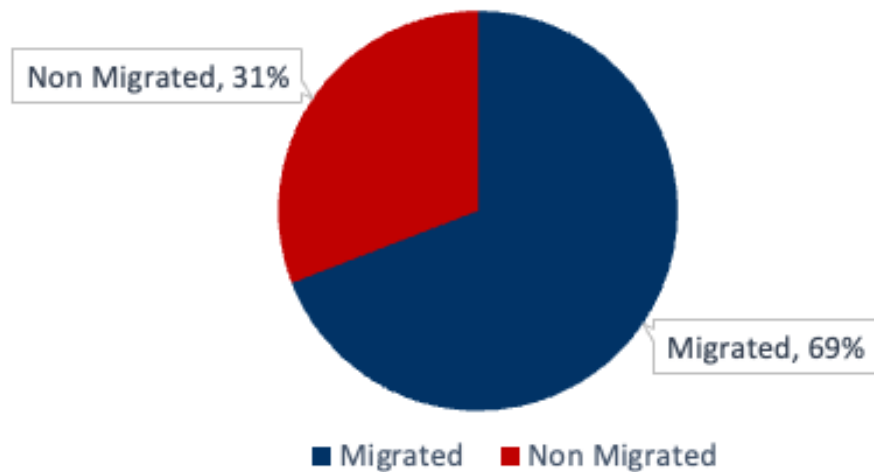
V.   *Labor-related work.* Being landless, Sahariyas were working in construction and on the farms of upper caste people, and many of them were practicing sharecropping. They were working as laborers on their own lands; the land where they worked used to be theirs but their ancestors had sold it for money-related needs. Some were also ill-treated if the yield was insufficient or was eaten by animals.

VI.   *Investing in small crops and vegetables.* Since food, vegetables, and spices were expensive in the markets, not everyone was able to afford them: only people who had stable food and income sources were able to afford those products. Many community members were accustomed to growing *bhaji*, tomato, potato, coriander, and garlic around settlements for daily consumption. Stray animals, dry weather, and water scarcity were hindrances to food production in certain villages.

VII. *Herding and selling ruminants:* In some places, people had domesticated animals like sheeps, goats, cows, and occasionally buffaloes. Goat and cow's milk were used for

consumption by a few households or sold. Cattle herding was not always possible due to the dry weather conditions, water scarcity, lack of grasslands, and prohibition in using forests for animal production.

VIII.   *Rag picking and begging:* Some women and small children from urban slums were involved in the collection of discarded material to sell the plastic, paper, and iron. Many people were also begging for food. A woman who was observed carrying a mound of trash near the roadway later explained that she had to gather and sell it to provide for her children because her husband constantly consumed alcohol. As a result, they relied on short-term solutions to meet their food-related needs.

Discussion

The concept of vulnerability has been discussed in several ways in academic fields, with a focus on the economy, livelihood, risk management, and poverty (Alwang et al., 2001). Anthropologists and sociologists have added a further dimension, known as social vulnerability, which refers to the susceptibility of social groups to potential harm due to their social characteristics and the structure of society. It highlights how inequalities (such as poverty, gender, age, ethnicity, disability, and marginalization) affect a group's ability to prepare for, respond to, and recover from hazards — whether economic shocks, environmental disasters, or health crises (Alwang et al., 2001). It is also an important aspect which needs to be taken care of because it affects the synergetic nature of society. According to a report by Rao et al. (2006), Sahariyas face chronic food insecurity due to the exploitation and lack of resources. Their statements suggest that a significant proportion of the population relies on daily wage labor to meet their basic needs, which is also not regularly available. As a result of these challenges,

many individuals are forced to move to cities, where they are exposed to an unstable

environment, making them more susceptible to illnesses and nutrition-related vulnerabilities. It

also impacts the education of the children. For example, a group of Sahariyas had migrated to a

factory in Punjab for work, but due to their lack of skills, they were dismissed without pay after a

few days. Engaging in extensive labor work requires an additional energy expenditure, leading to

increased dietary requirements. However, due to low wages, the community members cannot

afford to meet these requirements. Their limited dietary intake could lead to nutritional

deficiencies and hinder their growth. Previously, the community consumed sorghum, barley,

corn, and healthy forest products. Despite their reliance on traditional agronomic practices, only

19% of the population practices settled agriculture. However, changing food availability and

rising food prices have further exacerbated their uncertainty regarding food security. The

environment further exacerbates their situation, with stony soil, lack of water, and a dry climate

making it difficult to grow food. Caste-based threats are a further difficulty. The lack of

education and awareness amongst the population has resulted in land loss and forced Sahariyas

into a nomadic lifestyle.

Food insecurity or famine may arise due to the disruption of food from PDS, which can

prevent households from accessing alternative sources of food. Individuals can experience a

direct loss of entitlement in which they used to get food items like rice, wheat, sugar, and salt at

minimal cost by government. When they are unable to access resources or experience crop

failure, while an indirect loss of entitlement may result from unemployment or escalating food

prices (Akerele et al., 2013). The PDS faces several challenges in delivering food to the

population. Still, 27.38% of the households surveyed were not entitled to PDS due to various

reasons, leaving them in poverty and food insecurity. Issues of documentation, coupled with

modern digital technologies, make it difficult for them to access the system. Many Sahariyas live in poverty due to irregularities in the beneficiary list and the growth of families. Hostile behavior from distributors and improper functioning of Aanganwadi also contribute to their food insecurity. There was issue of dietary diversity and quantity in the mid-day meal scheme which was contributing to poor growth of children. It is consistent with Sen's concept of entitlement, which highlights the importance of food distribution as well as availability in determining whether individuals experience hunger (Sen, 1982). The Prime Minister's Kisan Samman Nidhi scheme has not been effective due to landlessness and issues with the registry. POSHAN Abhiyan was also not able to meet its target of providing adequate food to the population. This study highlights that the programs were not that vibrant because they were not culturally conceptualized.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further worsened the community's food insecurity, with lockdowns and other measures disrupting the food supply chain and leading to widespread unemployment. These issues, compounded by historical marginalization and exclusion from mainstream society, have resulted in widespread poverty and food insecurity among the Sahariya people. Fieldwork observations indicate that children and mothers rely heavily on local food solutions, with young girls and women working in agriculture and some children and mothers engaging in rag-picking. Hunger, coupled with alcoholism, which consumed half of their everyday wages, placed a significant health burden on the community which has also led to domestic issues. The evidence suggests that the conservation and sustainable management of forests and their resources can contribute significantly to achieving food security and improving the nutritional status of rural populations. Therefore, targeted interventions that address the

complex social, economic, and environmental factors underlying food insecurity are urgently

needed to support the Sahariya people.

Recommendations

Adequate monitoring and functioning of programs like Aanganwadi, mid-day meals,

POSHAN Abhiyan, PDS, and more are required to ensure that the Sahariya people's food related

needs are met. There is a need for new food provisions which are in compliance with tribal

cultures and needs. Solutions for land alienation and land registration issues are needed and

should be developed through further assessment with field visits in community. Increases in the

food entitlement amounts, while also including more nutritious foods, is needed to support large

families.

In terms of community-led programs, sample surveys and rigorous fieldwork should be

conducted in collaboration with the tribes before the introduction of any new program.

Community involvement should be ensured by bringing in representatives from tribal

communities. There should also be a focus on proper financing and programs to ensure last mile

connectivity so that Sahariyas can safely and efficiently prepare food in their homes.

Conclusion

Sahariyas are one of the most vulnerable tribes in the country and are struggling with

day-to-day food. The complex challenges they face in achieving adequate nutrition stem from

unstable livelihoods with no reliable income sources. Existing systems and initiatives have failed

to effectively reach and support these marginalized groups due to various loopholes. Sahariyas

rely on the surrounding environment and some unstable, temporary practices to fulfill their food

related needs. Developing sustainable coping strategies to achieve food security through a

comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic and environmental factors is essential.

Robust social protection measures are needed to build their resilience against shocks and provide

greater stability and security to their livelihoods. Policies and interventions that ensure consistent

access to sufficient, nutritious food for these tribes are urgently required. Addressing their

malnutrition is vital for building a thriving economy and better future. Adequate data, improved

food affordability, availability, quality and safety measures must be implemented to tackle

malnutrition sustainably among vulnerable groups and overall and planetary health.

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Appendix A: List of Acronyms

AAY: Antodaya Anna Yojna

BPL: Below Poverty Line

FAO: Food and Agriculture Organization

NFSA: National Food Security Act

NTFP: Non-Timber Forest Products

PDS: Public Distribution System

POSHAN: The Prime Minister's Overarching Scheme for Holistic Nourishment

PVTG: Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group

TPDS: Targeted Public Distribution System

WHO: World Health Organization