

Social Knowing, Mental Health, and the Importance of Indigenous Resources: A Case Study of Indigenous Employment Engagement in Southwestern Ontario

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Abstract

This article addresses employment/unemployment engagement experiences of Indigenous peoples living in a region of present-day southwestern Ontario, as well as the wider socio-economic, cultural, and historical contexts of those experiences. The qualitative research study that informs this paper was conducted with and at the request of an Indigenous organization in southwestern Ontario with the aim of broadening understandings of the multiple factors that lead to disadvantages amongst Indigenous peoples living in a settler-colonial neoliberal society. Based on focus groups/sharing circles with 21 Indigenous youth and adults and interviews with local employers in southwestern Ontario, our study reveals that when Indigenous peoples have access to cultural knowing, critical Indigenous education opportunities, and strong support networks, they are better able to access and advocate for employment opportunities and their well-being. Yet, they face challenges in navigating these resources and spaces due to what Kristie Dotson (2014) refers to as ‘epistemic oppression’, issues related to poverty, mental health, and intergenerational trauma, all of which are intricately connected to settler colonialism and Canadian Federal Indian Policy. Overall, Indigenous organizations provide urban communities with pathways to, and respite from, neoliberal societal expectations.

Keywords: Indigenous; Social Knowing; Determinants of Indigenous Peoples’ Health; Employment; Education

Résumé

Cet article traite des expériences des peuples autochtones vivant dans une région du sud-ouest de l’Ontario quant à l’emploi et au chômage, et plus généralement, des contextes socio-économique, culturel et historique liés à ces expériences. La recherche quantitative sur laquelle est fondé cet article a été menée avec l’aide d’une organisation autochtone du sud-ouest de l’Ontario, par leur requête, afin d’approfondir notre compréhension des multiples facteurs qui défavorisent les peuples autochtones vivant dans une société de colonialisme de peuplement néo-libérale. À travers des groupes de discussion et des cercles de partage avec 21 Autochtones, jeunes et adultes, ainsi que des entrevues avec des employeurs locaux du sud-ouest de l’Ontario, notre étude démontre que les peuples autochtones sont plus en mesure d’améliorer leurs opportunités de travail et leur bien-être, ainsi que les défendre, lorsqu’ils ont accès au savoir culturel, à des possibilités d’éducation autochtones essentielles et à un réseau de soutien solide. Pourtant, ils peinent à utiliser ces ressources et les espaces en raison de ce que Kristie Dotson (2014) appelle « l’oppression épistémique », soit des problèmes se raccordant à la pauvreté, à la santé mentale et au traumatisme intergénérationnel, ces derniers étant étroitement liés au colonialisme de peuplement et à la politique indienne du gouvernement fédéral du Canada. Globalement, les organisations autochtones offrent aux communautés urbaines des débouchés ainsi qu’un répit face aux attentes de la société néo-libérale.

Mots clés : Autochtones; savoir culturel; déterminants de la santé des peuples autochtones; emploi; éducation

Introduction

This research arose from an expressed need and desire on the part of an urban Indigenous Friendship Centre organization to learn more about the employment/unemployment engagement experiences of Indigenous peoples living in a region of present-day southwestern Ontario, as well as the wider socio-economic, cultural, and historical contexts of those experiences. The organization located in the Dish with One Spoon Treaty territory (the shared land of Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples) services Indigenous peoples from First Nations and Métis communities. The urban Indigenous community with whom this research was conducted is largely composed of people originally from Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee communities throughout Ontario, although the organization also serves anyone who self-identifies as Indigenous.

This research began when an Indigenous Friendship Centre initiated a collaborative research relationship with a local university. Through conversation with Elders and the community about the disadvantages and inequities urban Indigenous peoples experience in the region, employment engagement emerged as both a key research project and a pathway for community and individual well-being. Our researchers sought to understand the employment engagement barriers that are routinely faced by unemployed Indigenous residents. We were interested in what successful or unsuccessful strategies, if any, had been used by the largest employers in the region to attract and retain Indigenous employees and what programs, supports, or resources could assist Indigenous individuals to apply for, obtain, and retain employment. We also explored variations in employment engagement among the subjects across age, gender, education level, and type of work obtained (part-time, full-time, with or without benefits).

Our research is framed by a larger national context in what is currently Canada, and is attuned to the ongoing impacts and lived experiences of settler colonialism that Indigenous peoples contend with everyday, as well as the histories and political realities of pre-existing Indigenous Nations and their peoples. The current discrepancies in educational attainment and employment levels between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in Canada are commonly acknowledged to be deplorable. We offer this article and our findings to bring attention to the incommensurabilities between land-based/relationship-based Indigenous worldviews of prosperity and well-being, and the kind of individualistic understanding of prosperity that is common in a settler colonial, capitalist context.

We write from a standpoint that acknowledges the tension that exists within this article: that capitalism is the antithesis of Indigenous relationality and stewardship principles (Jewell, 2018) and that for our Nations to truly live, as Coulthard (2013) writes, capitalism must die. In this contemporary moment, Indigenous peoples face economic exclusion and fewer employment opportunities, which adversely affects their access to basic necessities of life (Reading, 2018). Further, abject poverty is a lived Indigenous experience imposed through settler colonialism and exacerbated by the delegitimization, exclusion, and downright sabotage of Indigenous economies. Lack of access to the aforementioned basic necessities of life is due entirely to the

dispossession of ways of life, lands, and kinships, yet this lack of employment is framed as Indigenous peoples' collective "failure" to participate as individuals in the system and is often touted as the cause of poverty. It is but a symptom, as Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson (2017) states:

Too often, in my experience, Indigenous peoples in Canada start from the place that global capitalism is permanent and our survival depends upon our ability to work within it...Solutions to social issues like housing, health care, and clean drinking water that divorce the cause (dispossessive capitalist exploitation under settler colonialism) from the effect (poverty) serve settler colonial interests, not Indigenous ones, by placing Indigenous peoples in a never-ending cycle of victimhood, and Canadians in a never-ending cycle of self-congratulatory saviorhood, while we both reinforce the structure of settler colonialism that set the terms for exploitation in the first place (p. 80).

We produced this inquiry and case study of Indigenous employment engagement experiences in this region of southwestern Ontario not only at the request of the community itself, but as an exercise in exploring what worlds and realities exist and are made possible with our current means. "Organizing around issues of poverty and social conditions in urban and reserve communities as a critical core of the project of resurgence, as a political issue, breaks this cycle" (Simpson, 2017, p. 79). As Tanana scholar Dian Million (2013) writes, "Our epistemologies, our cultures, represent ways of thinking about the world truly different from capitalism. These epistemologies *are* the cultures that everyone is always referring to—they are ways of knowing, and I believe they are diverse, differently located, not always rural, never static, and do effect change" (p. 162).

We have organized this article into three sections. First, we detail our informing theoretical, methodological, epistemological, and empirical literatures. Second, we lay out our methodological approach that guides our research project. Finally, we describe our three key findings which are: social circumstances, social knowing, and epistemic oppression; mental health, intergenerational trauma and culture; and the importance of Indigenous resources.

Informing Theoretical, Methodological, Epistemological, and Empirical Literatures

Our research adhered to the belief that any investigation of Indigenous employment engagement needs to utilize a multi-disciplinary and relational "desire-based approach" (Tuck, 2009, p. 416) that is not only rooted in the strength and resilience of Indigenous peoples, but also attends to epistemological, methodological, theoretical, and structural considerations. Our work was informed by two resources that combine theories, methodologies, and epistemologies. First, we detail some of the limitations of Statistics Canada data on Indigenous peoples, unemployment, and education and discuss the need to interrogate measurement categories. Second, we draw from the field of Determinants of Indigenous Peoples' Health (distinct from

Social Determinants of Health), which emphasizes settler colonialism and resulting inter-generational trauma as well as *epistemic oppression* (Dotson, 2014, p. 115).

Statistics Canada and Indigenous Peoples

To consider the wider contemporary context of employment engagement amongst Indigenous peoples, we make use of Statistics Canada data, but with several caveats. Statistics Canada's enumeration techniques are, broadly speaking, technologies of neoliberal biopower. The methodology and kinds of data that are measured, particularly those regarding Indigenous identity or "Aboriginality," as it appears in discussions by Andersen (2013) and Walter and Andersen (2013), have been problematized by those seeking to "denaturalize the powerful but largely unacknowledged ways that census categories and practices in formerly imperial colonies truncate the complexity of Indigenous socialities to fit dominant, officially generated socio-demographic categories" (Andersen, 2013, pp. 627-8).

First, the Canadian census poses Indigenous identity both as a "self-identification" question and as an ethnic ancestry question, meaning that one can be enumerated as an Indigenous individual if they self-identify as such, as well as if they have heritage or lineage in an Indigenous Nation. This double differentiation has been critiqued as a settler colonial ideation of what constitutes Indigenous identity, most notably in the case of Indian Status flowing from Canada's infamous Indian Act. For many decades, Indian Status was defined by male lineage, meaning that only men and association with men would constitute status (for a more in-depth discussion, see Walter & Andersen, 2013; Lawrence, 2004). This allowed for non-Indigenous women to gain status if they married a Status Indian man, and resulted in Indigenous women losing status if they married a non-Indian Status man; thus complicating Indigenous identity and who could "officially" be considered Indigenous.

A problem with self-identification is that it has made space for questionable claims to Métis identity, with some white settler Canadians claiming Indigeneity to acquire land rights (LeRoux, 2019). This is most notable in the case of the supposed Eastern Métis, who are not to be confused with the actual Métis Nation historically rooted in the prairie regions of what is currently Canada (Andersen, 2013). Unlike ethnic ancestry, which established a heritage connection to currently existing Indigenous Nations, self-identification measures Indigeneity rather dubiously: it can be constructed based on lineal descent from a single Indigenous ancestor born centuries ago (LeRoux, 2019).

Second, Statistics Canada is the system responsible for measuring actual Indigenous peoples in near-constant deficit; the failures of Indigenous peoples to meet an acceptable neoliberal standard in the midst of ongoing settler colonial violence has become a justification for state interventions that "remain deeply ensconced in a developmental ethos that seeks to 'close the gap' between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations" (Andersen, 2013, p. 628). Indeed, Statistics Canada opted for self-identification questions surrounding Indigenous identity starting in 1986 "not because it was somehow more contextual or reflexive in its conception of Aboriginality, but because its subset of respondents appeared *more in need of the kinds of*

policies set by the Canadian government. In other words, it displayed with greater precision the ‘gaps’ between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations” (Andersen, 2013, p. 642; emphasis added). We provide the following statistical information with this context to convey how Indigenous peoples fare in a neoliberal system designed to facilitate their erasure.

Finally, in relation to the education and employment of Indigenous peoples in Canada, according to the 2011 Canadian census, 29.1 percent of people who identified as Indigenous (or “Aboriginal” as it appears on the census), meaning First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples, did not have a high school diploma or certificate, whereas for Canadian citizens, this figure was 12.1 percent. Among First Nations people specifically, 33 percent did not have a certificate, diploma, or degree; this number was elevated to 47.2 percent for First Nations people living on reserves (25.6 percent off-reserve) (Statistics Canada, 2011). Since 2011, the numbers have remained largely unchanged. Data from the 2016 census shows that 92 percent of non-Indigenous Canadians have at least a high school certificate, but far fewer Indigenous peoples in Canada do. It states: “Among Métis, 84 percent have completed high school. Among First Nations young adults living off-reserve, 75 percent. But among those living on-reserve, only 48 percent have done so – less than half” (Richards, 2017, n.p.; see also Statistics Canada, 2017). Taking a closer look at younger demographics, 20.1 percent of Indigenous men and women in Canada between the ages of 25 and 34 have not completed high school, whereas this is true of only 8.5 percent of their Canadian counterparts.

Access to post-secondary education is also significantly lower for Indigenous peoples compared to other Canadians. In Canada, Indigenous peoples’ access to education is 28 percent lower than that of settler native-born Canadians. Moreover, Indigenous peoples attending university have a lower rate of persistence (Finnie, Childs, & Wismer, 2011), and Vaccaro (2012) notes that Indigenous peoples in Canada are only one-third as likely to obtain a university degree.

There is strong evidence that without a high school diploma, individuals are likely to experience high rates of unemployment and poverty (Calver, 2015). Similarly, young adults with lower levels of education are less likely to be employed in the labour force (Statistics Canada, 2017). Across Canada, including Ontario, Indigenous peoples have lower income levels and higher levels of unemployment compared to other Canadians (Ontario Trillium Foundation, 2011), and as a result, are more likely to be at risk for precarious housing (Shier, Graham, Fukuda, & Turner, 2015). In 2011, the employment rate for Indigenous peoples (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples) in Canada was 62.5 percent, compared to the 75.8 percent employment rate for the non-Indigenous population (Statistics Canada, 2015). In 2010, the median after-tax income for Indigenous peoples was \$20,060, compared to \$27,600 for the non-Indigenous population (Statistics Canada, 2015).

While the statistics detailed above provide clear evidence of the systemic differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians in all levels of education, employment, and income, it is also important to note that behind these numbers is a view of Indigenous peoples' lives as a deficit-based plight or as part of the enduring "Lazy Indian" trope that has "inhabited Canadian welfare policy discourse from its inception and that continues to haunt social policy and popular discourse" (Taylor-Neu, Friedel, Taylor, and Kemble 2019, p. 66).

Determinants of Indigenous Peoples' Health

Social Determinants of Health literature (SDH) indicates that income is a direct contributor to health and well-being, and that "income is an exceedingly good predictor of incidence and mortality from a variety of diseases. About 23 percent of excess premature years of life lost can be attributed to income differences among Canadians" (Raphael, 2009, p. 9). For Raphael (2009), of the 12 SDH, the first is Aboriginal (Indigenous) status, which "represents the interaction of culture, public policy, and the mechanisms by which systematic exclusion...profoundly affects health" (p. 9). In 2007, it was specified at an international summit that SDH differ altogether for Indigenous peoples (Czyzewski, 2011). For Indigenous peoples, cultures and worldviews are considered an important determinant of health since these emerge from a sustained relationship with land – a connection understood as an extension of human health and well-being (Raphael, 2009). In the volume *Determinants of Indigenous Peoples' Health: Beyond the Social*, editors Greenwood, De Leeuw, and Lindsay (2015) point out that SDH have only recently been lauded for providing much needed contextual nuance to public health analysis, but that often these determinants "exclude or marginalize other types of determinants not typically considered to fall under the category of the 'social' – for example, spirituality, relationship to the land, geography, history, culture, language, and knowledge systems" (p. xii), all of which, to put it simply, are considered aspects of life and well-being for Indigenous peoples and have also been adversely impacted by settler colonialism.

Settler colonialism is characterized by Wolfe (2006) as a structure rather than a single historical event, the logics of which are to eliminate pre-existing worlds and peoples in order for the settler colonial state to thrive. Wolfe (2006) writes: "As I put it, settler colonizers come to stay... Settler colonialism destroys to replace" (p. 388). Today, Indigenous peoples in what is currently Canada are still systematically dispossessed of the means to support their well-being as aligned with their own worldviews (emphasizing the necessary connection to land, waters, family, culture, language, etc.), which constitute access to the unique determinants of Indigenous Peoples' health. As Czyzewski (2011) has stated, "Colonialism is the guiding force that manipulated the historic, political, social, and economic contexts shaping Indigenous/state/non-Indigenous relations and account for the public erasure of political and economic marginalization, and racism today" (p. 4). Building on these points, our research views the unemployment "gap" among Indigenous peoples as a result of multi-generational impacts of

lived settler colonialism, marginalization, and Canadian Indian Act policy rather than as an indication of a failure to “fit in” to a predominantly white mainstream Canadian society.

It is important to note that our research participants were urban Indigenous people and that our findings reflect their specific lived experiences. Mi’kmaq scholar Bonita Lawrence (2004) poses that urban Indigenous experiences are distinct from those of reserve-based Indigenous communities because urban Indigenous peoples are “managing the intolerable pressures on their identities that come from being always surrounded by white people, in a society that has offered little protection for Native people in the face of white violence” (p. 120). Lawrence’s work explicates the nuances that Indigenous peoples experience in urban centres, from navigating the wide ranging differences and complexities of Indigenous identity in a seemingly non-Indigenous space, to living with the repercussions of settler colonial policies meant to destroy kinships, to seeking access to culturally relevant community supports, to maintaining communities that encourage the expressions of ongoing Indigeneity that emerge and flourish in urban spaces.

Despite Canada’s continued colonial violence, the ongoing presence of diverse Indigenous peoples and their intentional resistance/reclamation practices forge pathways toward futures that centre diverse and specific ontologies, appearing as movements like gender justice and equity, language reclamation, cultural resurgence, land-based practice resurgence, #LandBack, and ceremonial engagement (Corntassel, 2012, 2018; Deer, 2015; McGregor, 2008; Meissner, 2018; Nixon, 2020; Simpson, 2012, 2017; Women’s Earth Alliance & Native Youth Sexual Health Network, 2013). Although it is not the central feature of Indigenous peoples’ identities, we consider settler colonialism and its policies to be the most significant source of injustice and barriers to well-being and prosperity for Indigenous peoples. Thus, we engage a “desire-based” framework (Tuck, 2009) that both acknowledges the strengths of the participants of this study and addresses the systemic injustices experienced by Indigenous peoples in what is currently Canada. To describe what constitutes the multicultural but predominantly white, European-settler influenced Canadian society, we make use of the terms “Canadian mainstream” or “mainstream Canada,” which are employed by Dene scholar Cora Voyageur and Cree lawyer Brian Caillou (2000) in their work on Canada’s multicultural “embrace” that excludes and ignores Indigenous heterogeneity. From the narratives shared by participants, we identify key factors that seem to have an impact on employment opportunities for Indigenous peoples in the southwestern Ontario region.

Methods

Our research was guided by a methodological process that combined the team’s experience with Indigenous methodologies/epistemologies/ontologies, community-based research, and ecological approaches to knowledge making and narrative analysis (Doucet, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c; Jewell, 2018). The research process began in the spring of 2017, when the Indigenous organization approached a local university and inquired about collaborating on a

research project to investigate the high unemployment rates in the region. We met with community Elders to discuss ideas for a project, and their concerns about poverty and lack of employment opportunities fed into our project planning process. Once funding was obtained, we underwent two levels of ethics review: one by our University Research Ethics Board (with input from the Aboriginal Research Advisory Circle [ARAC]), and a second by a network of Indigenous centres in the province of Ontario. The research team included three members from a university in Ontario (the Principal Investigator [PI], an Indigenous Postdoctoral fellow, and an undergraduate Research Fellow), and a peer researcher from the urban Indigenous organization, who assisted with sampling, data collection, and analysis.

Our research process was highly collaborative. We worked with an understanding of “data as relationship” (Kovach, 2009), meaning that at each stage we were aware of how we were facilitating particular stories, then analyzing and making sense of those stories. We also recognized how our interpretations and engagement were becoming part of the data analysis processes. In order to ensure some shared comprehension of Canada’s colonial legacy and its impacts on Indigenous peoples and their employment histories, the team received cultural competency training¹ from the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres.

Interviews and Data Generation

In our first stage of research, we approached five large employers in the region. Three expressed an interest in participating, but only two ultimately agreed to be interviewed: a private sector employer of a multinational wholesale food store that employed approximately 300 employees, and a public sector employer at a local municipal government that employed approximately 150 employees.

In our second stage of research, we conducted four focus groups/sharing circles with (1) six female young adults (under 25 years of age), (2) six female adults, (3) three male young adults (under 25 years of age), and (4) six male adults (see Table 1 in Appendix). The research team all participated in the sharing circles, along with an Elder from the urban Indigenous organization. Each sharing circle/focus group lasted about two hours and we shared a mid-day meal with the groups.

Data Analysis and Narrative Analysis

Our data analysis process was broadly guided by the principles of non-representational narrative analysis (Doucet, 2018a; Somers, 1994). Our process thus acknowledges the reflexive positionality of researchers in relation to “data,” and how there are multiple layers of narratives, including the stories that people tell, the relational contexts within which these stories are lived and told, and the conceptual narratives that researchers use to make sense of these stories.

¹ The Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC) offers an Indigenous Cultural Competency Training (ICCT) to organizations, businesses, and governments. The training is a cultural-based knowledge training aimed at fostering and maintaining positive and productive relationships with Indigenous Peoples. More information can be found at: <https://ofifc.org/training-learning/indigenous-cultural-competency-training-icct/>

We conducted our analysis immediately following the focus groups/sharing circles and after seeking input from the research team, the community Elder, and the director of the urban Indigenous organization. We then worked for several days in intensive data analysis sessions, reading the transcripts aloud and building our interpretations through layered readings. During our analysis processes, we identified five key themes: (i) social circumstances and social knowing, (ii) mental health, (iii) the importance of Indigenous resources, (iv) discrimination, and (v) the feminization of poverty. In this article we focus on the first three of these findings.

Key Findings

(i) Social circumstances and social knowing

After hearing the experiences of focus group participants, it was clear that there is a discrepancy between mainstream Canadian and urban Indigenous peoples' social circumstances and, to a certain extent, their knowledge systems. These "gaps" in "social/cultural capital," as they are often referred to in the scholarly literature, is not due to a problem on the part of Indigenous peoples' inability to access or know typical Canadian social circumstances or knowledge. Rather, Indigenous knowledge systems are composed of different ways of knowing, developed within Indigenous cultures, values, and communities, and shaped by the lived experiences of the many Indigenous peoples who must navigate social circumstances of systematic marginalization and settler colonialism. Canada's attempts to align Indigenous peoples' ways of knowing with Western ways of knowing have proven to be epistemically violent, genocidal, and generally disastrous—when referring to the many injustices Indigenous peoples experience in the child welfare system, Holyk and Harder (2016) state: "Any attempts to remedy the situation, when intermixed with European values, have not produced results that demonstrate good health or healing for peoples subjugated by the dominant group" (p. 88).

Mainstream Canadian society continues to operate with knowledge systems that are founded on Western worldviews, and those unfamiliar with or resistant to Western social rules and nuances can experience barriers when accessing resources in these systems. Dotson (2014) describes this phenomenon as "epistemic oppression," or the systematic exclusion of marginalized peoples' knowledges as distinct from ongoing social and political oppressions. We assert that this exacerbates issues of poverty and unemployment because these are, for the context of Indigenous peoples in what is currently Canada, linked to systemic injustices through land dispossession, intergenerational stress and trauma, and assimilation. Compounded, these elements place Indigenous peoples' well-being at higher risk. However, we found that some participants were better equipped to navigate services and employment opportunities in mainstream Canadian spaces. Our findings suggest that three factors contribute significantly to an urban Indigenous individual's ability to self-advocate and successfully navigate mainstream systems: i) their awareness and applied knowledge of their specific Indigenous culture; ii) a critical Indigenous education (in other words, they were aware of historical and ongoing injustices); and iii) adequate support from their family or Indigenous community. Those

participants who identified one or several of these factors reported capacity to navigate the social knowledge/circumstantial discrepancy between Western and Indigenous social knowing and social circumstances, though our research also highlights the need for further inquiry into this issue.

We use the term “social knowing” to reflect the dynamic social knowledge that emerges from lived experiences, culture, and social norms, and “social capital” as the accrued social currency with which one navigates mainstream neoliberal systems. Capital, described by Bourdieu (1986), is accumulated labour, which, when secured on an “exclusive basis,” enables members of the group to appropriate and influence social energy. Put differently, when groups have collected social capital over time, they are more adept at navigating and reproducing the expected and implicit social norms and characteristics of particular social spaces; these include relationships, opportunities, and trust in and understanding of social nuances among one another, which are not always made explicit in society.

Cultural differences and exclusions to social knowing and social capital can create barriers when Indigenous peoples attempt to access employment opportunities. Potential employers expect candidates to have adequate education, training, and prior employment experience, and, as we highlighted earlier, significantly less Indigenous peoples have completed high school or post-secondary education compared to other Canadians (Ontario Trillium Foundation, 2011).

Participants in focus groups/sharing circles provided insights that express the differences in what Indigenous peoples know and value, and what they perceive is required to maneuver through mainstream systems for employment and education. Employers from the private and public sectors also contributed mainstream (or white Canadian) perspectives, describing these differences in knowing and values as “gaps,” “issues,” and experiential dimensions that are “lacking.”

Sierra, (female, 40) a participant and member of the urban Indigenous community, reflected on her challenging pre-education experience of not knowing what services were available to assist her as an employee. She said: “If I had known how to advocate for myself to get transportation and childcare services way back then, like, how . . . you know my life probably would have been a whole lot different.” She articulated her experience as “pre-education” and “post-education,” the latter representing her current self.

When asked about what might contribute to the high level of unemployment among Indigenous peoples, Trevor (male, age N/A), a non-Indigenous representative from a public sector organization employer, described a lack of “soft skills” or “higher level skills.” His view, based on our interpretation of our interview with him, is that this divergence in social knowledge of Western interpersonal relationship norms ostensibly prevents potential Indigenous employees from ascending in mainstream systems and employment opportunities. As Trevor expressed it:

Is it a cultural challenge that has some candidates lacking on the soft skills? Interpersonal relationships, leadership issues . . . dealing with change . . . the technical stuff you can teach. I can sit someone down in front of a computer, and they can learn how to use a computer . . . but they can't necessarily learn how to negotiate, or how to manage performance. . . I'm thinking more along the lines of problem solving, situational judgment, which comes with experience, team leadership . . . these are higher level skills, but at some point, if you want to find full-time employment, and keep it and progress . . . those are the types of soft skills you're gonna [sic] need.

Yet, the importance of attaining the “soft skills” that assist in maneuvering through mainstream systems is not always a priority for Indigenous peoples, particularly as urgent calls for cultural reclamation and decolonization prompt reflection on the meaning of a capitalist society that is violently superimposed over Indigenous ways of being. Sierra articulated the different values and the incommensurability of Indigenous ways of knowing and mainstream Canadian society, while also pointing to how some Indigenous epistemologies and knowledge systems are not quantifiable or commodifiable in a capitalist frame. She told us:

I have to not think that having a job title is related to success. Because I have to believe that I'm only here on a human journey. And my spirit's going to go back and do something else. And it has nothing to do with [a job]. 10,000 years from now my spirit's going to be like, what job? Who cares? (laughter) But, instead, what did you learn? What did you do?

Sierra's reflections convey a tension between contemporary life in a neoliberal society, and the desire to honour decolonial, place-based epistemologies and practices. Dene scholar Glen Coulthard gestures to this type of knowledge as *grounded normativity*: “longstanding experiential knowledge that inform and structure our ethical engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhuman others over time” (2014, p. 13).

Poverty, often intergenerational, is a significant social circumstance that has an impact on a person's ability to secure and maintain employment. In 2010, the median after-tax income for Indigenous peoples was \$20,060, compared to \$27,600 for the non-Indigenous population (Statistics Canada, 2015). In many ways, poverty is interminable for those who are struggling within it. Steve (male, 42) described how poverty and social assistance affect the outlook of those who grew up within it, saying:

You know, people who are struggling on welfare, they think that's the only way they can live, and then their kids see that, and fall under that too. You know, 'I grew up on welfare, I'm probably gonna die on welfare.' You know what I mean?

Steve's insight gestures to the intergenerational nature of poverty as well as the lack of agency that is inherent to the "Lazy Indian" trope that we pointed to earlier. Since poverty is often an inherited circumstance, and one that afflicts Indigenous peoples more often, it is perceived that

the inability to escape it is a personal failure. Mackenzie (female, 32) reflected on her family's intergenerational poverty and illuminates its correlation with habitual substance use (discussed further in the next finding), saying:

For my dad, he was a self-employed artist. And I can remember when I was very young he had a couple of jobs working with backhoes, and equipment and stuff like that, he was also an alcoholic. And as a kid I don't know what led to him not working in that job anymore. But it got to the point when he didn't job search anymore—and began carving. And I've been thinking about this a lot lately, since I've been thinking about, "Okay Mackenzie, you've been on assistance for 10 years now," and why am I so comfortable on assistance? And I can relate it to my dad that it was never really a problem, because he displayed to me, and talked to me that it was normal, or acceptable to rely on assistance to get your rent paid, or get grocery money, and it wasn't really unacceptable. . . . So, I think that for him, his reason why was just because, how he was raised with. I know, his dad, he was a stone carver, and an alcoholic as well, and that's probably why my dad followed in his footsteps, in what his dad had shown him.

Mackenzie's story is a powerful example of the ways that social knowing and epistemic oppression are passed through generations for Indigenous peoples. Yet, Mackenzie showed resolve and ambition to change her situation when she said:

So, [I'm] trying to go back to school. And trying to think that I'm still capable. [I see] how much parents have an effect on what we are taught. So, when your parents are working, you're raised to believe you need to work for life, or this is how you are, and how you function as an adult. And so . . . [a spiritual advisor told me], you have to go to school because if you don't your kids are going to end up following the same path I went, and they'll probably think that, "oh well it's okay if you don't finish school, it's okay if you don't work, it's okay if you spend your life on assistance." And I don't wanna teach them that, right?

In her reflection, Mackenzie encapsulates the interconnectedness of many points we contend have an effect on Indigenous peoples' poverty and overall challenges in accessing opportunities for well-being. Mackenzie's assertion that she has the power of choice to interrupt a cycle of poverty that her children stand to inherit reflects the same hope that so many Indigenous peoples embody despite the marginalization they face. We hear in Mackenzie's aspirations that she, and many others like her, requires access to spaces where compassion, trauma-informed approaches, and Indigenous social knowing are core values.

For Indigenous peoples in urban centres, poverty means that access to the necessary components of urban life can be limited. Personal transportation is difficult to maintain for those unemployed and underemployed, and for those reliant on public transportation in smaller urban centres, the lack of certainty around mobility can be a significant challenge. Personal transportation requires a lump sum of cash, steady income, or good personal credit to purchase or finance a vehicle, and it's easy to see how this problem is greater among Indigenous peoples

living in poverty or with lower incomes. When one adds in insurance, gas, and maintenance costs, personal transportation quickly becomes unattainable for many who are struggling to make ends meet. Jennifer (female, 33) explained that when her car broke down, she wasn't able to rely on the transit system in the region. She said:

My car broke down and I'm working out of town, how do I get there? And it would just be too tough and I'd end up getting out of a job . . . because I couldn't rely on transportation, public transportation, and I couldn't rely on my parents, so I guess it was just like, okay now I have to find another job.

The cost of obtaining a driver's license presents a challenge for those who are unemployed and underemployed. Caleb (male, 35) reflected on the cost and how he got his driver's license through a program at the urban Indigenous organization:

I drove around for years without a license... Years ago, there was a program here that helped you get your license... So basically, they paid for your beginner's test, which included your road test after that. And they paid for [enrolment in a driving academy], which helps [reduce] insurance [costs]... That was huge, I know a lot of people took advantage of that... It was incredible, it definitely helped out. I couldn't drive to work, but now [I can], because of that.

Poverty contributes to transportation challenges, which in turn hinder securing employment for adequate income. The cycle can become frustrating. Further, as the statistics demonstrate, Indigenous peoples have a significantly lower average yearly income than non-Indigenous peoples in Canada, therefore these costs related to obtaining employment create more barriers for Indigenous peoples. However, when resources and access to certification opportunities are made available through urban Indigenous centres, they alleviate some of these barriers.

We employ Dotson's (2014) epistemic exclusion in this case to point out that a) the types of knowledges that emerge from specific Indigenous normativities are not congruent to a neoliberal context, and that b) the type of social capital required to navigate and benefit from mainstream Canadian systems is often in contrast to these Indigenous worldviews. In fact, these systems are often downright daunting to navigate for many Indigenous peoples, and for this reason Indigenous organizations in urban settings are significant lifelines to culturally safe spaces. As social knowing reflects a blend of values and circumstances for Indigenous peoples, Mackenzie's story illuminated the important link between role modeling and imagining the potential self. Research suggests that Indigenous youths' perceptions of their potential selves increase when they are exposed to images of Indigenous peoples in inspiring professional roles; and it is important to note that the roles featured were those associated with cultural expression (such as professional dance) or roles that benefit community well-being (such as health care) (Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman, & Stone, 2008). This points to how important self-representation, role modeling, and Indigenous forms of social knowing are in access to opportunities for prosperity as it is conceptualized in Indigenous normativities. It is important that Indigenous

organizations are equipped to provide adequate advocacy and resources to assist in mitigating these challenges. Allocations for communicating about available resources and strengthening visual campaigns to reach Indigenous peoples would be an important resource for Indigenous organizations.

(ii) Mental Health

Our discussions with focus group participants illuminated the unique mental health needs of Indigenous peoples in urban settings. In our findings, we assert that access to culture is an important factor to attaining well-being as it pertains to employment opportunities, as well as critical Indigenous education opportunities and adequate support systems. Greenwood and Jones (cited in Greenwood, Leeuw, & Lindsay, 2018) argue that cultural identity and access to cultural knowledge is one of the strongest determinants of Indigenous peoples' health and well-being, stating: "For Indigenous children, development of cultural identity is a pathway to survival and well-being" (p. 111). Indigenous peoples face particular challenges in employment due to mental health issues such as intergenerational stress and habitual substance use that stems from the strain of marginalization.

In the focus groups/sharing circles, we heard that participants valued and needed access to culture, but that these were sometimes incommensurate with their employment. Sierra prioritizes cultural events to ensure her children are exposed to their culture. She expressed how "Working in mainstream, the problems are that they don't understand the uniqueness of Indigeneity . . . I will not miss a pow-wow with my kids, I won't."

Involvement in ceremonial practices is a locally specific, land-based endeavour. Depending on which ceremonial community one is involved with, attending Indigenous ceremonies can sometimes require extensive travel to a specific location and require three to four days off from work, up to four times a year. Derek (male, age N/A) describes the tension between maintaining employment and engaging in time-sensitive ceremonial activities, saying:

My issue is trying to get back to my culture. Missing some time off for some ceremonies . . . I'm afraid to go do that, because they want constant work. And I know my rights, and I can legally go, but they'll find any small excuse to get rid of me.

Sierra and Derek's reflections point to the struggle that Indigenous peoples face when trying to balance cultural and ceremonial events with standard employment. Access to culture is a vital part of achieving wellness for Indigenous peoples. The importance of attending cultural and ceremonial gatherings needs to be understood by employers and appropriate time must be allocated to Indigenous peoples who want to attend cultural events. This is another reason why Indigenous centres are important resources for urban Indigenous communities—they often provide ceremonial and cultural resources in a localized urban setting. Ensuring adequate funding for these types of events and activities will alleviate access issues for Indigenous peoples in urban areas as well as contribute to improving their mental health and well-being. Further, for Indigenous peoples to actually implement and live by their epistemologies and worldviews, there

needs to be a systemic change in mainstream Canada toward *truly* honouring treaties, land rights, and Indigenous values.

Thomas (male, 36) illustrated the issues of mental health and gendered violence in Indigenous communities, and the need for profound change, saying:

I think that one of the big issues for our communities is access to mental health services and ensuring that . . . because of the social illness a lot of our communities are facing, a lot of our communities don't have access to treatment for residential schools . . . or domestic violence. The man just has to go to jail. There's no halfway house . . . I just think there needs to be more opportunities to access public service. And instead of, like, criminalizing our people, we need to find ways to support them in their needs. And it makes sense to me, but it just seems like the furthest thing we want to do in our society, is take care of our people. Our young men, they have no power, they haven't been empowered, and it's just awful. And thank god for organizations like this, but we have a long way to go. Because we need to make a drastic shift.

Illuminated here is the ongoing social fallout of intergenerational trauma, with Thomas explicating concerns for disempowered young men who fall into cycles of violence with subsequent involvement in the criminal justice system. Related to this complex issue is the habitual substance use that has roots in intergenerational stress, trauma, and social circumstances, all with causal roots in settler colonialism. Gabor Maté (2014) states:

Addiction cannot be understood from an isolated perspective. It is a complex condition, a condition rooted in the individual experience of the sufferer and also in the multi-generational history of his or her family and—not least—also in the cultural and historical context in which that family has existed. The shameful statistics of addiction prevalence among First Nations people are not attributable to any genetic flaw, but to the historical trauma endured by the Aboriginal populations of North America; the horrendous multi-generational legacy of the residential schools; and the ongoing social, economic and cultural ostracization that continues to be their lot. (p. xvi).

Maté's analysis, informed by years of research and experience, is important for understanding how the prevalence of habitual substance use, or addiction, affects not only Indigenous peoples' access to employment but their health and well-being in general. Socially and politically regarded as an individual moral failure, addiction is a ritualized and compulsive seeking of comfort for those with Adverse Childhood Experiences (Stevens, 2017) that form "discourses of Indigenous deviance...shaped by a range of institutional practices, beliefs, policies, and laws in Canada over the past 150 years [that have] particularly targeted Indigenous children" (de Leeuw, Greenwood, and Cameron, 2009, p. 286).

Carol (female, 48) expressed how substance use worsened in response to a loss of loved ones, causing disruptions in her ability to access employment. She described the support she

receives from her community, especially the Restorative Justice program at the local urban community Indigenous Centre:

The mental health . . . is an issue with me. Because my brother passed away last year, my mom two years ago . . . and I was just very . . . just masking the pain. And it was hard for me to get employment because of my addiction. Now that I'm sober, it's getting better, much better. I'm actually, if I wasn't taking this [local Restorative Justice Program] class I coulda [sic] been working more. But, [the local Restorative Justice Program] is helping me, so I work when I can. I'm working today actually.

For Indigenous peoples struggling with trauma, intergenerational stress, and habitual substance use/addiction issues, community resources offered by Indigenous organizations are vital in the pathway of well-being. When compounded with poverty, struggles with mental health can make finding and maintaining employment especially challenging. It is vital that more support for culturally relevant, Indigenous-led, trauma-informed mental health care is made available for Indigenous peoples who experience hardship due to ongoing systemic harms such as higher rates of incarceration and child apprehension (and their symptomatic coping mechanisms). Treatment should take into account the holistic worldviews of Indigenous peoples and be accessible through Non-Insured Health Benefits (NIHB) or state-funded health insurance plans.

(iii) Importance of Indigenous Resources

It was apparent amongst the focus group participants that Indigenous organizations are vital resources for cultural access and general well-being because community-focused resources, programs, and services tend to be developed and delivered by Indigenous peoples for Indigenous peoples. As several of the participants attested, these resources provided much needed support in areas of advocacy, employment, education, income, housing, cultural access, and childcare. As an example, Mackenzie expressed her gratitude for the community and services that a local Indigenous centre provides, saying:

I'm really, really happy to be a part of the Centre. I think that's helped my family a lot. There are a lot of programs in the centre. I'm really grateful for the educational opportunities [and] youth programs for the kids.

Further, Thomas spoke about the importance of accessing restorative justice services (based on Indigenous concepts of restitution). He noted that it provided "all around great personal support."

We cannot stress enough the importance of Indigenous-focused, developed, and delivered programs and services for Indigenous peoples. Researchers and Indigenous scholars alike have long identified self-determination as a necessary component to Indigenous health, success, and well-being (Deer, 2015; Fryberg et al., 2008; Ladner, 2009). Previous research findings reveal that when Indigenous communities have greater access to and control over their services, high risk social indicators such as youth suicide rates decrease (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008); this, in turn, points to how profound challenges in Indigenous communities are mitigated when they can promote culture, well-being, and prosperity *from their worldviews* through their services.

Indigenous peoples still do not have adequate funding for the vital resources described above. Many urban Indigenous organizations have expressed that having access to more discretionary funding would provide greater opportunities to invest in the particular needs of a community. In other words, if urban Indigenous organizations had more control over the financial resources they receive from funding agencies, they would be better able to address specific needs unique to their communities. In the context of the community we worked with, frequent use of Indigenous-led employment and training programs indicates that there is a great desire to access culturally-relevant and community-responsive programming for the extensive employment needs of Indigenous communities. As an example, we found that the epistemic exclusion that Indigenous peoples experience has contributed to a widespread lack of access to information about services. Augmenting funding to urban Indigenous programs, and enabling centres to allocate some of these funds for media and communications, as they see fit, would increase awareness of their current programs.

Conclusion

Many of our research findings are interconnected; we found that we could not describe one aspect of our analysis without referencing others. The barriers that Indigenous peoples face in mainstream Canadian systems are rooted in Canada's Federal Indian Policy and have been compounded over generations. A transportation issue, for example, may not be simply a matter of lacking a vehicle – an individual who has not had access to the mainstream “social capital,” such as credit or saved income required to finance or purchase a car, is at a clear disadvantage. Likewise, inadequate job readiness and lack of work experience on the part of young Indigenous people today might be due to intergenerational stressors, such as ritualized coping mechanisms through habitual substance use in the home that prevented access to this social knowing. This social circumstance is directly linked to adverse childhood experiences (Stevens, 2017). Indigenous peoples face many of these stressors due to disproportionately high rates of child apprehension and the residual effects of residential schools. As early childhood is a formative determinant of Indigenous peoples' health, “Historical and continuing assaults on Indigenous children's identity development are reflected in Indigenous peoples' health and well-being today” (Greenwood & Jones, 2018, p. 112). Overall, it is vital to the well-being of urban Indigenous organizations that resources grounded in specific, local, cultural normativities (in this case, Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee worldviews) are accessible to members of the community. In a context where access to adequate income means a higher quality of life, this case study examined the barriers that Indigenous peoples face in accessing employment opportunities. Our research revealed that while ongoing tensions of epistemic differences complicate Indigenous perspectives of wellness, Indigenous organizations provide urban communities with pathways to, and respite from, neoliberal societal expectation.

As we detail in this article, insufficient education is partly to blame for higher levels of unemployment among Indigenous peoples. Yet, drawing on insights from the Truth and

Reconciliation Commission (2015) and a growing body of scholarship on the enduring impacts of settler colonialism, residential schools, the “Sixties Scoop,” and intergenerational trauma, it is clear that we need to interrogate how multiple intersecting factors lead to Indigenous peoples’ lower educational attainment, lower levels of high school completion, and higher levels of unemployment in Canada. Although the focus of our study is on a region in southwestern Ontario, we believe that our analysis and findings have far-reaching implications for Indigenous peoples and communities across Canada and possibly in other countries.

We found that Indigenous peoples do, in fact, access opportunities for employment, training, education, and/or wellness in many ways. Yet, they face challenges in navigating these resources and spaces due to epistemic exclusion and issues related to poverty, mental health, and intergenerational trauma and addiction, all of which are intricately connected to settler colonialism and Canadian Federal Indian Policy. Our research suggests that when Indigenous peoples have access to cultural knowledge, critical Indigenous education opportunities, and a strong support network (whether through family or an Indigenous community), they are better able to access and advocate for employment opportunities and their well-being and prosperity. The most successful services are those that are imbued with Indigenous social knowing, epistemologies, and values, and that also have a clear understanding of Canadian social circumstances and colonial contexts and what it means to live as an Indigenous person in Canada. Our research participants judged these services to be widely accessed and highly effective contributors to their well-being and prosperity. Often, however, these services have limited capacity and are stretched too thin to meet the high needs of the communities they serve. We conclude that more resources and discretionary funding are required to enable such programs to better address the localized and unique needs of different Indigenous communities. Further, we urge that all levels of government—as well as employers, schools, and community organizations—continue to fulfill their responsibility for implementing the structural change that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s 94 Calls to Action demand, some of which relate to the findings we have discussed here.

Conflict of Interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Appendix

Table 1					
<i>Focus Group Summary of Participants</i>					
Group	Pseudonym	Age	Highest Level of Education	Household Composition	Dependents
Female Youth	Sam	21	some post-secondary	partner, expecting	expecting child
	Hannah	22	some post-secondary	partner, child	1 child
	Keira	24	some secondary	grandfather, grandmother, mother, brother	none
	Patricia	19	post-secondary	partner	none
	Charlotte	17	some-secondary	partner, partner's mother, partner's father, 2 children, expecting child	2 children
	Mia	22	post-secondary	partner, child	1 child
Male Youth	Travis	17	some-secondary	mother, father, siblings	none
	Darian	19	some post-secondary	mother, father, siblings, aunt, uncles, grandmother, grandfather;	none
	Samuel	18	some-secondary	Father, sibling	none
Female Adults	Carol	48	secondary	2 children	2 children
	Sierra	40	post-secondary	3 children, son's girlfriend	3 children, son's girlfriend
	Jennifer	33	some post-secondary	partner, 2 children	2 children
	Ruth	47	post-secondary	4 children	4 children
	Mackenzie	32	some secondary	3 children	3 children
	Lilly	48	post-secondary	3 children	3 children
Male Adults	Aaron	32	secondary	father	sister
	Derek	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Evan	50	some post-secondary	no one	1 child
	Thomas	36	secondary	aunts and cousins	none
	Steve	42	some secondary	2 children	5 children
	Caleb	35	secondary	spouse, 2 children	2 children (including 1 niece)