

Introduction

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In discussing the notion of well-being that provides privilege for an Indigenous perspective, it has been customary to concede that this may be a very personal discourse (Ross, 2014). Academic objectivity, the process of eliminating personal biases from research or other scholarly discourse, has been regarded by many Indigenous scholars as something of a myth (Deloria, 1997). As contemporary and historical issues of Indigenous nationalism have informed this personal discourse, perhaps they require discussion as well. Let us briefly consider some manifestations of Indigenous ethno-national identity, and then make some connections to the way in which the chapters in this book thematically link to such manifestations.

I (Frank) grew up on a First Nation in Quebec called Kahnawake. This community, identified by many as a constituent part of the Kanienkeha'ka (popularly referred to as "Mohawk") nation, represents a rich environment of Indigenous heritage and language that has facilitated cultural revitalization and affirmation. Kahnawake's potential as a focal point for understanding the possibilities of Indigenous activism and cultural assertion is perhaps supported by its geographical location adjacent to a major urban centre on the southern shore of the St. Lawrence River (Simpson, 2014). The Kanienkeha'ka have much in common with other Indigenous nations in this region of the world. Like other communities, we have transmitted creation stories from one generation to another that infer that their people have inhabited a particular place since time immemorial. One such story tells of a pregnant woman from the sky world who fell to the earth and came to rest on a turtle's back, upon which earth from the ocean depths was used to develop a land mass (to this day, Indigenous peoples refer to North America as *Turtle Island*). Although popularly regarded by non-Indigenous peoples as mytho-historical in nature, these stories have survived for centuries and have proven resilient to colonial activities, attempts of assimilation, and school programming that has provided very little space for Indigenous perspectives and culture. Although many may question the utility of such stories as evidence of the first peoples as inhabitants of North America from time immemorial, the stories tell us of the peoples for whom these stories represent their beliefs, supporting an assertion of nationhood that may be every bit as "real" as the archaeological evidence that supports the antithesis of human migration through Beringia.

How does a legacy of story-telling through oral discourse fit in with a conception of well-being? In regard to matters of collective identity, the sense of self across a community is a very important consideration in terms of social affirmation (Ferguson, 2005). Also important to this discourse is how a strong collective identity provides Indigenous peoples with an opportunity to distinguish themselves from other peoples and nations in a celebratory way (Holder, 2006). A distinct communal and/or national identity may be regarded as the fundamental dimension of cultural well-being for Indigenous peoples (Lawrence, 2004).

When I first began working in Indigenous education contexts in Manitoba, I began to hear of something called *mino-pimatisiwin*. Being of Kanien'keha:ka ancestry, my familiarity with the ancestral



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languages of Manitoba was not strong and it took some time before I began to appreciate what this phrase means. Many who are knowledgeable in the spiritual dimensions of *mino-pimatisiwin* have informed my understanding of what is *the good life*. In working with others on one particular project, I learned that the imperatives associated with *mino-pimatisiwin* could be regarded thusly: “the good life we all strive for to benefit ourselves, our families and all peoples” (Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre, 2008, p. iii). These imperatives were further articulated by Michael Anthony Hart (2002) in a discourse that affirms the importance of community-based perspectives on healing and cultural revitalization:

We have to recapture our peoples’ language, history and understanding of the world, take and live those teachings which will support us in this attempt to overcome oppression and reach *mino-pimatisiwin* – the good life. On a spiritual level, we must learn and understand the values and beliefs of our people and freely decide those which we will internalize. We must validate these values and beliefs through our spiritual expression and daily practices. (p. 32)

The principal tenets associated with *mino-pimatisiwin* might be best understood not only as it applies to individual contexts but also that of communities as well. Appreciating the importance of relationships that are explored in all dimensions of *mino-pimatisiwin* gives some life to the idea that collective balance, health, harmony and growth, to name a few, is essential to the notion that what is desired is a life that is experienced in its fullest, healthiest sense. Essential to understanding how such a life might be achieved in contemporary Canadian society might be consideration to the core values of *respect*, *sharing*, and *spirituality*. Although the first two can be readily understood for its application to how we treat one another, other forms of life, the environment, and the issues associated with spirituality might require further discussion in the context of the unique manifestations of spirituality that may be associated with a given community.

Mino-pimatisiwin (literally means “the good life” in Cree) is the realization/acquisition of healing, balance, and life-long learning. The realization of the good life, particularly for First Nations peoples, may be reflected in the following principles (Gray, Coates & Yellow Bird, 2008, pp. 134-135):

- The concept of ***wholeness*** is about the incorporation of all aspects of life and the giving of attention and energy to each aspect within ourselves and the universe around us.
- ***Balance*** reflects the dynamic nature of relationships wherein we give attention to each aspect of the whole in a manner where one aspect is not focused on to the detriment of the other parts.
- All aspects of the whole, including the more than world, are related and these ***relationships*** require attention and ***nurturing***; when we give energy to these relationships we nurture the connections between them. Nurturing these connections leads to health while disconnection leads to disease.
- ***Harmony*** is ultimately a process involving all entities fulfilling their obligations to each other and to themselves.
- ***Growth*** is a life-long process that involves developing aspects of oneself, such as the body, mind, heart and spirit, in a harmonious manner.

- **Healing** is a daily practice orientated to the restoration of wholeness, balance, relationships and harmony. It is not only focused on illness, but on disconnections, imbalances and disharmony.
- **Mino-pimatisiwin** is the good life or life in the fullest, healthiest sense. *Mino-pimatisiwin* is the goal of growth and healing and includes efforts by individuals, families, communities and people in general, in fact, all living forms, including the more than human world.

Core Values:

- **Respect** or the showing of honour, esteem, deference and courtesy to all, and not imposing our views on others.
- **Sharing**, including the sharing of all we have to share, even knowledge and life experiences, which show that everyone is important and helps develop relationships.
- **Spirituality** is the recognition that there is a non-physical world. It is all-encompassing in Aboriginal life and is respected in all interactions, including this helping approach, and is demonstrated through meditation, prayer and ceremonies that guide good conduct.

These manifestations of Indigenous perspectives on (education for) well-being will serve us as the centre around which we want to thematically cluster the chapters of this collection.¹ Nicole Bell (**chapter 1**), drawing on Anishinaabe elders, makes the concept of “the good life” the core of her inquiry, in which she provides an Anishinaabe perspective on *mino-bimaadiziwin* and how it is achieved through the different life stages and ceremonies.

Two clusters of chapters address each a different aspect of the wholeness of “the good life”. The first cluster focuses on the health of Indigenous children and youth, using an Indigenous perspective on well-being. Leisa Desmoulins (**chapter 6**) uses the concept of *meno-bimaadiziwin* to study and make recommendations on the question of “healthy weights” of Indigenous children in early years. Elaine Greidanus and Lauren Johnson (**chapter 7**), on the other hand, focus on mental health of Indigenous youth as it is addressed in a youth treatment program that is grounded in Indigenous cultural spiritual teachings. The second cluster focuses on Indigenous perspectives of well-being as they relate to the natural environment and the living on and off the land. Gail Lafleur (**chapter 10**) explores the Anishinaabek/Ojibwe worldview on the spiritual relationship with “Mother Earth”, while Cidro, Martens, and Guilbault (**chapter 3**) explore “traditional Indigenous food upskilling” for *urban* Indigenous people to support the development of urban Indigenous food sovereignty in response to food insecurity.

Linked to these clusters of chapters, which explore specific aspects of Indigenous cultural heritage, is Cyr and Slater’s (**chapter 4**) focus on the culturally embedded practice of making bannock, a specific type of bread. What distinguishes the focus of this chapter from the previously

¹ While the title of the book speaks of Indigenous perspectives of education of well-being *in Canada*, which was also the title under which we called for submissions, we were pleased about a submission from colleagues from Alaska (now chapter 11 in this book). The border separating Canada from Alaska is of colonial heritage, so we felt we could more flexibly interpret the notion of “in Canada” to support and be in line with the overall purpose of this book project.

discussed chapters is that the cultural practice of making and consuming bannock might link traditional Indigenous cultural practices with those of early settlers.

Four chapters focus on Indigenous perspectives of (school) education for well-being. Rita Bouvier, Marie Battiste, and Jarrett Laughlin (**chapter 2**) report on a research project that took the stance that understanding “school success” for Indigenous students needs to be grounded in *Indigenous* perspectives and that inquired into the question what such (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis) perspectives look like and, hence, how school success for Indigenous students should be conceptualized. The lack of appropriate cultural context and content of current school education for many Indigenous students is also the focus of Frank Deer’s (**chapter 5**) contribution. In his chapter he draws on interviews with Anishinaabe elders and educational professionals to identify missing Anishinaabe cultural dimensions (e.g., language and spirituality) in the current school system, undermining, Deer argues, the ethno-cultural well-being of Anishinaabe students and communities. As it stands right now, changing the school educational experiences of many Indigenous students in the way these two chapters suggest will require the willingness and ability of non-Indigenous school educators to ground their educational practices and the implementation of the curricula in the Indigenous perspectives discussed in these two chapters. Yatta Kanu (**chapter 9**) explores the sources of resistance by non-Indigenous teacher candidates (i.e., future school teachers) to integrate Indigenous perspectives into their teaching and what teacher education programs might need to do to change that. Linked to Kanu’s chapter on the integration of Indigenous perspectives in school education by non-Indigenous teacher candidates, the chapter written by Jennifer Hardwick, Konwanonhsiyohstha, Kanonhsyonne, and Jill Scott (**chapter 8**) explores the way in which the Tsi Tyónnheht Onkwawén:na Language and Cultural Centre together with one Canadian university has been trying to “build healthy learning communities, and foster deeper knowledge and understanding of Indigenous cultures and ways of knowing for Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners, teachers, and the broader community” (this volume, p. 123). The relational approach taken in this endeavour – grounded in the core value of relationship in the Rotinonhsyón:ni culture – expressed “the importance of continuously renewing, strengthening, and valuing existing relationships for the health and well-being of families, communities and nations, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous” (this volume, p. 135).

Finally, the chapter written by Sean Asiqluq Topkok and Carie Green (**chapter 11**) links with a number of the themes addressed by the chapters introduced so far. As chapter 1 lays out an Anishinaabe understanding of “the good life”, Topkok and Green’s chapter shares with the reader a system of Inuit (Iñupiaq) cultural values, which, internalized, relate to Iñupiaq well-being. This system of values is holistic and community-embedded as those discussed in the previously introduced chapters. Similar to the perspectives presented in those chapters, the Iñupiaq well-being perspective is also kept by and drawn from community Elders. Another theme that draws across the previously introduced chapters is the sense of urgency with which Indigenous cultural heritage is in danger of disappearing and, thus, in great need to be passed on to and re-discovered by next generations. This urgency and need is expressed in a very personal way in Topkok and Green’s chapter, where the personal journal of one of the chapter authors of re-discovery of his cultural heritage is portrayed.

We are so pleased to see such a range of approaches to the theme of the book. Our hope is that this volume will contribute to the discourse on Indigenous perspectives on “the good life” and the education that is to come with it, but also to the reconciliation process (Truth and Reconciliation

Commission of Canada, 2015), for which the appreciative understanding of Indigenous perspectives by non-Indigenous people is so crucial.

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