Healthy on our own terms: Indigenous wellbeing and the colonized food system

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Abstract

Indigenous peoples' health is often reported through physical health disparities and prevalence of chronic disease experiences. Western perspectives often quantify health by reducing it to a set of numbers using a bio-medical approach. Health for Indigenous peoples in Canada is experienced more holistically, through a broader concept of "being well", which is achieved through relationships to other people, to the land and creation, and to our ancestors in the spiritual realm. Using this Indigenous lens, the notion of health is applied to the food systems and to healthy eating. Indigenous peoples maintain their health through accessing fresh, original and healthy foods on their traditional lands. In order to do so, traditional food systems are composed of a network of complex relationships that include the physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual aspects of learning and teaching ways of the land as well as food skills. These relationships feed people holistically through the connection to the land and vice versa. Colonization has created numerous barriers for Indigenous peoples to be healthy on their own terms. There is a great deal of pain associated with food for Indigenous peoples as a result of starvation tactics during treaty negotiation processes, residential schools, nutrition experiments, and hunting and fishing laws which have impacted Indigenous peoples' ability to eat original foods and maintain their health. The concepts of health and wellbeing, in the context of Indigenous food systems and cultures, should be adapted to serve the needs and represent the realities of Indigenous peoples.

Introduction

Indigenous peoples' health is often reported through physical health disparities and prevalence of chronic disease experiences. This conceptual paper argues how the colonized food system in Canada has dramatically shaped Indigenous peoples' ability to enact their notions of "being well." Colonization has created numerous barriers for Indigenous peoples in Canada to be healthy on their own terms. There is a great deal of pain associated with food for Indigenous peoples as a result of starvation tactics during treaty negotiation processes, residential schools, nutrition experiments, and hunting and fishing laws which has limited Indigenous peoples'

ability to eat original foods¹ and maintain their health. Health for Indigenous peoples is experienced more holistically, through a broader concept of "being well," which is achieved through relationships to other people, to the land and creation, and to our ancestors in the spiritual realm. Using this Cree and Anishinaabe lens (Hart, 2002; Sasakamoose, Bellegarde, Sutherland, Pete & McKay-McNabb, 2017), the notion of health is applied to the food system and to healthy eating. Indigenous peoples maintain their health through accessing original

¹ Indigenous foods have been referred to as traditional foods, country foods, wild foods, cultural foods and original foods. The use of the word original foods is deliberate and part of the resurgence of land and political-based activity regarding the history of a colonized food system.

and healthy foods on their traditional lands. In order to do so, the food system is comprised of a network of complex relationships that include the physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual aspects of learning and teaching ways of the land, as well as food skills. These relationships feed people holistically through the connection to the land and vice versa. The concepts of health and wellbeing, in the context of Indigenous food sovereignty and cultures, must be better examined to serve the needs, represent the realities of Indigenous peoples, and begin to address the disconnection to the traditional food system because of colonization and experimentation.

Colonization and Indigenous Food Experiences

Colonization has resoundingly affected Indigenous people and their relationship to their traditional food systems. Colonialism, the driving force behind the colonization of Indigenous peoples in Canada (and indeed elsewhere), has been described as a process encompassing an invasion of territory by the colonizers in order to “establish political, social, spiritual, intellectual domination over that territory” (Yellow Bird, 2008). As the lands were colonized, Indigenous foodways were violently replaced with Western settlers’ colonial systems. Through the colonization of the lands, there has been large scale destruction to the natural environment. Waziyatawin (2012) describes one example where her Dakota people faced the losses of more than 90 percent of their white pines, wetlands, woods and nearly all of the prairies, which have been used for large-scale agriculture and industrialization. The methods of colonizing the land and food systems served multiple purposes, for example, the Plains bison were hunted nearly to extinction for the sale of their hides, allowing for the land to be repurposed with domestic herd animals through cattle ranches while starving Indigenous peoples onto reservations (Grey & Patel, 2014; Waziyatawin, 2012). These changes dramatically changed Indigenous peoples’ relationship to their homelands and their ability to honor their responsibility to the living earth that supplies life through food and water (Jensen, 2006, in Waziyatawin, 2012).

Canadian policy shifted towards assimilating Indigenous peoples through forced attendance at residential schools from the 1870s to 1990s. Indigenous children were removed from their family homes, their communities, their homelands and from their traditional foods (Coté,

2016). The lasting negative effects of the residential schools are far-reaching and the direct correlation between the health issues faced by Indigenous people today can be traced to the food they were forced to eat in residential schools (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). The children were required to eat foods that were foreign to them, such as “domesticated meats, cheese, wheat flour, and sugar” and were not allowed to eat their healthy traditional diets (Coté, 2016, p. 3). Children were typically fed porridge and stale bread, broth, lard, and tea; sometimes the food was inedible, and many children reported hunger, starvation, and sickness during their time in residential school (Mosby, 2013).

In 1942, studies were conducted to examine the state of nutrition and newly developed medical procedures in five Cree communities in Northern Manitoba (Mosby, 2013). The higher rates of hunger and malnutrition were directly linked to dependence on Western foods purchased at grocery stores, with most of their diet attributed to white flour, lard, sugar and jam (Mosby, 2013). Researchers conducted experiments where they provided vitamin supplements but did not address a proper solution to the hunger. The policies created to address these issues further relied upon Western foods of canned tomatoes, rolled oats, lunch meat, cheese, and dried fruit (Mosby, 2013). Furthermore, the policies were focused on Western ideas of nutrition as mere nutrients and not the holistic Indigenous views of food and sustenance by promoting Indigenous food systems consisting of healthy traditional foods of fish, wild game, and berries (Mosby, 2013; Coté, 2016).

There were also nutritional experiments by trained dietitians conducted on nearly 1000 Indigenous children in six residential schools across Canada from 1948 to 1952 (Mosby, 2013). The study gave poor and inadequate diets to the children with some children receiving a Western diet of food, milk and fruit, and others vitamin supplements; some children were not given anything or were given placebos (Coté, 2016). These experiments continued from two to five years, with children being denied a healthy diet, adequate nutrition, and proper dental care (Mosby, 2013).

Through settler colonialism, there have been dramatic negative effects for Indigenous people who were purposefully disconnected from their healthy, traditional diets. These people were confined to reserve settings and denied access to traditional foods. Hunger and

inadequate nutrition were used as tools to assimilate Indigenous peoples, and when fed, Indigenous people were offered rations based in Western food systems that contribute to health issues faced today. The imposition of Western nutrition science and a focus on nutrients caused harmful experiments and large-scale experience of hunger and malnutrition. Moving forward, efforts to address health- and food-related issues in Indigenous communities must include Indigenous knowledge about food and repair the relationships between the food system and Indigenous peoples.

What does it mean to be well for Indigenous Peoples?

By many measures Indigenous peoples face disproportionally higher levels of 'health issues' than non-Indigenous peoples in Canada (Assembly of First Nations, 2006; McLachlan, 2014). Particularly troubling are incidences of food-related diseases amidst the prevalence of food insecurity (Power, 2008). Food in Indigenous cultures is central to worldviews, values, perspectives, and ultimately wellbeing (Martin & Amos, 2017; Mawhiney & Nabigon, 2011). Food is not and was never meant to harm our peoples. Indeed, recent scholarship on Indigenous food sovereignty speaks to the ways that Indigenous peoples are working, in practice, towards being well (Robin, 2019; Côté, 2016; Daigle, 2017; Robidoux, & Mason, 2017). While there have been important attempts by Indigenous scholars to describe processes of wellbeing for Indigenous peoples, communities, and nations (Absolon, 2010; Dumont, 2014; Linklater, 2014; Morrisseau, 1988), this has yet to be adequately examined through food (see Ray, Burnett, Cameron, Joseph, LeBlanc, Parker, et al., 2019 for a recent contribution to the literature).

To understand the connections between food and Indigenous cultures, it becomes critical to first discuss what it means to be well. Importantly, to be well and to be healthy are not the same thing. Health, as a concept and value, is largely presented through a biomedical lens. Western medicine's tendency to focus on mind and body as separate entities is problematic for peoples who are experiencing colonialism, marginalization, and oppression (Sasakamoose, Pete, McKay-McNabb, Bellegarde, & Sutherland, 2017). Michael Yellow Bird (2008) has argued that the relationship between colonizer and colonized works to the detriment of Indigenous peoples' wellbeing. These relationships are based upon "racist policies that destroyed my culture"

and the loss of lands and dignity (p. 277). Historically, Indigenous peoples were viewed as being in need of health interventions (McCallum, 2017), including starvation and other food experiments (Mosby, 2013, 2014). At the same time, the work of Indigenous helpers, healers, and medicine people was driven underground. Many traditional healing practices have been lost as a result of the Indian Act, residential schools, the loss of land, and other colonizing tactics (Linklater, 2014).

Supporting wellness requires an understanding of the influence of trauma, oppression and assimilation (Svenson & LaFontaine, 1999). Moreover, there must be a willingness to tackle the economic, social, and cultural components that underlie illness and disease (Adelson, 2005). The medicine wheel is an ancient concept that uses the teachings of balance, harmony, relationships, and wholeness to support the concept of wellbeing (Hart, 2002). The medicine wheel can be used in a variety of ways and contexts and differs according to nation, however, it tends to be presented as four equal parts of a circle to represent the four directions coinciding with traditional teachings (Absolon, 2010; Bopp, Bopp, Brown & Lane, 1984; Regnier, 1994). Spirituality is the foundation of the medicine wheel. Contained within this spiritual model are four elements of being: mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional. According to the teachings of the medicine wheel, each element requires attention. Inattention or imbalance between each of these elements results in illness and dis-ease (Absolon, 2011; Hart, 2002). Dis-ease is examined according to the state of the relationships within and between all parts of being. Thus, harmony, balance, and attention to relationships are critical to wellness (Struthers, 2000).

Slater (2010) argues that Indigenous wellbeing is both personal and political. Wellbeing is not objective. Indeed, for Cree people, there is no direct word in the language for health. Adelson (1988) shares how for the Cree (Iiyuu) of Whapmagoostui, Quebec, Miyupimaatisiin translates into "being alive well." Miyupimaatisiin describes the state where Cree people are eating Cree foods and practicing traditional land-based lifestyles. Through these practices comes nourishment. According to Manitowabi and Shawande (2012), the Cree and Anishinabe terms for wellbeing are similar:

The terms pimadiziwin and bimadziwin are variations of the spellings of the same Ojibwa root for "life." The Ojibwa prefix mino, Odawa mno, and Cree miu mean "good." Thus, Adelson's (2004) concept of miyupimaatisiin

and Hart's (2002) concept *mino pimatisiwin* are Cree equivalents of the Manitoulin Island Anishinabe term *mnaamodzawin* meaning "the good life" (p. 444).

'Being alive well' and 'the good life' are concepts that more accurately describe wellbeing. Wellbeing is more holistic than the physical component and characteristics of health, and thus to support wellbeing requires holistic systems, programs, and practices that view people through their contexts and experiences. This means that the vision for treatment should be considered through the lens of healing and/or working to maintain the wellbeing of Indigenous peoples. This vision, of course, must include food.

We Are All relationships

The medicine wheel is an important tool for understanding relationships. It helps to describe concepts such as wholeness, balance, interconnections and harmony. These concepts are critical to Indigenous wellbeing. Relationships exist in and around us; they range from the relationships we have within ourselves to the relationships we have with our family or a medicine, a moose, or the water. The concept 'all my relations' refers to the relationships we have with creation, a conversation to acknowledge the interconnectivity of life. Mahwiney and Nabigon (2011) share how historically relationships with the land, water, plants and animals were so strong they were viewed as part of Indigenous peoples. Hunting, fishing, growing, gathering, cooking, and preserving respects the relationships one has with creation. These practices are demonstrative of our responsibilities to our ancestors and the land. But supporting traditional healing practices, re-learning the language, standing up for the health of our lands is equally important because our relationships extend into these parts of life as well. In many ways, the quest for wellbeing is constant. Colonization presents too many forces that shape Indigenous lives for wellbeing not to be a struggle. At the same time, Indigenous peoples recognize the value of process: journeys and pathways towards healing from colonization and reclaiming wellbeing. Progress is not necessarily linear, but rather cyclical.

Traditional and land-based food and cultural activities are ripe with relationships. They are steeped in history and allow us to re-learn, re-value and re-invest in our culture. Certainly, there are nutritional benefits of a diet based in food that comes from the land. But there

are further benefits to a land-based diet in which we honour the relationship our ancestors had to the land, whether it is through prayer, or tobacco, or moon cycle plantings, or any of the teachings of our ancestors that are grounded in place and identity (Absolon, 2011; Robin, 2019). Greater benefits occur when we reclaim our space on the land, or when we teach our children and our children's children how to save a seed or clean a fish. The closer we are connected to our food system, the more relationships in our food. To eat well, to be well, we must eat food that is full of connections and interconnections. Yet, how does one measure the value of this? Or measure any component of a relationship? Food contains spirit and gives spirit. The spirit in food is what helps to keep us well.

Food Security and Indigenous People

Food security occurs "when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (Food & Agriculture Organization, 1996). Food insecurity is categorized as moderate (compromise in quality and/or quantity of food due to lack of money for food) to severe (miss meals, reduce food intake and go days without food). Food insecurity is measured by surveys and interviews or indirectly through food bank usage.

The food insecurity rates for Indigenous peoples have been disproportionately higher than the rest of Canadian society. Poverty is often linked to food insecurity and First Nations communities are the most remote and poorest in Canada. Tarasuk et al. (2014) found that food insecurity in Indigenous households is more than double than in non-Indigenous households. They found a direct connection between being Indigenous and higher likelihood of food insecurity. There are limited data on food insecurity in First Nations communities, however; one study found 75% of homes in northern Manitoba to be food insecure, with one third of those experiencing severe food insecurity (Fieldhouse & Thompson, 2012). Another study revealed that South Indian Lake, a northern Manitoba community, experienced 100% food insecurity (Thompson Gulrukh, Ballard, Beardy, Islam, Lozeznik, & Wong, 2011). Some northern communities are facing challenges of access to affordable, fresh foods. Northern communities also lack the infrastructure for food processing, food production, and often, safe drinking water (Fieldhouse & Thompson, 2012).

One solution for addressing food insecurity and malnutrition in Indigenous peoples is to promote Western foods over “country” or traditional foods. In the 1930s, researchers found that the move away from traditional foods, even partially, to store-bought foods lead to a decline in health for Indigenous peoples (Mosby, 2012). Efforts to address food insecurity have been to encourage or coerce Indigenous peoples into choosing ‘more nutritious’ store-bought food while also consuming country foods (Mosby, 2012). The government provided Family Allowances but restricted their use for Indigenous peoples, no longer allowing the allowance to be received as cash but for in-kind purchases of clothing and nutritious foods (Mosby, 2013). Similar issues persist to this day; currently, there is a concern over the cost of food in stores in northern communities. There have been various subsidies over the years, such as the Food Mail Program and Nutrition North Canada that supported the funding for shipment of nutritious perishable foods to remote communities; however, based on past usage of the programs eligibility for the Nutrition North Program is limited to only some communities (Pal, Haman, & Robidoux, 2013).

Indigenous people benefit from consuming traditional foods such as land animals, fish, wild berries, nuts, wild birds, and plants. There are barriers to living off the land such as lack of hunters, equipment and fuel costs, government regulations on meat handling and slaughter, restrictions on land use, and lack of physical strength (Pal et al., 2013). Pal et al. (2013) found there is knowledge transmission from older hunters/anglers to younger generations. Fishing can be not only a recreational activity but a serious food gathering expedition for some Indigenous families. In addition to the hunting and fishing is the preparation, which takes time and effort. The food preparation is incorporated into family social practices, where foods are cleaned and prepared before being smoked, boiled, fried, or baked (Pal et al., 2013). Thus, the hunting and fishing feed the people through the nutrients but also through connection to the land, social interactions, and identity of their people (Pal et al., 2013). There are few subsidies to support traditional food acquisition because it is not under federal jurisdiction and does not exist in all provinces. The Nelson House Country Food Program provides community members with access to wild foods by hiring local people who hunt and fish year-round and distributing the food to elders and the vulnerable, including the sick or low-income (Fieldhouse & Thompson, 2012). If programs

and funding were truly invested in Indigenous peoples’ wellbeing, the support for traditional hunting, fishing, and preparation would be essential for promoting health and being well in Indigenous communities.

Poor health outcomes are directly correlated with food insecurity. Negative health outcomes result from food insecurity, including heart disease, high blood pressure, distress, depression, and dental issues (Fieldhouse & Thompson, 2012). Given the seriousness of food insecurity on physical and mental health, the measures to alleviate it do not include attributes of being well that are important for Indigenous people, including access to traditional foods through hunting, fishing, and gathering, and attention to language or culture. Use of traditional languages for discussing food security is imperative considering the deep connection between language, culture, and worldviews (Power, 2008). Indigenous methods of sharing information would offer deeper and more meaningful insights into issues related to food security such as storytelling and interpersonal relationships to elicit personal experiences. Contextualizing food security in Indigenous frameworks to better understand Indigenous relationships and outlooks on food, while also acknowledging how this affects their relationships with community members through obligation and reciprocity of sharing foods, would better capture the experience of food insecurity in Indigenous communities (Willows, 2005). As mentioned with settler colonialism, power and control have been and continue to be enacted on Indigenous people through clearing the lands, destroying the environment, and historically by placing children in residential schools, and removing communities to remote living on reserves. This power struggle is visible today through the broken government systems that continue to oppress Indigenous peoples.

Reclaiming Indigenous Food Sovereignty

Alternatives to reclaiming the power to self-determine Indigenous food systems, including diets, culture, and lands, are plentiful but challenging. These alternatives fall under the lens of Indigenous food sovereignty (IFS). Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) has articulated the need for radical alternatives that do not focus on the fight against systems of oppression, but rather strengthen Indigenous communities and mentalities: “I’m interested in unapologetic place-based nationhoods using Indigenous practices and operating in an ethical and principled way from an intact land base. This is the base from which we can develop a “new relationship” with

the Canadian state” (p. 50-51). These radical alternatives offer new insight into how to move forward in an era of reconciliation, where the term *cultural resurgence* has been over-used due to the discomfort of conversations around *political resurgence* (Simpson, 2017).

Across the world, Indigenous food sovereignty has been in practice since time immemorial. More recently, however, Indigenous food sovereignty has entered the arena of both scholarship and “community development” practice in Canada. Importantly, it has begun to be shaped and articulated by Indigenous peoples across the country in everyday actions: through protesting pipeline placement, tackling the issue of the legalities of sharing traditional food, and cooking and growing food. These everyday actions also include trapping, art, ceremony, language, and identity. One of the most important contributions to the scholarship has come from Morrison (2011), who shared four principles of Indigenous food sovereignty, which have become foundational to the movement in Canada: 1) that food is sacred and the sacredness of the food upheld; 2) that Indigenous food sovereignty involves active participation of Indigenous peoples; 3) that self-determination is the key to understanding the overarching goal of IFS, and; 4) that there is a great need for land reform in Canada (Morrison, 2011). Indigenous food sovereignty is also present through Indigenous knowledges, decolonization, and self-determination by several Indigenous scholars (Coté, 2016; Daigle, 2017; Robin, 2019).

Although the word sovereignty can be problematic due to its colonial implications (Alfred, 1999), Indigenous food sovereignty - the movement, the practice, and the way of life - is a conversation that is quick to emerge within food studies at the present time. The potentials of Indigenous food sovereignty for Indigenous peoples in Canada are still largely unknown, despite having been shared by Elders for hundreds of years. Indigenous peoples, as peoples of the land, will heal through land-based processes. The attention that Indigenous food sovereignty has received as a part of health literature has largely focused on the nutritional aspects of food (see Ray et al., 2019 for an alternative approach). Much like the definition of food security, these attitudes and perceptions have evolved to consider the kinds of foods Indigenous peoples are eating as part of their pre-colonial diets; however, the idea that food feeds the spirit is still missing from the literature. This is important because health and the land are intimately linked. Indeed, a common prophecy within Indigenous

cultures in Canada has been that people will not heal in isolation from the land; we must heal together. This connects Indigenous wellbeing to the health of the land. Within the framework of Indigenous food sovereignty, we must move past the trappings of reconciliation that largely ignore the current political implications of government-supported resource extraction and a lack of protection for land. These intersections need to be taught in schools, universities, libraries, and any other space possible. We must collectively raise our various levels of accountability to include Creation. To be well, in Indigenous cultures, requires eating food from the land. Without adequate access, supports, legislation, and stewardship, the journey towards wellbeing will continue to be long and complex. But it is, perhaps, one of the only ways to heal from colonization.

Conclusion

Traditional food activities such as hunting, gathering, fishing, cooking, and feasting, which help provide a diet rich in cultural food, also work as social networks bringing people and place together. These contacts, connections, and interrelationships between land, people, and knowledge suggest that Indigenous food sovereignty, while a continuing process, helps to revive, support, and maintain Indigenous wellbeing. This is how we re-build and heal from the disconnection created through colonization and experimentation. Indigenous food sovereignty is centered upon the links between how we come to know and understand our place on the land and the gifts that land provides for us. We have a responsibility to care for the lands, and also to care for our families. Alfred and Cornthassel (2005) have referred to the rapidly changing landscape as our new living reality. In a sea of changing landscapes and cultural erosions due to the impacts of a colonized food system, there is a great need to heal both people and place.

Indigenous peoples must be armed with protective and respectful land legislation to reclaim their food identities. We must reclaim our bodies, hearts, minds, and spirits in feeding ourselves in ways similar to our ancestors. We know the path forward; it is time for government to re-consider and broaden reconciliation so that it encompasses all the damages created from colonialism.

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