

# Karihwaientáhkwen: Conceptualizing Morality in Indigenous Consciousness

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Article abstract

Many public institutions, including universities and colleges, have committed to Indigenous engagement – the institutional effort to engage with experiences, histories, and perspectives of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples in meaningful ways. In many areas of institutional endeavour, these commitments have frequently included a focus upon spiritual orientations of Indigenous peoples as a central aspect of their knowledge and worldviews. In this study, we sought to acquire knowledge on moral understandings that were resident in the consciousness of Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers situated at universities across Canada. Findings revealed that personal and communal experiences informed a developed sense of responsibility that may be situated in the unique manifestations of their respective knowledge systems, heritages, and consciousnesses. Although non-Indigenous orientations such as those of Christianity informed the narratives of some, a prevailing sense of traditional identity emerged from participants.

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# Karihwaientáhkwen: Conceptualizing Morality in Indigenous Consciousness

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## ABSTRACT

Many public institutions, including universities and colleges, have committed to Indigenous<sup>1</sup> engagement – the institutional effort to engage with experiences, histories, and perspectives of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples in meaningful ways. In many areas of institutional endeavour, these commitments have frequently included a focus upon spiritual orientations of Indigenous peoples as a central aspect of their knowledge and worldviews. In this study, we sought to acquire knowledge on moral understandings that were resident in the consciousness of Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers situated at universities across Canada. Findings revealed that personal and communal experiences

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, the term *Indigenous* refers only to the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples of Canada and related territories.

informed a developed sense of responsibility that may be situated in the unique manifestations of their respective knowledge systems, heritages, and consciousnesses. Although non-Indigenous orientations such as those of Christianity informed the narratives of some, a prevailing sense of traditional identity emerged from participants.

## **Introduction**

Currently, primary, secondary, and post-secondary education in Canada is benefitting from increased value for Indigenous histories, experiences and perspectives that may be integrated into educational programming. Increasing numbers of educators have worked towards including Indigenous peoples, histories, and issues into their work. In many schools, universities, and colleges, content and pedagogies have changed with a view to employ aspects of the Indigenous experience; these aspects may have relevance to Indigenous languages, literature, literacy, and other disciplinary areas. What has been of emphasis in these changes is the amount of focus placed upon the unique manifestations of Indigenous knowledge, heritage, consciousness, and traditions that may be relevant to a particular educational context. Examples of such initiatives include improved social studies curricula that include Indigenous community content as well as the inclusion of traditional ecological knowledge as a constituent part of school science programming. Administrators responsible for supporting educators to respond to these relatively new educational imperatives are becoming more receptive to the notion that Indigenous content should be shared, celebrated, and inform the development of a balanced perspective on the Indigenous experience that is appreciative (e.g., Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2022; Ontario Education and Training, 2022).

The public responsibilities that schools and post-secondary institutions have toward reconciliation may be understood as an outworking of their responsibility to provide appropriate, respectful, and balanced learning to all students in a way that will support citizenship and character development. Acknowledging that the



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Indigenous experience embodies emotive, cultural, spiritual, traditional, and language-based dimensions may be an essential step for education leaders in the provision of such learning opportunities (Malott et al., 2009). As school authorities employ Indigenous education as a means of addressing reconciliation, it may be important to consider those aspects of Indigenous knowledge and ways of being that will inform the development of this reconciliatory journey. It is toward harmonious coexistence amongst all that reconciliation may lead and that appears to be a stated aim of many educational institutions.

In initiating explorations of the Indigenous experience, educators have invoked numerous topics and issues that are viewed as informative points of entry. For example, one of the topics frequently adduced as a means of framing the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples is that of treaties. The exploration of treaties between colonial governments and Indigenous peoples may be useful for fostering education-based inquiry because of the opportunities for historical and social exploration that treaties necessitate. As a result, provincial departments, university academics, and others have developed resources for teachers and students to explore this topic (e.g., Government of Ontario, 2023; Historica Canada, 2023; University of Alberta, 2023). The frequency for which treaties are the subject of school and university-based learning has made this topic, directly and indirectly, a proxy for understanding the Indigenous experience, the motto being “we are all treaty people” (e.g., University of Toronto, n.d.). Just as a non-Indigenous person in Canada may be initially understood as a descendent from another country or region of the world (and thus initial thoughts regarding that person may be situated in the context of the histories or political issues of that country or region), Indigenous peoples in Canada are frequently understood through what treaties and/or legislative mechanisms are relevant to them. How often is, for instance, a person of First Nations background considered in terms of their particular treaty, which may offer inferential information about what region of Canada they are from as well as their respective language(s)? Such points of inquiry can shape the manner in which people understand Indigenous peoples and may provide useful discussion points.

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The exploration of Indigenous knowledge in educational institutions appears to have led to a focus on morality. Use of the Seven Sacred Teachings, Elders' teachings, and ceremony are examples of how explorations of right and wrong have been approached in schools and post-secondary institutions. Although this may be expected in faith-based primary and secondary schools, many (ostensibly) secular schools, universities, and colleges have begun exploring morality through the perspectives of Indigenous knowledge and consciousness. The inclusion of moral frameworks that reflect the spiritual perspectives of Indigenous peoples has become more frequent as a constituent part of a process of indigenization. To illustrate the spiritual dimensions of Indigenous identity, Vine Deloria Jr. (1999), wrote:

The real interest in the old Indians was not to discover the abstract structure of physical reality but rather to find the proper road along which, for the duration of a person's life, individuals were supposed to walk. This colorful image of the road suggests that the universe is a moral universe. That is to say, there is a proper way to live in the universe. There is a content to every action, behavior, and belief....There is direction to the universe....Nothing has incidental meaning and there are no coincidences. (p. 46)

The stance put forth by Deloria illustrates a dichotomy of sorts between the moral approaches of Indigenous peoples and those of non-Indigenous people. Whereas reference may be made to the non-Indigenous worldviews and approaches to well-being, Deloria writes of a specific role for Indigenous peoples: "[American Indians'] role has been to change the American conception of a society...to one in which liberty is...characterized by manners and a moral sense of right and wrong" (p. 221).

The non-delineated approach to a moral code is reflected by Cajete (1994) who writes of the values of Indigenous moral and religious perspectives as best respected by observing them not as a codified set of imperatives similar to what may be found in the Christian biblical canon but rather as a process for

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understanding right and wrong and acting upon that understanding. Friesen (2000), referring to the work of Cajete, describes the sources of morality for Indigenous peoples thusly:

The traditional First Nations' metaphysical belief system did not adhere to an overall, organized description. It was a way of life, not carefully catalogued delineation of major and minor doctrines, subdoctrines, and corollary beliefs. Theology, to the Aboriginal, was a process rather than an intellectual structure. (p. 12)

The moral frames of Indigenous people have come to be reflected in some aspects of content and programing in schools, universities, and colleges. In a number of institutions in Canada, frameworks for morality are put forth by invited Elders and community members who employ this notion of process, reflecting the act of relationship-making and/or restoration. In spite of the emphasis on process for which people may contribute, the representation of moral imperatives have been, for better or worse, delineated and/or codified. One example previously mentioned is the *Seven Sacred Teachings* – a set of teachings that offer insight into how we should interface with one another. The Seven Teachings have become ubiquitous within educational institutions and have been used in educational resources and professional development sessions.

## **Morality**

Differentiating between religion and spirituality, Stonechild (2016) observes that the latter is flexible, evolving “according to changing circumstances and needs of humanity” (p. 5). Therefore, rigid commandments such as “Thou shalt not steal” can be insufficient to guide individuals in extraordinary circumstances. Thus, besides the Great Law of Peace and Harmony, which informs the laws governing human behaviours, Indigenous peoples focus instead on possessing the Seven Virtues, which enable an individual to “make appropriate decisions and maintain good relationships with others” (p. 85). The Seven Virtues are “mutually



reinforcing codes of conduct” (Stonechild, 2020, p. 15) and include: respect, courage, love, generosity, honesty, humility and wisdom. Stonechild (2016) notes the similarities between the Seven Virtues and the biblical Ten Commandments but emphasizes that the latter does not provide room for appropriate responses to everchanging human relationships.

On a similar vein, Deloria (2003) argues that the codes of conduct of mainstream religions are often taken as universal and complete ways of explaining the cosmos. Conversely, Indigenous morality is contextual and experiential. While one has a moral responsibility towards the land, practices and understandings of reality are seen as in “a continuous process of adjustment to the natural surroundings and not as a specific message valid for all times and places” (p. 66). Furthermore, Deloria notes that in Indigenous spirituality (to which he refers as “tribal religions”) there is no need for doctrine, and heresies are unknown:

Preconceived standards of conduct are unimportant and the assumption of the innate sinfulness of human is impossible, for the individual is judged instantaneously by his or her fellows as useful or useless according to his or her degree of participation in community affairs. (p. 194)

Cordova (2004) follows a similar mindset, arguing that Indigenous codes of conduct exist in relation to others, not to an autonomous, self-determined “I.” For that reason, children are taught from an early age what it means to be a human being in that specific group, that every choice and action has consequences on both themselves and on others, and that they should take responsibility for their own actions (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Cordova, 2004). Particularly, children are taught to be aware and sensitive to “the needs and emotions of others as well as a keen perception of where the child [is] in the world (a sense of place)” (Cordova, 2004, p. 178). For instance, Battiste and Henderson (2000) highlight some of the lessons taught to Mi’kmaq children, such as honoring and respecting mothers and grandmothers, never crossing the path or walking over the feet of an Elder. During



teenagerhood, teachings focus on dignity and integrity, instructing the child what is considered right and wrong according to Mi'kmaq knowledges.

As a consequence, Waters (2004) observes that Indigenous constructs of ethnicity and gender, for example, do not have fixed boundaries, but are rather malleable, complex and in continuous change according to contexts and relations. Battiste and Henderson (2000) concur, pointing that “life is to be lived not according to universal, abstract theories about the way things work but as an interactive relationship in a particular time and place” (p. 27). Another example can be found in the Rotinoshonni story, where the alcohol is not described as evil in itself but something that caused devastating effects on the Sonontowa:haka, who were thus living without purpose, neglecting ceremonies and yielding to violence (Rice, 2013).

Finally, although specific values and customs can vary across nations, the principles of Indigenous morality can also be applied to inform interactions beyond a specific community. Battiste and Henderson (2000), for example, highlight that cross-cultural interactions should tolerate constructive diversity. In other words, “intercultural diplomacy must empower a fair and just space between cultures that must be respected and honored” (pp. 16-17).

## **The Study**

This study's focus was upon Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers and their understandings of morality and the sources of knowledge associated with those understandings. The research team consisted of Frank Deer as investigator and Rebeca Heringer as co-investigatior. Frank is Kaniienkeha'ka from Kahnawake, a community that lies just south of Tiotia'ke in the eastern region of the Rotinoshonni Confederacy. Having previously served as a classroom teacher in a Cree community in Northern Manitoba and in the culturally diverse Inner City of Winnipeg, Frank's programme of research is a direct outworking of his experiences as an Onkwehón:we educator who has come to appreciate the importance of Indigenous knowledge and its contribution to education. Rebeca was born and





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raised in Brazil and began to learn about the Indigenous knowledges and morality in Canadian contexts after she moved to Winnipeg in 2016. In a spirit of humility and reconciliation, Rebeca seeks to promote anti-oppressive education, research, and relationships, with special focus on racial minorities.

Data were acquired through a combination of story, conversation, and other forms of narrative within the context of relational accountability exercised through in-person or online individual interviews. Wilson's (2008) work is of particular importance because data collected was in narrative form. These semi-structured interviews with participants were appreciative in nature, promoting the agency of the participants in a manner that honoured their perspectives (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007). In keeping with the observations of Ellerby (2006) – that when Indigenous peoples, particularly Elders and Knowledge Keepers, offer their insights into morality, they tend to do so through storytelling – narratives in this study included empirical and non-empirical epistemological dimensions that were in the form of story. Where appropriate, this research adhered to protocols that were reputedly necessary vis-à-vis respective Indigenous traditions (e.g., offering of tobacco as a means of consent over and above the requisite consent forms).

One of the central issues that inspired the development of this study was the developing concern amongst Canadian universities to not only incorporate the spiritual orientations of Indigenous peoples as a central aspect of Indigenous knowledge and worldviews but also to condition the ethos of their institutions through increased involvement of Indigenous faculty and support staff. Elders and Knowledge Keepers hosted in 57 universities across Canada were contacted (each hosting one or more potential participants). 11 Elders/Knowledge Keepers from across Turtle Island agreed to participate. Of these 11 participants, 9 were of First Nations background and 2 were Métis; six participants were women and five were men; participants had cultural roots from across the territories. Interviews were held in English with occasional reference to an Indigenous word or phrase. All participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts of their interviews to check for accuracy. Acquired data were analyzed through a process of

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constant comparison employing the tenets of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014).

The guiding questions posed in the study were designed to foster a climate of discussion in which participants would share narratives in response to the following prompts:

- Please tell me about yourself (e.g., national identity, home community).
- Please describe your experiences in working with Indigenous knowledge.
- To what extent has spiritual knowledge and teachings been a part of your experiences?
- In what ways has morality been a part of your experiences/learning?

From these general guiding questions emerged several different thematic tracts amongst participants. Prompting questions and emergent points of discussion arose that were associated with such things as participants' nationhood as well as their interface with Christianity.

The focus upon Elders/Knowledge Keepers for this study is essential for they are the principal source of Indigenous knowledge in Indigenous communities. Through continued discussion and partnership with Indigenous communities, post-secondary institutions and other public offices have come to understand the benefits of working with Elders and Knowledge Keepers as attempts are made to be responsive to the existing and developing needs and expectations of Indigenous peoples.

Our approach to this study was reconciliatory in nature. Reconciliation – the ongoing journey toward a new relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples that maintains a sense of their shared histories (Government of Canada, 2024) – requires an honouring of the histories and contributions of Indigenous peoples to support all peoples' developing understandings of the Indigenous experience.

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## Findings

This study yielded six emergent themes from the aggregated data. Those themes were:

- Self-Discovery through Familial Relations and Community Work
- Different Dimensions of Thinking
- Influence of Non-Indigenous Values
- Challenges
- Practical Values

As stated above, this study was one in which participants, Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers, took part in discussions intended to facilitate storytelling. As the communal/familial, ancestral, and spiritual dimensions of participants' experiences were a natural starting point for these discussions, each participant's narrative was to varying degrees unique, embodied, and (at times) implicit. Different school and community experiences, situatedness with culture and ceremony, and connection to their respective cultural mores are examples of what made participant's stories unique.

The stories of each participant were embodied insofar as the rather distinctive manifestations of knowledge, heritage, consciousness, and tradition that were resident in their stories and their experiences constituted their unique whole mentioned above. To disembodify these features and the contexts in which they existed, therefore, would adversely affect the teachings that may be derived. Associated with their unique and embodied features, these stories – especially those aspects of them that may constitute “teachings” – were also implicit because they were not plainly expressed. As discussed further in the discussion section of this article, it may be our responsibility as listeners to these stories to derive teachings from them in an appropriate way. The value of the stories of Elders and



Knowledge Keepers is that they are at once out-workings of their unique Indigenous experiences and also points of valuable reference, which consumers of these stories can use as spiritual, cultural, and experiential frames that may guide future orientations and decisions.

## **Self-Discovery through Familial Relations and Community Work**

One of the principal contexts in which participants acquired knowledge that was a part of or informed their understandings of moral thought and action was through their familial relations and broader community work. For instance, one participant recognized how pivotal his home environment was to his identity development:

I consider myself — and my brothers talk about this and we talk about it — really fortunate. We happened to be in a place where someone or something caused us to think and ask who we are. Like, there's got to be more to us. My brother was here and my friend Gerald was there with me that time. And when I was asking that question: is there more to this being Indian business?

In a similar vein, every participant in this study described community work through which they worked with fellow community members either in traditional communal settings or in public institutions. These experiences of community work appeared to be central to the development of personal and national identity amongst participants. In most cases, the sort of community work that was situated in established institutions like universities provided somewhat robust forums for this to occur. One participant, in speaking of his work in his respective university-based role, described a journey through which his help of others supported his own personal development:

I didn't really look to establish a relationship to this university. But I was aware that I was going through a process of self-discovery. During this, I did get Indigenous identity building opportunities. But back in the day I was



building and looking at my culture and my spirituality and just wanted to become more of an Indian person. I also wanted to find some pride in that. There was some self-hate and all that.

For many – but not all – of the participants, there was a small community of individuals who were working together in institutional contexts such as the one referred to in this quote. For many, such as this participant, the work alongside others in community contexts led to enhanced notions of nationhood and righteousness. The participant continued with a description of a key episode that took place inside a teepee during a ceremony, as they developed into a Knowledge Keeper:

There's pictures of Sitting Bull with this big black tip eagle feather on these books. And I said, "that's a feather he was wearing, that's a real eagle feather." And as I looked down at the pipes and all those things that were laying there was on a buffalo hide that was underneath the tobacco that was there. They were using tobacco in a different kind of way, not just smoking cigarettes and other items. That little boy water from the water drum that preceded him doing the water drum. And then realizing this is our stuff. This is us. None of this come from Europe. This is originally ours. This is it. This is what I was looking for. And that literally changed my life.

What the theme of community work illustrates is what kinds of experiences and commitments are necessary to build sufficient knowledge, character, and trust in order to be regarded as one who can help in a way that might be expected of Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers. Opportunities for such growth appeared to be quite important for the participants in this study. It was through these experiences living and working within and Indigenous communities alongside family and community members that contributed to the development of a moral frame that was maintained by participants.



## **Different Dimensions of Thinking**

Indigenous peoples and communities promote and celebrate their national, communal, and linguistic identities because they are, amongst other features, distinct from other groups in Canada. The celebration of such distinctness is not unique to Indigenous peoples – many settler groups across the territories such as francophone settlers in Quebec have advanced the distinct nature of their collective identities.

The distinctness identified in this study is one that has become congruent with a prevailing idea amongst some universities and colleges and frequently advanced by Indigenous peoples – that of the distinctiveness of Indigenous perspectives. Features of Indigenous perspectives cited above such as unique knowledges, worldviews, and spiritual orientations are, according to participants of this study, some of the most important dimensions of the Indigenous ethos that ought to be prioritized in the institutional journey toward reconciliation. For example, one participant commented on the necessity of expanding one's ways of thinking when working with Indigenous peoples:

You need to understand that you can't show up with a form and fill out the form and say you're serving that person. You need to understand where they're coming from. You need to respect them enough to listen to their stories of how they got to the place where they're from. That's just human respect. You need to listen to their story and understand where they are coming from and you need to be a witness to their story. And this will go a long way to developing a relationship where you can work with them. And you need to carry the histories through the truth and reconciliation documents. You need to understand the Indian hospitals, residential school – what was done and still being done.



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The need to interpret the world through an Indigenous lens was particularly emphasized in terms of how the distinctness of perspectives is resident in language:

Our languages are key. They are foundational to understanding our worldview because our languages are multi-dimensional. They address both the physical and the spiritual when we speak. And when you begin to, when you look at the language and its origin, it's a voice.

Another participant also observed how language is not only valuable in practical ways but also something that becomes vital to one's identity:

[Members of the university community] always come to me because of my fluency in Anishinaabe. Universities are contacting me to provide them with bundles.... My fluency came from praying. I started that in the lodge in the mornings. They would always ask me to pray in our language because none of them spoke Anishinaabe or any Indigenous languages. I was the only one that could. I started to appreciate my own language. And now it keeps me alive.

In some instances, participants cited the frame through which language is used – for instance, the differences between a noun-based language of a settler and the verb-based language of an Indigenous person. These differences relate to the notion that meaning may be lost in the use of settler languages such as English and French when attempting to represent something that reflects on an aspect of Indigenous consciousness. One participant, in describing the importance of offering teachings on sacred medicines at their university, reflected on this:

I use English words for the white man. I don't need to explain this whole thing to another Indigenous person. They also have these understandings. It's in us. I guess to some I guess it's a mystery but to me, ever since I was born, there were always there. It took teachers to bring that, explained those things to me as a kid.

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The knowledge, heritage, consciousness, and traditions of Indigenous peoples can be very unique and distinct from one another. Living and working with one's own family and community over a period of time can offer one the opportunity to develop orientations toward such things as right and wrong that can be unique in character given that they emerge from these communal systems of knowledge, heritage, consciousness, and tradition. This may be understood as an important aspect of what an Elder or Knowledge Keeper represents and contributes; their teachings on the moral journey are directly connected to their communities' worldviews.

## **Influence of Non-Indigenous Values**

Participants' commentary on distinctness as resident in language frequently led to observations of a sort that focused upon the influence of non-Indigenous values in their lives, particularly coming from their own families. Common across the interviews was the ability they have gained to understand others' perspectives from a broader lens than they were exposed to, which becomes of utmost importance to reconciliation:

So if they want to talk about the Catholic Church, I understand what they're talking about and can participate. If we're going to get down to the morality of and the wisdoms for what people utilize to get through their walk on the earth as human beings, because it's a tough goal. This walk is a tough goal. We need one another. We need to communicate whatever form that takes. We need we need to share that with one another.

Or as another participant put it:

When we grew up as Catholics back home, it was just the narrow focus of that. You know, "this is spirituality." It wasn't called spirituality... "This is religion." You're of the Catholic religion. And, you know, this is what we





kind of expect from you as a Catholic, to be in church on Sunday. Well, now, my spirituality is as a pastor and as an Elder. Now, spirituality is broadened out so much like that now that it's not even so much as was going to church every Sunday, the Catholic Church, and learning the Ten Commandments or, is my relationship now with creator, with God, if you will. Is more than it was back then too, like it's more attached to the natural world than it was going to church on Sunday. Like I could never understand why I had to go to church. My mom used to tell us, "You have to go to church and you have to serve as altar boys. You have to serve the priest as altar boys." And we did that. But that was kind of the narrow vision, our version of religion or spirituality. And you had to know the Bible, you had to know your prayers kind of thing, right? But now that time for me, now that's all changed. The spirituality is some of that, but most of it is how we relate to other people and how we relate to the natural world around us. Yeah, the natural laws of the world mean this is what it relates to which is a broader version of [Christianity]. Not so much a narrow view.

All the participants in this study attended either Indian Residential Schools or Indian Day Schools, which were sites of oppression and cultural erasure. In discussing this, participants cited such school experiences as one of the principal reasons why their respective community's languages and cultural knowledges were so adversely affected. Some noted the influence that some religious authorities had on the processes of attempted erasure through influence on schools. One participant noted that although some authorities affiliated with a church may have used an Indigenous language in order to proselytize, the values related to Christian faith were still advanced:

I came across an Ojibwe dictionary and I learned that it was used by the missionaries to supplant Indigenous beliefs. I started looking through the dictionary and breaking it down. And it was all slanted towards Christians. You know, it's as if a priest is talking to me, but he's using Anishinaabe. It sounded Christian.



It is clear that participants in this study recognized and affirmed the influence that non-Indigenous worldviews and systems of thought had upon traditional ways of knowing and being. Although not all citation of such influences were regarded as negative, the prevailing feeling amongst participants was that influences such as Christianity operated in the consciousness of Indigenous peoples in a way that at least obscured traditional views on right and wrong. What emerged from this study is the notion that the delineated, canonical view of morality that is resident in Christian teachings is so removed from the organic approach to coming to understand right and wrong that they are difficult to reconcile.

## Challenges

Participants appeared to explore these issues as a means of emphasizing that universities and colleges should avoid the imposition of non-Indigenous values upon the student population. However, in some jurisdictions, this may be an even challenging issue given the decrease in the Indigenous population and hence Indigenous languages being spoken and practiced through ceremony:

Our Indigenous people are smaller [in number] compared to other cities, other jurisdictions. So when you're looking for opportunities for ceremony, you don't have a lot. Even the language...I can probably give you 20 people I know who speak Mi'kmaq and the rest all speak English. The language is lost here in P.E.I. A lot of our ceremonies here when the residential school happened went underground. Or they just disappeared. So what we're just starting to do is not only rebuilding but embracing. We embraced and relearned the traditions. Relearned what it means to be Mi'kmaq. What does it mean to be Mi'kmaq? So it's almost like a rebirth. I see this happening in baby steps. We are learning. We're learning but the problem is our survivors are dying. Our survivors of residential school are dying. We don't have the ceremonies that we used to have. We don't do Sundance ceremonies here. We're limited here. I would say we're not there yet. So it's almost our ceremonies are almost filtered with mainstream.



In a similar vein, some participants observed that there is still great resistance to indigenization due to ongoing colonization:

We're still getting pushback in the university relating to smudging. I don't understand this. It's weird. When I was working there, you didn't hear people say, "Hey, that was Indians or smudging, what the hell they are doing? They're infringing on a race." No, no, that's cool. It was all good, right? It was all good because it was also seen as a way to stabilize the institution. Now we're working with the medicine's healing. Everybody's on the same trajectory. They all want to get out of supporting this? They all want to get out having these ceremonies. But our educational institutions are not that far. I don't quite understand it. ... But we know today that the prison systems are now the new Indian Residential Schools.

An important element of the journey of Elders and Knowledge Keepers in this study were those challenges that were experienced as they attempted to affect the climates and cultures of their respective areas of work. As all of this study's participants were associated with public institutions, such as universities or colleges, or those intended to support Indigenous people, reference to those contexts pointed to a difficulty of integrating Indigenous knowledge and approaches to well-being into non-Indigenous institutional frames. The challenge that has been met by participants of this study is that of supporting Indigenous community members to engage in the journey toward moral truth through Indigenous approaches to well-being.

## **Practical Values**

All participants expressed ways in which Indigenous morality has been translated into practical values. For example, one participant observed that while truth is unchanging, one can choose to be honest about it or not:

I went back to the old science in elementary school and learning what's a solid, liquid and a gas kind of thing. And I equated truth is as a solid. It



doesn't change. You know, truth is something that doesn't change. It's there. Like, the truth is that that's a chair or desk, that kind of thing. And honesty is my behaviour in relationship to that truth. You know, man, am I going to be like this? And the Elders taught me that that's the one I have a choice about, is my honesty. I have no choice about the truth. I can't change it. Whatever it is, it's going to stay the same. That's what it is. But I do have a choice on how I might look at it. I think that's how the Elders taught us that you have a choice about it. You can either be honest or you can not be.

He continued: "And it's the same with kindness. The same teaching comes with kindness. You have a choice in that. They said, it can either be kind or it cannot be kind. It's a choice." Another participant pointed out that virtues such as humility and honesty are acquired – learned through experience. This understanding seems to resonate with another participant who, having struggled with alcohol addictions before, now chooses to exercise responsibility by being honest with himself:

Every time I drive by a liquor store or a wine rack at the grocery store, I give praise to Creator and I've not drawn as a magnet to it any more just this responsibility that I'm just one drink away from losing it all, you know. It's a lifetime because vision is an, a vision quest. It never stops. It's a lifetime. I just know I'm addicted. I don't drink anymore. And they appreciate that. Even when I'm giving a talk somewhere, telling stories, I tell them I'm 31 years sober, and the whole crowd seems to give me to the applause. There's always after when the performance is over, somebody or a couple of people have come up to me and congratulated me because someone close to them is addicted. Thank you for that story. There's hope. They said, "Hey, there's hope." So giving them hope is my responsibility through my honesty, my truth. That's powerful truth.

Participants also commented on the practical implications of Indigenous values to their relationship with students:



When students come to me one on one and they have trauma, then I'm only assisting them to see their way through the trauma. The premises that guide our discussions are the seven grandfather teachings. It's always the seven grandfather teachings. And maybe I should talk about seven grandfather teachings as a unit, as a bundle, teaching more. I tried to facilitate in our circles the respect, the unconditional love. But maybe I should break it down more and talk about what is love? What do I mean, what do we mean when we say love? For me, it's understanding of unconditional love and acceptance. What do I mean when I say courage? Courage is to walk through life, not falter. Courage is to walk through that crucible and get damn good and hot and learn the spiritual lessons that you're going to learn by doing that, I can choose a fire in the building. You can feel about yourself when you've completed that journey through the fire because you're going to be different. Through fire you're going to be different at the other end of that. And that's courage.

Sharing such values seems to also be an important component of participants relationships with students and with their descendants:

I think I'm facilitating. I hope that's what I'm doing. And I say to the students, you know, general principle: It's very difficult. You earn the right to be here, but you're going to become fire walkers and I'm going to walk beside you. I'm a good fire walker. And I can help you out, so that your inner world does not become disconnected from your outer world performance as a student. That at the end of your journey through fire that you have gained some insights, you have adapted some skills and that your inner world will remain intact because I see in my experience all kinds of people who have transcended. And my goal is to take it out of the performative, out the perfectionistic of performative to the authentic. That's what I shoot for.

And as another participant observed:



I just feel it is part of my role, just part of my life and to ensure that I teach my children and grandchildren and anybody else that's that I encounter, that that's the way I am. And I teach my children and grandchildren that and in any of my teachings for the workshops I've done and in my sharing, of course I share that same message, I hope. And that is part of responsibility. Yeah, I guess it would be as part of a human, a part of as a mother and grandmother and whatever, and teacher... that it is part of my responsibility to pass that on as a human being, to ensure that we live to the utmost, to the highest of our intentions. So it's for the betterment of whoever is around us.

What became clear over the course of this study was the notion that Indigenous conceptions of morality – for instance those that are reflected in the Seven Sacred Teachings – can be important for helping Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in their journeys to a better life. The responsibility taken on by participants in this study – Elders and Knowledge Keepers – was to situate Indigenous ways of knowing and being in established, non-Indigenous institutional environment for the sake of all who wished to learn.

The findings of this study emerged from the stories of Indigenous Elder's and Knowledge Keepers. An important aspect of data collection in a study of this sort is the manner through which these stories were received and how each were aggregated into a coherent set of themes as reflected above. The reconciliatory approach described earlier in this section reflected an important aspect in this study's methodology, that is, honouring of the histories and contributions of Indigenous peoples to support all peoples' developing understanding of the Indigenous experience. Because of the nature of the target population, it is important to be mindful of how responses tend to be offered from Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers to questions in a social sciences study such as this – through story. Many social sciences researchers may expect direct, incisive responses to questions of the sort one associates with studies on perspective such as this, but that is not usually the orientation for Indigenous Elders and Knowledge



Keepers who are more apt to tell a story. The responsibility for researchers in studies such as this is to engage with participants in a respectful way and receive these stories and the teachings that may be resident in them in an appreciative manner. Further, the task for researchers with such narrative data is to receive and interpret them in culturally appropriate ways. This can involve accommodating for the manner through which data is received (e.g., through Zoom interviews), being mindful for how discussion in a non-Indigenous languages may cheat meaning in these stories, and adhering to any protocols that may be necessary for particular participants.

## **Discussion**

What the findings of this study may highlight for many is the notion that *Indigenous perspectives* – manifestations of Indigenous knowledge, heritage, consciousness, and tradition that emerge from experience, blood memory, and personal/communal values – are what frame many of the ideas that are resident in the stories of Elders and Knowledge Keepers. The need for inclusion of Indigenous perspectives is the need that is reflected at the outset of this article, where the goals of universities and colleges were cited. In order to minister to the needs of reconciliation, Indigenous perspectives are necessary. When those needs are related to cultural knowledge, ceremony, and spirituality, the Indigenous perspectives of Elders and Knowledge Keepers are especially necessary. What the results of this study support is the notion that moral orientations are central features in the stories of Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers and the inference that may be made is that they can have important benefits to universities and colleges that hope to support Indigenous members of their communities as well as the journey toward reconciliation. The stories told by Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers in this study may be understood as contributing to community consciousness in ways that Battiste and Henderson (2000), Deloria (1999), and others have affirmed; that they are constituent elements of a people's knowledge systems. To come to understand the knowledge systems of First Nations, Inuit, and



Métis peoples, we must listen to their stories and appropriately apprehend them to the best of our abilities.

This study revealed that one of the essential elements of the knowledge systems of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples is that of morality. A ubiquitous feature of all peoples' journeys in life and their pursuit of truth, meaning, and social connections, morality is frequently linked with religious and/or spiritual orientations. As many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples venture to affirm and embrace their traditional roots and identities, their focus upon traditional knowledge systems in which belief and morality are resident have become more focused. In recent years, universities and other institutions of higher education have begun to reflect such knowledge systems – with specific regard for morality – in institutional endeavour. This study yielded discussion on how Indigenous conceptions of morality may be resident in the life experiences of Indigenous peoples and in broader communal consciousness.

In analyzing acquired data – the central ideas amongst participants' stories – the main emergent themes community work, different dimensions of thinking, influence of non-Indigenous values, challenges, practical values, and self-discovery were clear in the final analysis. There was, however, a prevailing and recurrent feature of the moral frames of participants that was recurrent – that of *responsibility*. Marked by commitments to family, community, tradition, and collective values, Elders and Knowledge Keepers in this study articulated obligations and duties in community contexts as well as in institutional contexts such as those of universities. In most of these contexts, there were at once commitments to both represent their respective communities and to lend to the maintenance and sustainability of their knowledge systems. With moral dimensions such as responsibility clearly resident within the stories of participants, the knowledge systems that informed their perspectives might be best understood through the lens of moral responsibility. Committed service to others through community and professional work in which their knowledge is brought to bear and their stories are respectfully employed for the purposes of institutional





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betterment is what appears to be foundational in the progressive changes of the Canadian academy.

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