

Sacred Fire Gatherings and Indigenous Men's Wellness

Kim Anderson^{1a}, Robert Alexander Innes^{2b}, Cara Wehkamp^{1c}, Rob Baldwin^{1d}¹ University of Guelph, ² McMaster University

Keywords: Indigenous men's health, Indigenous masculinities, gender and Indigeneity, urban Indigenous men, land based practices

<https://doi.org/10.54760/001c.151830>

Journal of Global Indigeneity

Vol. 9, Issue 3, 2025

Relatively little attention has been paid to Indigenous men's health and wellbeing in the urban landscape and even less attention has been given to urban experiential land-based health and wellbeing activities for Indigenous men as they connect to masculinities. This paper is built out of findings from an experiential land-based research project that the authors developed to address needs pertaining to Indigenous masculinities and men's wellbeing in Ontario, Canada. In collaboration with knowledge keepers and adhering to Anishinaabe, Nehiyaw, and Haudenosaunee cultural protocols, the authors organized bi-weekly sacred fire gatherings to bring men together in community. Once a month the participants received "teachings" about the fire, Indigenous masculinities, and Indigenous men's wellbeing from Indigenous traditional knowledge carriers. The research team conducted semi-structured interviews with seven participants, with the facilitator and with the four knowledge carriers. One of the participants was a transgender man, and the rest were cisgender men. The themes that emerged from the interviews reveal the sacred fire as the heart of the health practice and possibilities the research team set out to explore. The sacred fires were literally and physically at the centre of the gatherings, and act as the central organizing theme of the results presented. From the experiences of the participants, the sacred fire is an example of way to create a space and an activity for men to gather a place to talk about Indigenous masculinities and wellness for Indigenous men in the urban setting.

1. INTRODUCTION

Good health, as defined by many Indigenous peoples, is deeply connected to relationships with the land. As Johnson-Jennings, Billiot, and Walters (2020) have observed "Indigenous individuals consider the land as co-contributing to their meaning of place and influencing their healing journey" (4). Land-

a Kim Anderson (she/her) is a Métis writer and scholar, based at the University of Guelph where she holds a Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Relationality and Storied Practice.

b Robert Alexander Innes (he/him) is a Plains Cree, Saulteaux, and Métis citizen of Cowessess First Nation, located in Treaty 4 territory. He is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Indigenous Studies Department at McMaster University.

c Cara Wehkamp (Algonquin Anishinàbe) is the Assistant Vice-President (Indigenous Initiatives) at the University of Guelph.

d Rob Baldwin, MSW is of mixed ancestry from Sault Ste Marie, Ontario. He is a retired Counsellor/Therapist from the University of Guelph.

based experiences and environments have thus been identified as significant components of Indigenous healing and wellbeing initiatives (Danto et al., 2020; Dobson & Brazzoni, 2016; Johnson-Jennings et al., 2020; J. M. Redvers, 2020; N. Redvers et al., 2021), but relatively little has been written about programs that deploy land based, experiential activities to help guide Indigenous men towards health and wellness. This paper examines the outcomes of a research project that explored the question “How can land based sacred spaces enhance Indigenous men’s wellness?” The authors formed a team that developed bi-weekly sacred fire gatherings for men¹ in Guelph, Ontario, and then interviewed them about their experiences. Our findings indicated that sacred fire gatherings in urban land-based settings can contribute to Indigenous men’s wellness by creating land-based spaces for community building, learning about Indigenous cultures, and healing.

Our exploration of Indigenous men’s wellness is grounded in the scholarship exploring issues facing Indigenous men as a result of colonization (Hokowhitu, 2003, 2012, 2015; Innes & Anderson, 2015; Lee, 2013; McKegney, 2014, 2021; Mucina, 2019; Tegan 2008). This body of work demonstrates that Indigenous men suffer a particular kind of colonial violence that is directly related to an intense process of cultural genocide which in North America happened through federal governments’ formal assimilation policies, including removal from their lands and the dismantling of extended family systems, languages and cultures through residential schools, where many were horrifically abused (McKegney, 2013; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). The trauma from these policies disrupted how boys and men learned to act in a responsible and kind way with all their relations (Innes, 2015; McKegney, 2012) and the assimilation process meant, among other things, that Indigenous ideals of the multiple ways masculinity could be expressed were replaced to conform to a singular, toxic masculinity that upholds white supremacist heteronormative patriarchy (Innes & Anderson, 2015). As a result, the caring and loving kinship circle and relations between generations of Indigenous men has been negatively impacted by this process, as has their overall health and wellbeing (Innes & Anderson, 2015). Social determinants of health for Indigenous men, including poverty and dispossession from their lands, have further resulted in Indigenous men having the lowest rates of life expectancy and education attainment, while their suicide, murder, and incarceration rates are the highest (Ball, 2009; Brzozowski et al., 2006; Cotter, 2014; Dauvergne, 2012; Innes, 2015; Lockwood & Williamson, 2022; Nichols, 2014; Owusu-Bempah et al., 2014).

¹ Our project recruitment invited “men and male identified individuals” and resulted in participation from cisgender and transgender men. Feedback from editors of this journal have indicated that the term “men” is the best term to use in the article, as it includes cisgender, queer and transgender men.

Recovering and finding wellness amidst ongoing colonial trauma has been slow for Indigenous men, partly due to that fact that very little health and wellness programming exists for them. The programming that does exist is targeted for incarcerated populations, anti-violence against women programs, and, to a lesser extent, programs for Indigenous fathers (Ball, 2009, 2010; Bender, 2005; Goodwill, 2016; Goodwill & Ishiyama, 2015; Kelley et al., 2020; Lefler, 2005; Neault et al., 2012; Piche, 2015; White et al., 2006). Scholars have examined the ways colonization has negatively impacted Indigenous men's health and wellbeing. For example, some have investigated the state sanctioned violence inflicted upon Indigenous men through their involvement in gangs (Comack et al., 2013; Dziewansk & Henry, 2023; Henry, 2015, 2019; Skye, 2015), their interactions with policing (Cunneen & Tauri, 2018; Green, 2006), and while in custody (Comack, 2019; Nichols, 2014; Razack, 2014, 2015). Unfortunately, very little attention has been paid to Indigenous men as victims of violence (Ellington et al., 2015; Innes, 2015; Rizkalla et al., 2021).

There has been some recent focus on Indigenous men and access to health services, mostly out of Australia and New Zealand and with a focus on primary or clinical care (Canuto et al., 2018; Hamley & Le Grice, 2021; Merlino et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2020; Waddell et al., 2021). These studies show that, due to the impacts of colonization, Indigenous men access health services at a much lower rate than Indigenous women and non-Indigenous people because of "assumed and experienced discrimination demonstrated by an unwelcoming environment, stereotyping and stigma, and practice informed by racism" (N. Redvers et al., 2021). As a result, according to Canuto, et al. (2018) "Indigenous men report feeling shame or that it is inappropriateness to discuss health issues, especially for issues such as sexual health and mental health, with a female health professional (9)."

In Canada, scholars have begun to explore how creating spaces for Indigenous men to gather can enhance their health and wellbeing. Efimoff et al. (2021) and Gross et al. (2023) have written about the DUDES (Downtown Urban Knights Defending Equality and Solidarity) club, initially a support group for Indigenous men in the downtown east side of Vancouver and now a program for men's health and well-being with over 40 sites throughout the province of British Columbia. The gatherings hosted by the DUDES club involve discussions with health care practitioners and Elders, alongside cultural activities and shared meals, all of which have contributed to a sense of brotherhood and community among participants. With a focus on Canada's north, Jennifer Redvers (2020) has demonstrated that "the land is a healer", and Redvers, Nadeau, and Prince (2021) have documented the effectiveness of urban land-based healing for homeless Indigenous men in the city of Yellowknife, NWT. Indigenous men in focus groups across Canada told

Anderson and colleagues (2015) that they wanted more spaces to engage in dialogue and strengthen their overall well-being with connections to culture, land and ceremony.

Given the gaps in programming and research for Indigenous men's health and wellness, the authors decided to create an urban land-based experiential activity and safe space to discuss issues faced by men. The first and second author on this paper (Anderson and Innes), scholars of Indigenous masculinities, approached the third and fourth authors on this paper (Baldwin and Wehkamp), to inquire about program possibilities for Indigenous men who were students on the campus of the University of Guelph as this was an environment where we could build on longstanding relationships and shared interests. At the time, Baldwin was a counsellor with seventeen years of experience serving students at the University of Guelph and Wehkamp was the manager of the Indigenous Student Centre; both brought perspectives on how we might better serve Indigenous men who were students. Our aim was to foster intergenerational connections and build culture-based knowledge by bringing together younger men with older teachers in the community.

When approached with the question "What kind of land-based programming might we pilot for men?" Baldwin responded "sacred fire gatherings." We knew that Nehiyaw, Anishinaabe, and Haudenosaunee have cultural protocols the men take care of the fire and so we invited men and male identified individuals² to attend bi-weekly sacred fire gatherings that would include monthly visits with local Indigenous knowledge keepers. McLeary (2023) has written about our project from a participant perspective. This paper documents interviews we did with participants and knowledge keepers about their experiences with the program.

2. METHODS

After clearing ethics at the University of Guelph, Baldwin set up the bi-weekly gatherings of fires for men, and contracted Indigenous traditional knowledge carriers to come in once a month and offer "teachings" about the fire, and in general about Indigenous men's masculinities and wellbeing. These fires began in the fall of 2018 and the gatherings continued on independently after we had completed the research.

To recruit participants, the team initially sent out invitations for sacred fire gatherings to post-secondary students through Indigenous student coordinators at the three universities in the region. Unfortunately, we did not get the kind of response we had hoped for from Indigenous students and therefore opened the call to men from the community at large. In the end,

2 This was the language we used in our recruitment. See footnote 1 for our use of the term "men" in this paper.

the makeup of the participants at the fires included a mixture of students, community members and knowledge keepers, ranging from early 20s to men in their 70s. Up to ten men participated overall, and gatherings typically consisted of five to six individuals. One of the participants was a transgender man, while the rest were cisgender men. The fires involved sharing in a circle and teachings from the knowledge carriers, who spoke about the nature of the sacred fire itself and how it might connect to Indigenous masculinities, identities, and men's health.

Participants were informed from the outset that the fires were part of a research project but attendance did not require them to engage in the semi-structured interviews that we had planned for data collection. Seven participants and four of the visiting knowledge carriers took up the invitation to do interviews. One participant sent in notes in response to our questions and we coded these notes as data.

The interviews with participants focused on their experience of the program. We asked them about how they got involved with the project, what their experience had been in terms of wellness, and what suggestions they might have for other such gatherings for men. We collected further data from knowledge carriers through recordings of their talks and in follow up interviews that focused on any other teachings they wished to offer. We transcribed all the material and each of the authors went through the transcripts on their own, taking handwritten notes to identify preliminary patterns and preliminary themes. We then met as a team to discuss our observations, and then the first author coded the data in NVivo using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). After this coding was done, the first author checked back with the rest of the team to refine the themes and sub-themes.

3. FINDINGS

Our thematic coding revealed that the sacred fire—described as a living, spiritual entity with its own agency—was at the heart of the health practice and possibilities we set out to explore. Sacred fires were literally and physically at the centre of the gatherings, and thus sacred fire is the central organizing theme of the results presented here. We begin with themes that knowledge carriers (KC) shared with us about sacred fires, which provides context to the themes that came out of participant (P) interviews about their experiences. In the interest of anonymity, we have assigned pseudonyms to knowledge keepers and participants alike.

3.1 TENDING THE FIRE: THEMES FROM KNOWLEDGE CARRIERS

3.1.1. FIRE AS LIVING SPIRIT

The knowledge carriers emphasized that the sacred fire is a living spirit that has its own agency and can facilitate connection with other spirit beings, including ancestral relations. Two of the knowledge carriers told participants that when we light a sacred fire, our ancestors do the same “on the other side.” Three of the knowledge carriers shared that fire is a spirit that lives inside all of us, acting as a life force. Joseph talked about the significance of connecting with “the fire inside,” with these words that were addressed to the young men in particular:

...it's a matter of carrying yourself in a way that you're carrying with respect and dignity and honour. And that's this fire. It needs to be fed. You feed it, that fire inside you. And that's feeding your spirit.

Joseph's address to the young men went on to connect personal health and wellness with the capacity to care for family and community, emphasizing that the sacred fire offered a foundation to support these connections and as discussed in section 3.1.2.

The knowledge carriers shared that sacred fire can be part of particular ceremonies, such as Sundance or sweat lodge, or at gatherings like pow wows or conferences. Their stories demonstrated that sacred fires are called for when spirit work is needed. Some of the knowledge carriers talked about being called upon to do firekeeping following a death; and some shared that they had taken up firekeeping because of community need for fires of this kind. As Tom stated,

“One of the reasons the men brought back the ceremonies was that we were wondering what was going on in the communities. We were trying to bring the fire back because there were these untimely...violent deaths.”

As a spirit that lives in and supports all of creation, fire has the capacity to build community, and, in the case of our program, community among men. Joseph explained that bringing a circle of participants together around a sacred fire facilitates a connection to Creator that in turn, fosters other connections:

Once that medicine has been lit and that fire has been lit, it's a sacred space, ceremony.... Whenever there is somebody talking and you're listening, that person is talking directly to Creator. That's a conversation that they're having to Creator. And everybody that is sitting in that circle, or witnesses what is being said.

The sacred fire thus facilitated healing through connection to spirit/Creator, and through the community developed by sharing in the circle.

2. Responsibilities of Firekeepers

Much of what the knowledge carriers shared about firekeeping had to do with taking up responsibility to human as well as ancestral spirit relations. As Wil noted “It’s not a singular thing when we start that fire together. We’re starting that fire for our families, our communities, even our nation.” He explained how this is connected to place; that one must acknowledge the ancestral territory, stating “I need to make sure that my teachings are respectful to the land that I’m on and where I’m at.”

A number of the knowledge carriers spoke about how firekeeping falls within men’s responsibilities to care for kin, as expressed in this statement that Joseph directed toward the younger men:

That fire teaches you your roles and responsibilities as men. Because this sacred fire has tobacco in it, would we just get up and walk away from it? No, because we know how important it is. We know that it is a sacred fire.... It’s a responsibility, you built it, you take care of it. You love it, you honour it, and you respect it. You feed it, you provide for it. You protect it with your life. That’s what you do with your families.

Tom talked about how, through the trauma of colonization and the violence that has ensued, men began to misuse their power. He referred to instances of unchecked ego, rage and violence, noting that such behaviour does not fall within the “essence of spirit” that the sacred fire represents. He stated “We had the power to start the fire... but we forgot why we were doing it. We’re given that power, so that we could take care of our family.”

The scope of kinship responsibilities included care for community, which came through in the knowledge carriers’ stories of being asked to hold sacred fires. Wil talked about being called to do a fire at a former residential school, where survivors had gathered in advance of the school closing for a period. The fire and firekeeper were critical in terms of providing solace to survivors, families and ancestors:

We had two healers who sat at the fire with us to deal with people’s grief and stuff like that. Lots of questions and lots of tears. We were asked several times to go in and smudge the whole building to clear the air and allow for any spirit that was there and give spirit that was their permission to leave, to go home.

Wil and other knowledge carriers talked about the honour they felt being called to such responsibility. As Wil noted, “That’s that spirit of the fire, you know, taking you places.”

The practice of firekeeping encouraged the men to be healthy. The firekeepers talked about the need to personally prepare to hold a fire, through prayer and tobacco offerings. Self-care was critical, as “a lot comes to us, [is] working through us” [Wil]. Firekeeping encouraged the men to be free from addictions; Wil explained that a firekeeper who has addictions or other health concerns can hurt people, as “that fire can project that to people.” Talking about his years troubled by addictions, Tom stated “This is honestly what helped me stay alive.”

Care must also be taken to protect the fire, ensuring that only certain sacred medicines go into the fire, and Wil shared a story about how this responsibility can be daunting:

I’ve had teachings from a couple of Elders that in my early times as a fire keeper, [that made for] a lot of pressure! [laughter among the participants]. They say to me, “if this fire goes out for any reason, that means that this powwow is over.” And I’m going, oh! Really? [laughter] So, you know, you could be outside and it starts raining. So, you’re responsible for that fire under the pretense that this powwow could potentially be over. And some of them are two days, that fire starts in the morning of the first day and it ends the evening of the last day of the powwow.

The stories of firekeeping responsibility were linked to healing for those in attendance, but also in providing firekeepers with opportunities for purpose and identity building through community engaged service.

3.2. PARTICIPANTS’ EXPERIENCE OF THE SACRED FIRE

This section will focus on themes that highlighted the participants’ experience of the fire. Community building was a central theme, in terms of how the fires themselves drew the participants together; how the fire fostered collaboration; and what the fires facilitated in terms of teaching and learning.

3.2.1. SACRED FIRE AS A COMMUNITY BUILDER

Having a space where men can engage in learning traditional skills (eg. bow building, firekeeping, drum making, or agriculture) can be beneficial as it provides a common goal for gathering. Once this common goal can be established, elders and knowledge keepers can facilitate implicit teaching and knowledge transmission that is vital to the decentering of toxic-

masculine tendencies. It is in these spaces that the “truth” work about our collective healing as men can take place and where the healing path forward can begin to take shape. Don (participant)

As noted in the introduction, and in the experience of one of the authors (Baldwin), it can be difficult to create therapeutic men's groups. The fire in our project was very helpful in creating a gathering space for men; six of the eight participants stated that the fire itself was a significant draw in terms of their participation. Two talked about how the fire offered a place of connection and belonging. As Sol noted, “It's like coming home; it's like being home. This is like where I belong, building the fire and caring for the fire.” James talked about the fire as a home space where he could feel “the most authentic to myself as a human being.”

Gathering at a sacred fire outdoors offered different possibilities than men's groups in an indoor setting. Bobby pointed out that the fire was a key element in his participation in the program as it “allows us to be on the land and everything.” When asked what drew him to the fire gatherings, Vince noted:

I was already [part of] a men's sharing circle. And that was valuable and is still valuable, but it served a different purpose. I knew that I had been called to fire, but I felt I was too old to become a fire keeper's helper and go off to different places to learn the skills. And then suddenly there was an opportunity that seemed to be a very good fit. So the fire was a key element.

Two other participants indicated that they were drawn to the project by the possibility of learning firekeeping skills that they could apply when called upon by community.

One participant talked about how the sacred fires worked well as a gathering mechanism, stressing that the intentionality and spirit of the fire offered possibilities for improving mental health:

I have other healthy male relationships, but we don't often sit around the fire and talk, you know. It's really rare. On a fishing trip or canoe trip you kind of do that but it's never intentional. So, having it as intentional is really, really good. (Ken).

Having a skilled facilitator who set up a structure to the evenings contributed to the intentionality of the gatherings. As Ken put it “we're not just hanging around the fire; ... there was the facilitation of the circle discussions, the introductions, all that kind of stuff. It's significant because it brings everybody in.” Ken noted that the fire itself acted as health facilitator, stating, “there is something calming about the fire... just sitting and watching and listening to the environment and escaping all that for mental wellness.”

A few of the participants commented on the location of the fires in terms of purpose and community building. The program made use of two fire sites: one in a park in the city, and one on sacred land owned by the Jesuits on the outskirts of the city. Sol commented on the value of gathering at the space that the urban Indigenous community had built “because our presence can do a lot to strengthen that place, showing respect for the fire and for the standing ones [trees] who protect that space.” He added “that reinforces for [the city] that this is not a token something and that we are actually using it.” Considering what the city fires did for awareness among the urban population, as well as how fires outside the city were also important, Vince commented:

I think that we need to acknowledge that there are some things that are best done more quietly, out of the public eye. But at the same time it is important to say we are here and we will be here and get used to us having a presence. So some of it is a political statement. Even though the fire may not be political, I think the actions end up having a political resonance. When I talked to [city councillor], he's very aware that that is an important aspect to show our presence and for the city, right? [But] I think there are things that you can say and do, or things that you'd rather not say and do when anyone could be passing by.

The men's presence thus strengthened relations with the other than human relations in the middle of the city, as well as with Indigenous and non-Indigenous city dwellers, but fires outside of the city offer the privacy needed for particular kinds of healing work.

Collaboration between participants came through as a significant theme in community building. One of the participants talked about how they felt included as a transgender man, in great part due to the facilitator, but also because of the culture of collaborative work that fire building and tending encouraged. A number of the participants talked enthusiastically about the value of building the fires together. Kyle spoke about how he felt valued, despite his level of skill in tasks like chopping wood or preparing the fire in a traditional manner. He stated:

I don't think I can over accentuate the value of feeling a sense of true community that I have experienced with the fire circle as a person who lives alone, works alone, or has very one on one experiences in life and has for most of my life. Even to be in a smaller group, but to share tasks, to bring together a sacred fire that may or may not include a sharing of food has nourished me and I believe offered me a profound sense of healing of a very old wound of feeling separated and somewhat alienated.

Reflecting on an example from the gatherings, Sol talked about the collaborative work he witnessed when the fire wasn't starting for the facilitator. He noted that the facilitator passed the flint and steel onto one of the participants, and how this fostered the community building:

That's one of the things that I really do like about starting the fire with flint and striker. I find that it brings the men together. We have to work together... One guy is striking the fire, one guy is standing there with the fan ready to go and the other guy is holding the umbrella. And then, while if it doesn't work too good, if it's not working for you then we pass it on. And I think, there were six or eight of us there the other night, and everybody had a turn at something, including the guy who, two weeks before that, had been afraid to participate.

For Sol, this offered the lesson to participants that "you don't have to be perfect, you don't have to be successful in terms of lighting the fire, you take your turn and if the fire starts then it's like the fire decided to come."

Calling in the fire spirit was also seen as a collective act, as Sol noted: "Together, we're calling in the fire spirit. And we're opening ourselves to that fire to come, when the fire decides to come." The notion of the fire as a spirit at the centre of the men's practice was thus significant in creating community. As Kyle stated:

It felt like a spiritual practice for me to wish for the fire spirit to come, to express gratitude for the opportunity for the land that we were occupying to have this fire, and for each other's presence. It also felt quite spiritual to me. Just making it. And then, when we were in the circle and there was a fire in the middle of us, I felt like that was a unique opportunity to look into the fire. What was spiritual as well was, I felt I could put my attention to the fire and send well wishes to the other members in the circle through that and show gratitude for my life and being there and when available, putting in tobacco [as] a way to show gratitude and offer a prayer.

Kyle thus experienced the fire as a connector between him and the spirit world, but also between him and the other participants. During his interview, he referred to the benefits of the last fire he had attended, stating "That fire wasn't even that long ago, and while it was deeply healing and meaningful, in this moment I could say with the challenges I'm facing, I would drop a lot of things to put myself around a sacred fire, if there was one, you bet!"

3.2.2. SACRED FIRE AS A VENUE FOR SHARING & KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

With their central position in the project, the fires facilitated sharing in direct and indirect ways. Through their talks/teachings at the fires, the knowledge carriers imparted direct knowledge about sacred fires, firekeeping and Indigenous masculinities. The participants expressed gratitude for this knowledge, starting with the skills they learned in how to prepare, light and care for sacred fires. Several of the participants called for more such applied knowledge. As Don said:

In our future Fire gatherings, I would love to have more teachings around the process Firekeepers go through as they prepare to be in ceremony with the Fire. Do they pray? Do they put down Asemma? Do they fast? All of these questions are important. We now have the basics of how to start and look after the Fire, now let's dig a little deeper into the transformative process that can take place with the Fire.

Kyle talked about wanting to learn more about how to care for fires for particular purposes, like wakes or various types of ceremonies.

The participants also appreciated the fire and firekeeper teachings that were more contemplative in nature. Don talked about the benefits of these teachings, which included fostering an environment for co-learning and healing:

Knowledge carriers like Ron provided a great deal of teachings about the Fire, but also provided many teachings about relationship and interaction with each other as Firekeepers. Understanding our responsibility to the Fire and each other was a great foundational way to develop a safe space for many of our circles that followed.

A few of the participants affirmed that the fires offered valuable and often more informal opportunities for talking about identities, men's experiences and Indigenous masculinities that were not offered elsewhere. Bobby noted that there were few programs specific to Indigenous men at the universities or elsewhere. In terms of considering his identity as an Indigenous man, he stated:

[I] go to soup lunch at my university and hear about this or that going on. But in terms of my Indigenous involvement a lot of it has been through the fire circle. So I would say that any development that I've had in that area, any kind of knowledge or more comfort with my identity as an Indigenous person would have come primarily from the fire circle.

Kyle talked about how the fire circles allowed him to gain knowledge on “Indigenous philosophy, culture and spirituality,” stating “for example, at our last gathering, [there was] discussion around song carriers, [and] I just found myself in awe...”

Some of the informal learning came through the talking and visiting that the fire facilitated. Reflecting on how much he had learned at the fire circles, Don noted “I have found the community of sharing and learning to be the most significant aspect of these gatherings.” Comparing the sacred fire gatherings to another Indigenous men's sharing circle that he participated in previously, Vince said “the fire became the focal point and that narrowed what we wanted to share I think. So we probably didn't go as broadly with the fire circle, but in a way it was more intense.”

Finally, a number of the participants talked about the intergenerational knowledge sharing that took place. Vince noted “I've really enjoyed seeing the young men and being a part of that and hearing their experiences and to realize that I was able to offer something to that circle. So that was pretty special to be in a mix like that.” Sol stated:

It feels like we're here as equals, and we share from different places in life. The Elders have things to share, and the young people have things to share... I guess when you're twenty the world looks different than when you're seventy. There is something about that excitement of being twenty years old, with a lot of excitement about life and possibilities. I appreciate being with someone like that, and I appreciate sharing from the other end of the road, when I feel like there aren't as many possibilities anymore. To feel that from those guys and for them to be able to appreciate some of the thoughts from some old guy, it's kind of nice.

Bobby noted the value that “there's people who are young and curious and able to ask questions,” and Don noted “having Uncles present has helped me work through some of my relationship struggles. Kyle talked about his longing for male role models, pointing to the value of the collective offering “an opportunity to listen to other people and multiple sources.”

Whether the fire facilitated this kind of intergenerational knowledge sharing isn't clear. The older participants did talk, however, of the physical nature of the work involved in the fire, and how they felt supported when the young men stepped up to do the work. The fire and land-based nature of the gatherings, which inevitably require collaboration among people of varying capacities, thus possibly encouraged intergenerational community building and knowledge sharing.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our research project set out to address a gap in attention to the health and wellbeing of Indigenous men, as identified in previous work by two of the authors (Innes & Anderson, 2015). From our personal and research experience we knew that men were looking for spaces to gather, and that land-based spaces resonate with Indigenous men (Innes & Anderson, 2015). The sacred fires at the core of this project created such gathering spaces, and became a focal point for collaboration and relationship building between participants and with the Indigenous communities many of them serve. It is notable that our project took place in an urban setting; an environment where “land-based practices” might seem more difficult to access. We were able to host a meaningful space of engagement with the land, natural world and spirit world in the middle of the city; this is significant given that the majority of Indigenous peoples now live in urban settings (Stats Canada, 2023), and bodes well for the sustainability of such practices.

The participants talked about finding guidance and mentorship and began to think about how they could act in a more responsive and kinder way to each other and to other community members, expressing how they wanted to learn more to take up community responsibilities. On the whole, the project demonstrated what Indigenous men had previously told us, that the “general feeling [is] that creating men’s spaces was a good place to begin rebuilding relationships and responsibilities.” (Anderson et al., 2015, p. 302). Sam McKegney notes these kinds of masculine spaces could “be marshalled in the service of imagining and embodying Indigenous masculinities beyond heteropatriarchy – perhaps even against heteropatriarchy” (2021, p. 188).

It is interesting to consider the role of the fire itself in the work of decolonizing men, masculinities and heteropatriarchy. Oneida Elder Bob Antone (2015) has written about the use of Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee understandings of fire to counter toxic masculine behaviours. In the Indigenous healing centre where he worked, Antone and other teachers engaged “participants in activities that connected them to flint, fire, and the Grandfathers by teaching them how to make fire and construct bows; to do self-examination with genograms and lie lines; to expose and release anger; to establish personal ceremony to care for their manhood; to learn about women’s teachings; and to practice reaching out to other men” (2015, p. 32).

Our work reinforced that practical, hands-on and spirit centred practices were important components in the sense of wellbeing the participants describe, just as the physical work to make and care for the fires enabled critical relationship building. Sacred fires, understood to be living spirit, invite responsibility, purpose and an ethic of care that can facilitate healing and wellness. In addition, working with the sacred fire, imbued with cultural teachings and understandings, was a step towards strengthening these men’s cultural identity. This is similar to what Melinda Adams describes. In

analyzing student reflections of her experiential class in which she took students to ceremonial burns, Adams concludes that “ceremonial fire gatherings reveal themes of people’s connection to the land; reclamation of Indigenous identities; and positive physical, mental, and cultural experiences.” (Tom et al., 2023, p. 5).

Work to address heteropatriarchy can be further explored within these practices. We wanted to create space that refuted a static and categorical gender binary, while honouring teachings connected to men and masculinities. We took the position that, historically, in many Indigenous societies, roles/responsibilities were tied to their gender identity – but not completely cemented to them; the main responsibility of everyone was the survival of the people. We wanted to make space for learning that circumvented how communities often adopt the categorical colonial construct of the gender binary; to counter the imposition of heterosexuality and gendered violences on Indigenous peoples (Day, 2023). As Carlson, Kennedy and Farrell (2021) note, there is a need for “LGBTIQ+ people to seek safety within newly established systems of family and community” (422), and this may be another way to support processes of “coming-in” (Wilson, 2015). The acceptance of Trans, non-binary, and gender fluid people back into our circles challenges heteropatriarchy, inviting a process of “being in good relations, which necessarily requires the rejection of heterosexism, patriarchal dominance, capitalism, and anthropocentrism” (Pierce, 2022) and, in this setting, making more space for Queer Indigenous urbanism (Keovorabouth, 2022). We were pleased to find acceptance for this approach, as two spirit peoples can be challenged with the gendered norms in ceremonial contexts (Pyle, 2020).

The literature on Indigenous men and masculinities, and the data about health and challenges for these populations reminds us that we must continue to find ways to support and inspire Indigenous men to take up responsibilities to themselves and community. Decolonizing through responsibility can involve introducing traditional practices such as firekeeping, as the stories of our research participants has shown. A fuller understanding of the role of Indigenous sacred fires requires more experiential involvement with knowledge keepers; work that will hopefully be ongoing for participants out of the fires that we collectively started. We conclude by noting that all of the knowledge keepers were Anishinaabe, and thus their teachings come from that cultural foundation. We acknowledge that there are rich teachings and relationships with sacred fires among many other Indigenous peoples within Canada and beyond, and we hope to keep learning from similar work among other nations.

.....

Funding

The authors gratefully acknowledge that this research was funded with a grant from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research

Published: December 04, 2025 AEDT.



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-NC-ND-4.0). View this license's legal deed at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0> and legal code at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode> for more information.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, K., Innes, R. A., & Swift, J. (2015). "To arrive speaking": Voice from the bidwewidam Indigenous masculinities project. In R. A. Innes & K. Anderson (Eds.), *Indigenous men and masculinities: Legacies, identities, regeneration* (pp. 283–307). University of Manitoba Press.
- Antone, B. (2015). Reconstructing Indigenous masculine thought. In R. A. Innes & K. Anderson (Eds.), *Indigenous men and masculinities: Legacies, identities, regeneration* (pp. 21–37). University of Manitoba Press.
- Ball, J. (2009). Fathering in the shadows: Indigenous fathers and Canada's colonial legacies. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 624, 29–4. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716209334181>
- Ball, J. (2010). Indigenous fathers' involvement in reconstituting circles of care. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 45(1–2), 124–138. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-009-9293-1>
- Bender, M. (2005). Glimpses of local masculinities: Learning from interviews with Kiowa, Comanche, Apache and Chickasaw men. *Southern Anthropologist*, 31(1/2), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.56702/SAOL7955/santh3101/2>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. Sage.
- Brzozowski, J., Taylor-Butts, A., & Johnson, S. (2006). Victimization and offending among the Aboriginal population in Canada. *Juristat: Canadian Centre for Justice Studies. Statistics Canada – Catalogue No. 85-002-XIE*, 26(3), 1–23.
- Canuto, K., Brown, A., Wittert, G., & Harfield, S. (2018). Understanding the utilization of primary health care services by Indigenous men: A systematic review. *BMC Public Health*, 18(1198). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-018-6093-2>
- Carlson, B., Kennedy, T., & Farrell, A. (2021). Indigenous gender intersubjectivities: Political bodies. In M. Walters (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of Indigenous sociology*. Oxford University Press.
- Comack, E. (2019). Policing racialized spaces. In H. Dorries, R. Henry, T. McCreary, & J. Tomiak (Eds.), *Settler city limits: Indigenous resurgence and colonial violence in the urban prairie west*. University of Manitoba Press.
- Comack, E., Deane, L., Morrisette, L., & Silver, J. (2013). *Indians wear red: Colonialism, resistance, and Aboriginal street gangs*. Fernwood Publishing.
- Cotter, A. (2014). *Homicide in Canada, 2013*. Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics. Statistics Canada.
- Cunneen, C., & Tauri, J. (2018). Violence and Indigenous communities. In W. S. DeKeseredy, C. M. Rennison, & A. K. Hall-Sanchez (Eds.), *The Routledge international handbook of violence studies*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315270265-33>
- Danto, D., Walsh, R., & Sommerfield, J. (2020). Learning from those who do: Land-based healing in a Mushkegowuk community. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 19, 2131–2143. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-020-00306-z>
- Dauvergne, M. (2012). *Adult correctional statistics in Canada, 2010/2011*. Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics.
- Day, M. (2023). The question, or who asks for evidence of queerness in Aboriginal culture? In B. Carlson, M. Day, & S. O'Sullivan (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of Australian Indigenous peoples and futures* (pp. 311–321). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003271802-24>

- Dobson, C., & Brazzoni, R. (2016). Land based healing: Carrier first nations' addiction recovery program. *Journal of Indigenous Wellbeing*, 1(2), 9–17.
- Dziewansk, D., & Henry, R. (2023). Comparative analysis of coloured gangs in Cape Town and Indigenous gangs on Canada's prairies: Connecting localized opposition to globalized grievances through street culture. *Critical Criminology*, 31, 239–258.
- Efimoff, I., Patrick, L., Josewski, V., Gross, P., Lambert, S., & Smye, V. (2021). The power of connections: How a novel Canadian men's wellness program is improving the health and well-being of Indigenous and non-Indigenous men. *International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 12(2), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.18584/iipj.2021.12.2.10896>
- Ellington, L., Brassard, R., & Montminy, L. (2015). Harriman diversity of roles played by Aboriginal men in domestic violence in Quebec. *International Journal of Men's Health*, 14(3), 287–300.
- Goodwill, A. (2016). A critical incident technique study of the facilitation of gang entry: Perspectives of Indigenous men ex-gang members. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 25(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926771.2015.1129658>
- Goodwill, A., & Ishiyama, F. I. (2015). Finding the door: Critical incidents facilitating gang exit among Indigenous men. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 22(3), 333–340.
- Green, J. (2006). From Stonechild to social cohesion: Anti-racist challenges for Saskatchewan. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 39(3), 507–527. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423906060215>
- Gross, P. A., Iloradanon, H., Efimoff, I. A., Josewski, V., Cohn, F., Lambert, S., Everstz, T., & Oliffe, J. (2023). "Where are our men?": How the DUDES Club has supported Indigenous men in British Columbia, Canada to seek a path of healing and wellness. In J. A. Smith, D. C. Watkins, & D. M. Griffith (Eds.), *Health Promotion with Adolescent Boys and Young Men of Colour* (pp. 91–104). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-22174-3_6
- Hamley, L., & Le Grice, J. (2021). He kakano ahau – identity, indigeneity and wellbeing for young Maori (Indigenous) men in Aotearoa/New Zealand. *Feminism & Psychology*, 31(1), 62–80. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353520973568>
- Henry, R. (2015). Social spaces of maleness: The role of gangs in practicing Indigenous masculinities. In R. A. Innes & K. Anderson (Eds.), *Indigenous men and masculinities: Legacies, identities, regeneration* (pp. 181–196). University of Manitoba Press.
- Henry, R. (2019). "I claim in the name of...": Indigenous street gangs and politics of recognition in prairie cities. In H. Dorries, R. Henry, T. McCreary, & J. Tomiak (Eds.), *Settler city limits: Indigenous resurgence and colonial violence in the urban prairie West*. University of Manitoba Press.
- Hokowhitu, B. (2003). Māori masculinity, post-structuralism, and the emerging self. *New Zealand Sociology*, 18(2), 179–201.
- Hokowhitu, B. (2012). Producing elite Indigenous masculinities. *Settler Colonial Studies*, 2(2), 23–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2012.10648840>
- Hokowhitu, B. (2015). Taxonomies of Indigeneity: Indigenous heterosexual patriarchal masculinities. In R. A. Innes & K. Anderson (Eds.), *Indigenous men and masculinities: Legacies, identities, regeneration* (pp. 80–95). University of Manitoba Press.
- Innes, R. A. (2015). Moose on the loose: Indigenous men, violence, and the colonial excuse. *Aboriginal Policy Studies*, 4(2), 46–56. <https://doi.org/10.5663/aps.v4i1.24193>
- Innes, R. A., & Anderson, K. (Eds.). (2015). *Indigenous men and masculinities: Legacies, identities, regeneration*. University of Manitoba Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780887554797>

- Johnson-Jennings, B., S., M., & Walters, K. (2020). Returning to our roots: Tribal health and wellness through land-based healing. *Genealogy*, 4(91), 1-2.1. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy4030091>
- Kelley, A., Small, C., & Charani, M. (2020). Responsible fatherhood program for Native men: A mixed-method evaluation of the good road of life training. *Journal of Family Strengths*, 20(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.58464/2168-670X.1426>
- Keovorabouth, S. T. (2022). The Queer Urban Indigenous City: Understanding the Impacts of the settler-colonial state on Urban Indigenous and Two- Spirit Identity. *Journal of Global Indigeneity*, 6(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.54760/001c.36062>
- Lee, L. (2013). *Dine masculinities: Conceptualizations and reflections*. Createspace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Lefler, L. J. (2005). “My boys act like midwives”: Changes across three generations of Indian father. *Southern Anthropologist*, 31(1/2), 18–34. <https://doi.org/10.56702/SAOL7955/santh3101/3>
- Lockwood, K., & Williamson, B. (2022). The shackles of masculinity: Indigenous men, settler colonialism, and the carceral Archipelago. In T. Bartlett & R. Ricciardellis (Eds.), *Prison masculinities: International perspectives and interpretations*. Routledge.
- McCleary, G. (2023). Coming to know Ishkode: Re-encountering Indigenous male wholistic wellness in Canada. In J. A. Smith, D. C. Watkins, & D. M. Griffith (Eds.), *Health Promotion with Adolescent Boys and Young Men of Colour* (pp. 105–117). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-22174-3_7
- McKegney, S. (2012). Warriors, healers, lovers, and leaders: Colonial impositions on Indigenous males roles and responsibilities. In J. A. Laker (Ed.), *Canadian perspectives on men and masculinities: An interdisciplinary reader*. Oxford University Press.
- McKegney, S. (2013). ‘Pain, pleasure, shame. shame’—Masculine embodiment, kinship, and Indigenous reterritorialization. *Canadian Literature*, 216, 12–33.
- McKegney, S. (Ed.). (2014). *Masculindians: Conversations about Indigenous manhood*. University of Manitoba Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780887554438>
- McKegney, S. (2021). *Carrying the burden of peace: Reimagining Indigenous masculinities through story*. University of Regina Press.
- Merlino, A., Smith, J. A., Adams, M., Bonson, J., Osborne, R., Judd, B., Drummond, M., Aanundsen, D., Fleay, J., & Christie, B. (2020). What do we know about the nexus between culture, age, gender, and health literacy? Implications for improving the health and well-being of young Indigenous males. *International Journal of Men's Social and Community Health*, 3(2), 46–57. <https://doi.org/10.22374/ijmsch.v3i2.34>
- Mucina, D. D. (2019). *Ubuntu relational love: Decolonizing black masculinities*. University of Manitoba Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780887555886>
- Neault, N., Mullany, B., Powers, J., Coho-Mescal, V., Parker, S., Walkup, J., & Barlow, A. (2012). Fatherhood roles and drug use among young American Indian men. *The American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse*, 38(5), 395–40. <https://doi.org/10.3109/00952990.2012.703735>
- Nichols, R. (2014). The colonialism of incarceration. *Radical Philosophy Review*, 17(2), 435–455. <https://doi.org/10.5840/radphilrev201491622>
- Owusu-Bempah, A., Kanters, S., Druyts, E., Toor, K., Muldoon, K. A., Farquhar, J. W., & Mills, E. J. (2014). Years of life lost to incarceration: Inequities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians. *BMC Public Health*, 14, 585. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-14-585>

- Piche, A. (2015). Imprisonment and Indigenous masculinities: Contesting hegemonic masculinity in a toxic environment. In R. A. Innes & K. Anderson (Eds.), *Indigenous men and masculinities: Legacies, identities, regeneration* (pp. 197–213). University of Manitoba Press.
- Pierce, J. M. (2022). In good relations: Native adoptions, kinstillations, and the grounding of memory. In T. Bradway & E. Freeman (Eds.), *Queer kinship, race, sex, belonging, form*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2vr9cnp.8>
- Pyle, K. (2020). Reclaiming traditional gender roles: A two-spirit critique. In S. Nickel & A. Fehr (Eds.), *In good relation: History, gender, and kinship in Indigenous feminisms* (pp. 109–122). University of Manitoba Press.
- Razack, S. (2014). 'It happened more than once': Freezing deaths in Saskatchewan. *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, 26(1), 51–80. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjwl.26.1.51>
- Razack, S. (2015). *Dying for improvements: Inquests and inquiries into Indigenous deaths in custody*. University of Toronto Press.
- Redvers, J. M. (2020). 'The land is a healer': Perspectives on land-based healing from Indigenous practitioners in northern Canada. *International Journal of Indigenous Health*, 15(1), 90–197. <https://doi.org/10.32799/ijih.v15i1.34046>
- Redvers, N., Nadeau, M., & Prince, D. (2021). Urban land-based healing: A northern intervention strategy. *International Journal of Indigenous Health*, 16(2), 323–337.
- Rizkalla, K., Maar, M., Reade, M., Pilon, R., & McGregor, L. (2021). Intimate partner violence against Indigenous men in heterosexual relationships: Toward a culturally safe response in primary health care settings. *International Journal of Indigenous Health*, 16(1), 261–274.
- Skye, S. (2015). A conversation with the crazy Indians. In R. A. Innes & K. Anderson (Eds.), *Indigenous men and masculinities: Legacies, identities, regeneration* (pp. 266–282). University of Manitoba Press.
- Smith, J. A., Merlino, A., & Christie, B. (2020). "Dudes are meant to be tough as nails": The complex nexus between masculinities, culture and health literacy from the perspective of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males – implications for policy and practice. *American Journal of Men's Health*, 14(3), 1–17.
- Tom, E., Adams, M. M., & Goode, R. W. (2023). Solastalgia to soliphilia: Cultural fire, climate change, and Indigenous healing. *Ecopsychology*, 22(22), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1089/eco.2022.0085>
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Volume one: Summary: Honouring the truth, reconciling for the future*. James Lorimer and Company.
- Waddell, C. M., de Jager, M. D., Gobeil, J., Tacan, F., Herron, R. V., Allan, J. A., & Roger, K. (2021). Healing journeys: Indigenous men's reflections on resources and barriers to mental wellness. *Social Science and Medicine*, 270. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.113696>
- White, J. M., Godfrey, J., & Moccasin, B. I. (2006). American Indian fathering in the Dakota nation: Use of Akicita as a fatherhood standard. *Fathering*, 4(1), 49–69. <https://doi.org/10.3149/fth.0401.49>
- Wilson, A. (2015). Our coming in stories: Cree identity, body sovereignty and gender self-determination. *Journal of Global Indigeneity*, 1(1), 1–5.