Canadian Journal of Indigenous Studies ISSN:2819-6104
Vol 2, Issue 1 (2026) 65-86 https://doi.org/10.36939/cjis/vol2no1/art43

THIS DRUM HAS SAVED ME: LEARNING FROM THE AKICITA CANTE WASTE MENS GROUP ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF LAND-BASED INITIATIVES FOR INDIGENOUS MEN

MARTI FORD[1]*, CANDICE WADDELL-HENOWITCH[2] RACHEL HERRON [3]
JONATHAN ALLAN [4], JASON GOBEI[5], AND FRANK TACAN[6]

Abstract. This article examines the impact of a land-based Indigenous men's group, Akicita Cante Waste ("Good Hearted Warriors"), on the process of reclaiming culture, identity, and community connections in the wake of colonial trauma. Drawing on community-based participatory research and a two-eyed seeing approach, the study explores how traditional practices such as hunting and drum-making, along with sharing circles, interviews, and photovoice, foster connection, knowledge sharing, and pride among participants. The findings highlight the group's role in supporting Indigenous men in reconnecting with family, culture, and land, and in developing a renewed sense of purpose and collective identity. The study underscores the importance of culturally grounded, community-led initiatives for healing and the ongoing need for sustainable support for Indigenous men's programming.

Keywords. Indigenous men's health, Community-based participatory research, Cultural reclamation, Land-based healing, Two-eyed seeing

1. Positionality

Marti Ford, Ed.D., serves as the Associate Dean, Indigenous Education, and as an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba. Of Inuit and Settler heritage with family roots in Nain, Labrador, Baker Lake, NU and New Brunswick. Marti has dedicated her career to working alongside Inuit, First Nation, and Métis communities in roles including teacher, principal, superintendent, dean, and community volunteer. Her lived experience and professional journey have provided her with a deep understanding of the intergenerational impacts of colonization—both within her own family and in the families of the students and communities she supports. Marti believes that healing is a process that is grounded in culture and identity. Her scholarly work focuses on

Date: Received: August 6, 2025
* Corresponding author Marti Ford

Indigenous youth identity and family wellness across First Nation, Métis, and Inuit contexts.

Candice Waddell-Henowitch RPN/PhD (she/her) is a registered psychiatric nurse and an Associate Professor at Brandon University. She was born and raised on the lands of the Anishinaabeg, Dakota Oyate, and the Homeland of the Red River Metis, where her family's history of farming on the Manitoba landscape shapes her understanding of privilege and responsibility. Now living, working, and raising her daughter in Brandon Manitoba, Candice strives to honour the knowledge, strengths, and gifts of all Indigenous peoples. This commitment guides her teaching, research, community relationships and the values she instills in her daughter. Her scholarly work focuses on improving mental health care systems and addresses the impacts of gendered and structural violence. Grounded in feminist, anti-racist, and decolonizing approaches, her research examines experiences of sexual violence, intimate partner violence, and the systems that shape health and well-being.

Rachel Herron (she/her) is a white settler and Professor whose academic and personal relationships to rural places are shaped by settler colonialism. She grew up on Saugeen Ojibwe First Nations territory, where her family's history of farming was made possible through the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands. Now living and working in Manitoba (treaty 2), her teaching and research are guided by a commitment to working with rural and Indigenous communities to highlight and enhance their strengths. She is a Canada Research Chair in Rural and Remote Mental Health, focusing on improving rural mental health and quality of life across the lifespan.

Jonathan A. Allan is Professor of English, Drama, and Creative Writing and Gender and Women's Studies. He was previously Canada Research Chair in Men and Masculinities. In his work, he explores "taboo" topics, topics about which we might be uncomfortable speaking, and hopes to help alleviate some of those anxieties. In all of his work, he strives to be critically curious and interested in the people about whom he writes and engages with. He currently lives with his family in Brandon, Manitoba, the territory of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Assiniboine, Dakota, and Dene Peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation.

Jason Gobeil is a self employed men's mental health and wellness advocate, land based program developer and facilitator, motivational speaker and cultural consultant. Jason is a spiritual connector and oshkabaywis (helper) to others in community and ceremony; he carries the Spirit names of Blue Sky and Yellow Eagle with Good Voice and is a proud member of the Eagle Clan. Jason is registered to the Animbiigoo Zaagi'igan Anishinaabek First Nation in Ontario and lives in Brandon Manitoba. Jason's connection to the development of a network within the urban Indigenous community is one gained by living and growing up under the same conditions of the social settings with racism, poverty, intergenerational trauma, addictions and a struggle with self identity. Jason's spirit is shown throughout the invested connections of creating relationships with the men on a grassroots level and the creation of safe space on land and in the

circle of care. The written spirit of the men showcased throughout the materials expressed is from the heart space and their connections of spirit, growth, identity and self worth are forever changed by the opportunity to have been seen by others and for many of them for themselves

Frank Tacan, I am walking while the clouds are singing, is a Dakota Spiritual Advisor who spent most of his career as a Spiritual Advisor with the Brandon Friendship Centre. Since retirement, Frank continues to give back to his community by sharing his knowledge. His support, teaching, leadership, and guidance have been pivotal in guiding the men of the Akicita Cante Waste to live a good life in ceremony and brotherhood.

2. Introduction

Residential schools, forced relocation, the Sixties Scoop, and unfulfilled treaties have all left social, emotional, spiritual, and cultural fractures in Canadian Indigenous families and communities (Innes & Anderson, 2015; Nelson & Wilson, 2017; Prehn & Ezzy, 2020). The colonizing pressures of patriarchy and capitalism disrupted traditional roles, methods of knowledge and cultural sharing, and relationships (McKegney, 2014). These forces have profoundly shaped Indigenous wellbeing throughout the life course; Indigenous children experience higher rates of suicide, trauma, fetal alcohol syndrome, and mental health issues (Banerji & Shah, 2017; Ford, 2023); Indigenous women are abused by their intimate partners three times more often than non-Indigenous women (Ogden & Tutty, 2023); Indigenous men have shorter lifespans and are at greater risk for suicide, homicide, and incarceration (Innes & Anderson, 2015). While the experiences of colonialism differ greatly among diverse nations and in different contexts, the shared experiences of loss of identity, loss of cultural practices, and loss of family structure and roles prevail (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005). In this article, we describe an effort by the Akicita Cante Waste "Good Hearted Warriors" land-based men's group to reclaim identity, knowledge, culture, family roles, and relationships. We aim to enrich the understanding of the impact of programming that supports Indigenous lifeways while also sharing ways to improve access to Indigenous knowledge and land. We emphasize tokatakiya wichoni washte in Dakota, which means living in a way that cares for each other and all living things (Wenger-Nabigon, 2010). Although the project participants are a diverse group from a variety of nations, the Dakota teachings of love, respect, humility, courage, wisdom, truth, and honesty are the guiding principles of tokatakiya wichoni washte, and they form the foundation of the men's group (Brandon University, 2018; Hart, 2002; Southern First Nations Network of Care, 2022).

2.1. **Impact of colonialism on family, culture, and knowledge translation.**

Before settler occupation, many Indigenous nations were centred on social balance (Hart, 2002; Prehn & Ezzy, 2020). Women were honoured, and respect was crucial in all relationships (Neeganagwedgin, 2013). All individuals had equal and vital roles in families and communities, and interpersonal violence was rare

(Weaver, 2009). Despite resistance from Indigenous people, the colonial impositions of the Indian Act and treaties caused land stewardship and ownership to change in favour of settlers, residential schools destroyed families, and the leadership and power in communities was re-ordered (Cowan, 2020; Neeganagwedgin, 2013; Smallwood et al., 2021). The role of men in the new regime caused dynamics to change by replacing shared power and social equality with patriarchal models of maleness. Within the broader social context, Indigenous men's roles were marginal at best. In reality, the Indigenous men in this new power structure were disempowered, dismissed, and trivialized (Neeganagwedgin, 2013). Within a short period, the roles of Indigenous men changed drastically and caused many of them to experience a loss of dignity, a lack of direction, and an identity crisis (Allen, 1992; Smallwood et al., 2021).

Today, the impact of colonization and subsequent generations of trauma is evident. Indigenous men are less likely to graduate high school and have higher rates of incarceration and shorter lifespans (Waddell et al., 2021; Innes & Anderson, 2015). In Manitoba, where this study took place, 71% of murder victims are Indigenous men (Andrew-Gee, 2014; Innes & Anderson, 2015). Youth are growing up with the effects of inter-generational trauma and face issues of suicide, gang membership, and drug and alcohol abuse (Bombay et al., 2014; Whitbeck et al., 2009, 2014). In the face of these challenges, Indigenous men are seeking support and strength in their culture.

2.2. **Culture as a solution.** Research has shown that cultural and land-based programs can bring healing (Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021; Schwartz et al., 2012; Sommerfeld & Danto, 2019). In many studies focused on women or youth, restorative and protective factors against historical trauma were linked to cultural reclamation, a sense of self, recognition of shared cultural identity, and connection to family and culture (Cooper et al., 2019; Gittings et al., 2024). Other researchers have emphasized that Indigenous men's groups provide Indigenous men with a sense of belonging, cultural role modelling, and healing through ceremony and connection to land (George et al., 2019; McDonald & Haswell, 2013; Waddell et al., 2021). Yet there are very few funded, let alone consistently funded, programs with a focus on culture, healing, and land-based learning for Indigenous men in many parts of Canada (George et al., 2019; McCalman et al., 2006; McCleary, 2023; Waddell et al., 2021). Furthermore, there is a lack of research centred on the experiences of Indigenous men in Canada.

For instance, a 2021 literature review of land-based learning identified nine studies that met the criteria for land-based physical activities, including fishing, hunting, berry picking, medicinal picking, and other outdoor programs (Ahmed et al., 2021), of which only two occurred in Canada (Iwasaki & Bartlett, 2006; Robertson & Ljubicic, 2019). Both included mixed-gender participants and focused on physical health strategies.

Additionally, other work has explored the development of men's initiatives but not their evaluation of success (George et al., 2019). Often, when Indigenous men are the focus of intervention or research, it is related to justice initiatives

where they are stereotyped as perpetrators (Innes & Anderson, 2015). Rarely do prevention, intervention, or wellness initiatives acknowledge the source of their pain and provide structures and supports to dismantle the colonial impact.

To address this issue, the overarching goal of the present study was to develop and describe the impact of an Indigenous men's group, specifically focusing on land-based learning, including traditional practices such as moose hunting and drum making. The paper uses photovoice and individual interviews to reflect on the experiences of the men in this traditional land-based learning group. We argue that the Indigenous men's group enables Indigenous men to (re)connect, share knowledge, and increase pride in themselves and their community in a safe, supportive environment. Our contribution to the literature emphasizes the importance of Indigenous men's groups while also reinforcing the argument that cultural solutions can and will potentially reduce some of the negative impacts of colonization. Moreover, the study contributes to a growing body of literature on Indigenous masculinities that brings together health and wellness, the social sciences, and the humanities. In this way, we contribute to a nuanced study of Indigenous men and masculinities that engages with recent work both directly and indirectly.

3. Participants

Participants Throughout the project, participant numbers changed as the men's group established itself in the community. Additionally, drum-making was an impetus for getting the program started, but over the course of a year, the men participated in many other activities, such as ceremonies, ice fishing, assisting one another in vision quests, presentations to youth groups, and many other advocacy activities. In addition to drum-making, many activities were ones the men had not had an opportunity to engage in before joining the group. Therefore, it was effectively impossible to determine the precise impact of the drum-making program; instead, the findings reflect the men's overall experiences in Akicita Cante Waste. During the sharing circles, researchers were present and spoke as part of the collective. However, we do not include researcher comments in the findings; instead, the focus is on the men's narratives.

Additionally, due to COVID-19 restrictions on group size some sessions were not accessible to all researchers; but the Indigenous research assistant attended all drum-making sessions to ensure consistency. Akicita Cante Waste invited that research assistant to participate in other events and activities. Overall, we gathered the stories and experiences of ten men, two female researchers, two female research assistants, and one boy under age eighteen (while it is beyond the scope of this article, significant work remains to be done on Indigenous boyhood). Participants chose how they wanted to be involved in the project throughout the year-long experience, some participated multiple times, and others only once. Through the informed consent process, participants chose their pseudonyms and indicated how they wanted to be involved in the research, but we did not collect demographics on the participants. The participants agreed to the research project

and decided to observe and have their comments included in the analysis; however, one participant did not want their words quoted directly, so they are not included in the analysis.

4. Methods

4.1. **Two-eyed seeing approach with community-based participatory research.** This community-based participatory research project used a two-eyed seeing approach to meet the goals and objectives. Two-eyed seeing is a decolonizing research method that privileges Indigenous knowledge and worldviews while acknowledging Western perspectives (Iwama et al., 2009). Partners co-create knowledge collaboratively based on the 6 Rs: respect, reciprocity, relationship, relevance, responsibility, and representation (Tsosie et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2019). The authors have a well-established research protocol that integrates the 6 Rs into all aspects of research design (Tsosie et al., 2022: Waddell-Henowitch et al., 2022). Additionally, we established the research partnership years before the start of this specific project through other community-based participatory research project projects and community initiatives (Waddell et al., 2020, 2021).

In a two-eyed-seeing approach, it is vital to acknowledge and recognize the contributions of all partners to the research team while appreciating and holding on to both Indigenous and settler knowledges. The research team consisted of four social science scholars, three who identify as settlers and one who is Inuit, one Indigenous leader who also acted as the project coordinator, one Indigenous spiritual leader, and two undergraduate research assistants, one of whom identifies as Indigenous and the other as a settler. These individuals worked collaboratively throughout the process, taking the lead at times and stepping back when needed (Waddell et al., 2020). In this context, the settler and Indigenous researchers collaborated with men from the Akicita Cante Waste Good Hearted Warriors men's group. Akicita Cante Waste, a men's group, is a local organization formed to provide an opportunity for Indigenous men to gather. The group is not static; they have an open-door philosophy, and participants join and engage in different ways.

This manuscript focuses on the partnership between the Akicita Cante Waste men and the researchers as we progressed together in a year-long hunt-to-drum community-based participatory research project. This included a traditional hunt, dressing the animal, preparing the hide, creating the drum, and awakening the drum. The multimethod project used collective ethnography, sharing circles, individual interviews, and photovoice to capture the experiences of both the men and the researchers. We have published a fulsome description of the research protocol elsewhere (Waddell-Henowitch et al., 2022).

4.2. **Sharing Circles.** This is a method of data collection that redistributes and shares power between participants and facilitators (Kovach, 2009; Lavallée, 2009). A research partner, Blue Sky, who was also the coordinator of the men's group, facilitated and shared in each of the four sharing circles. Overall, ten men, four women, and one boy participated in the sharing circles. The circles occurred at

different points in the process, one right after the hunt (four women, eight men, and one boy), one occurred within a week of the hunt (four women, eight men, and one boy), one when the men were making the drum frames (two women, seven men and one boy), and one when they were working with the hides (five men).

4.3. **Individual Interviews.** After completing the drums and the final sharing circle, we invited the men involved with Akicita Cante Waste men's group to participate in individual interviews. A researcher in collaboration with the Indigenous research assistant conducted the semi-structured interviews. Six adults and one youth under age 18 participated in an interview. After the interviews, individuals received a gift card as remuneration for their time and knowledge.

4.4. **Photovoice.** This is a method of community-based participatory research that involves taking pictures, having an opportunity to reflect with peers to make collective interpretation of imagery, and sharing the reflections in dissemination strategies (Castleden et al., 2008; Liebenberg et al., 2019). At the very first meeting with the men regarding the research project, we explained the photovoice process and invited the men to participate. At the second meeting, the men that consented to be involved in the photovoice component received a camera, a memory card, and instructions. Throughout the year-long research project, men were reminded about the project's photovoice component. Upon completing the drums, the men chose and titled their five favourite photographs; then, during the final feast, we discussed the photos as a group. The research assistant conducted an individual interview with one man and one child who could not attend the photovoice final feast. Participants chose photos that included their faces and the faces of community members. All individuals in the photos provided consent for their photographs to be used and disseminated.

4.5. **Analysis.** The project used observation, photographs, and traditional methods of research. All the activities combined allowed for the researchers to develop rapport and enriched our understanding of the men and the group. In this paper, we report on the analysis of the sharing circles and interviews, some of which are focused on the photovoice component of the project. We recorded and transcribed all sharing circles and individual interviews verbatim. The research assistants, who were present for all interviews and sharing circles, transcribed the recordings for consistency. A researcher and two research assistants used narrative coding with NVivo to identify 46 inductive codes within the interviews and sharing circles (Butina, 2015). The codes included concepts such as aspiration, desire for connection to culture, connecting to community, connecting to culture, emotions, encouragement, fathering, fun, gratitude, learning, teaching, sharing, pride, and purpose. From those codes, two researchers and a research assistant developed preliminary themes. It became apparent that the codes were all intertwined, but the prominent themes were connecting, sharing knowledge, purpose, and pride. The entire research team, including the research assistants and the Indigenous community researchers, reviewed the preliminary themes and adapted the concepts and language until there was consensus amongst the group. This process

of collaboration ensured that the final themes were co-created and reflective of a community perspective (Bird et al., 2009; Iwama et al., 2009).

5. Findings

Some themes align with other authors' findings that Indigenous men's groups play a role in increasing belonging, cultural role modelling, and healing (George et al., 2019; McDonald & Haswell, 2013; Waddell et al., 2021). Our findings expand on that work through reference to the individual interviews, photovoice project, and sharing circles. The men's stories emphasized the men's groups' impact on connecting, knowledge sharing, and pride.

5.1. **Connecting.** Connection showed up in multiple ways in the men's stories. For instance, they talked about connecting to one another, culture, creator, and their families. Some men started with the group looking to connect with an Elder. For example, M, who was employed by the military at the time he joined the group, indicated that

> I joined the group to seek out the guidance of the Elder that leads the group. I was seeking out a form of counselling that was unavailable to me by my services. By reaching out to the public entities, I was then able to be linked up with the Elder. The Elder connected me with the group. I was just embraced if you would, by the entire group itself, and [that] made it really comfortable for me to be able to be in an atmosphere that I recognized from my youth. And it was easy for me to contribute, reciprocate meaningful energy right back. (M, Final Interview)

The welcoming nature of the group and the connection that the men felt in it was also acknowledged by K, who had struggled with alcoholism in the past and experienced a tragic loss before joining the men's group:

> I told Blue Sky that he'd be in my photos because he inspires me. He asked me to go to the men's group when I didn't know him. I was at the friendship centre for an appointment, and he walked up to me and said, "I know you have no idea who I am, but you should come to our men's group." Here we are gathering willows for the Carberry sweat lodge. (K, Figure #1)

The connection the men were able to build is reflected by MS, who indicated in a sharing circle, "I met them through this journey. And we're just close, you know? And we treat each other with respect, dignity, simple as that. There is no "I'm better that you" no, none of that, not in this world." The absence of judgment that MS reflects on allowed all participants in the men's group to be included and provided an opportunity for men to build trust and grow as individuals. For instance, K expressed how the connection in the group had changed him and provided him with the opportunity to express himself in a meaningful way:

FIGURE 1. "The Dakota Way"- Participant K

> When I was first in the group, I didn't say too much. But then, as I continued with the group and kept coming back, that's when I slowly opened up. And then when we went hunting, and when we went snowshoeing and snaring, you know, to sit with the guys, when we had our gatherings and talking and I, we all teased and joked around and stuff. So yeah, that's how I opened up. (K, Final Interview)

The men's group also became a supportive environment for individuals to process and confront disappointment. For instance, T talked about how the men had spent an entire day on the land with a local trapper to catch rabbits. Their goal had been to harvest and feed members of the community:

> We were out there, and the guys never caught nothing. I was disappointed, man, come on bro. Come on. [Laughter]... But it was fun, like I mean, we looked like little boys going through the bush with snowshoes in a line-up, we were just cracking up." (T, Figure #2)

FIGURE 2. "No Wabose" – Participant T

In addition to the connections the men were forming with one another, the group also allowed them to reconnect with their families, partners, and children. J summarized the impact the group has had on the way the men connect with their families and children:

> Some of these guys have grown so much, some of these guys have reclaimed their children, and have taken on being a father again. Some of these guys have rekindled their relationships at home. And yet, they're very honest about where they are in life right now. And they're not scared to share that with others, and they are so supportive of one another. (J, Final Interview)

F emphasized the importance of the connection of the men within the group by stating that "because we all matter in this world. You know, even though we don't have that support system. But we got brothers and sisters in this circle to support us" (Sharing Circle). As the men connected with one another, we witnessed that their connection to culture, one another, their families, and their creator strengthened. The men in the group were able to bring forward these connections into all other interactions in their lives.

5.2. **Sharing Knowledge.** The men spoke about finding their voices, sharing their experiences, supporting one another, and creating a safe space to share knowledge without judgment. In a sharing circle, MS spoke about tokatakiya wichoni washte and emphasized that when leaders teach in a good way, they are working on themselves as well:

> I think when I think of growth, I think of your spirit, and how it grows every time we do good. And that type of thing you don't often think about, but while you're doing things in a good way, for other people, T if he's teaching or he's making a drum, he's working on himself too.

T reflected on the impact he felt while providing men and boys with support through this type of group and what he received in return:

> You know what he's talking about, like not tooting my own horn. People that I knew since they were six, seven, eight years old, today they're working at Walmart, or working at Superstore, and they have families of their own. They approached me and they say, "Thank you for helping me and trying to help me, you know, in a good way." As I think, and I say, you know, you don't have to thank me; me, I'm just here, just here to support you and help you heal, just like I like needed support. I'm getting the support, I need that help, you know, it's just like, it all comes together. (Sharing Circle)

Much like T, M felt that the teaching that he provided to others became part of his own healing:

> "But when you're guiding and showing somebody, it's a different kind of fun, it's a different kind of enjoyment that's wholesome, that you might not really think about. So, for myself, I felt really good about today. I thought it benefited my mental health in an aspect that was wholesomely positive. And I believe that—I

> believe that this going forward is only going to create more positive circumstances in my day than—in my day than are going to trap me away from, you know, the not—the realm of not feeling. It sorts of snapped me back. (Sharing Circle)

M emphasized that teaching and giving had helped him connect with his feelings in ways he could not find elsewhere. Another participant, S, talked about the healing that he found through the program and specifically about making the drum, learning from others, and singing with the drum:

> You know, the boys taught me how to make my own drum. So, to be, to be able to have these extensions of myself, that is what healed me. As a young man who has been through so much in my life, this drum saved me time and time again. Not just this drum, but every drum that I've seen. The songs that we sing, the meaning of it alone, just to look at it can make you feel better you know. Healing, there's healing that comes with it, there's a life, there's just a feeling of being Indigenous you know. I love—I love what we do. (S, Figure #3)

FIGURE 3. "Extensions of Myself" – Participant S

The youngest participant, E, also reflected on how the learning had impacted his life:

> It taught me a lot more of hunting, making drums, preparing the wood. Like it's such a nice experience to have and, again, I actually want to say this, but I'm still really, really thankful. I'm just—every day I keep on thinking to myself what could have happened if I didn't join. I wouldn't have this knowledge of the songs, I wouldn't have this knowledge of how to make a drum, how—how to hunt, how to pray in a waking drum, spirit quests, sweats; [they] just gets rid of all the negativity. Um, I remember, I kind of suffered from anxiety. And I see the counselor like every couple—it went from every couple of days, and then a week, or every two weeks, and then every month now. And I feel like that's mostly

> because of cleansing and sweats; and all this beauty just makes me really happy. I'm happy to be here again. (E, Final Interview)

The cyclical nature of learning and teaching, and how the men and boys went back and forth between the roles of sharing knowledge, is evident in the words of E's father. Often, when the men and E were learning new skills, his younger sibling was also present. E's father reflected that "Glittering Hawk boy really looks up to his older brother, Fire Bear, and Fire Bear is a great role model, so monkey see, monkey do!" (P, Figure #4)

FIGURE 4. "Teaching Younger Generations" Participant P

They also reflected on sharing knowledge, J stated the following in a sharing circle: But there's lots of us doing good things. You can be a good dad. You can be a good man. You can take these teachings and teach others. And you know, you've said it, you've said it, you've said it, you've all said it; today wasn't just about sharing what you had, but learning from others as well, too, right? You opened yourself to do that. Lastly, the space was a safe place to share knowledge, make mistakes, and ask questions, which are crucial parts of learning:

> When I made this drum, I kind of made a mistake because I went too fast. I did the hole wrong. But that to me, makes me remember, the beginning to like the end result. Learning patience, because I moved too fast on that. Yeah, I didn't see it till after it was done. So, the next drum that I made I did it differently. (S, Sharing Circle). Because they need to know who they are and

> where to go, and if they have questions that they're not just—that there's no dumb questions. (T, Sharing Circle).

Individuals in the men's group shared culture, ceremony, skills, and knowledge. The men moved in and out of the role of leader or teacher as needed. Leadership was not assigned to one individual; rather, it was a collaborative group effort made possible by mutual respect and responsibility. Growth came from sharing, learning, and supporting one another to learn new skills, accomplish something as a group, or sit in a ceremony.

5.3. **Purpose and Pride.** Along with all the other positive outcomes of the men's group, among the most evident was the pride the men gained in themselves, their culture, and the Akicita Cante Waste Group. The men's pride resonated in the activities they accomplished together, being part of a collective identity recognized in the community, having a positive impact, giving back to the community, and rekindling their Indigenous identity. One element of this was the pride and purpose the men garnered from maintaining the Amahpiya Dowan Mani ("I am walking while the clouds are singing") Cultural Site, commonly known as the East site, owned by the local friendship centre and named after one of the group members. The East site is a space that the men use and have autonomy over just outside of the city. They can build ceremonial structures, harvest grandfathers (the rocks used in sweats) and medicines, and use the land for ceremony whenever needed. This autonomy over the land provided them with purpose and pride in being able to help others. For instance, MS highlighted all the work required to prepare for ceremony.

> And there's a lot of people who put a lot of time into making these ceremonies happen. And the work that's done, you can see it's covered there, but some fellows came out and put a fire together. The grandfathers are in there, ready to light. After they pray over it. I probably had prayed over. It covered it. It's yeah, the wood has to be cut, the grandfathers, the stones, they have to be gathered. At this time of year, the grass hadn't grown yet. But now we're out there cutting grass all the time. And, yeah, so the sweat itself has to be renewed. And that's done. Willows for wet and harvested and number of people came together to- some for the first time to build a sweat, some for the 300th time. And, yeah, it's always a learning experience. And it's always fun. There's a lot of kidding, a lot of—a lot of cajoling goes along with all of what we do. Probably makes it, makes the work easier. That's for sure. (Sharing Circle)

MS took pride in the work that was collectively done to care for the land and set the scene for ceremony. Similarly, B indicated that the work that he put in to maintain the lodge made him and others feel good:

> Yeah, the sweat lodge, and maintenance, me and K. We do a lot of grass cutting around there. Makes us feel good doing that. Yeah,

> that's what I enjoy doing. Maintaining the—the lodge and keeping medicines on stock. And picking medicine is the best thing that I love—what I like to do now. (Individual Interview)

J talked about the entire process of drum making, and all the different contributions the hunt provided, the focus for him was on the provisions the hunt was able to provide for the men's family and community:

> Because it was—it was just something that we were just trying to do on our time, with what we have. So overall, from start to finish, from preparation of getting hunting gear, to the training, to the preparation and leading up to the hunt camp, to the pipe ceremony, to dressing those animals on the land, to working with the wood, and really not even, more than that, working and harvesting that meat, and understanding how hard it really was, it is, but how beneficial it was for us to be able to not only feed our families but feed our Elders and community and to give that gift back. To give, right, like that in itself is—I just feel, feel the hair is standing up under my shirt here. Um, it feels good, you know. It feels good to do something bigger than you thought was attainable. (J, Individual Interview)

The men's group became the venue for the men to branch out into other areas of the community. During the process of the research—and into the present day—the Akicita Cante Waste group comes out to ceremonies, helping to keep the lodge in good shape, participating in advocacy marches, teachings in the local schools, and sharing their experiences on social media not just to Indigenous people but to settlers as well. A lot of these experiences became recognized in the community, as P indicated:

> We get tagged on a lot of things to through the men's group on Facebook, and me and my wife share a Facebook, so I got family members on there. And they say they can't wait to see every week what it's going to be. And they're like, "Oh, we're so proud of you." ... That was a huge motivational boost. (P, Final Interview)

J shared more than just a sense of pride. He also shared a counter-narrative about Indigenous men and Indigenous communities that gave him hope:

> I see so much hope in our future, right? I think of ten years from now and these young men that are in this space with us and what they're seeing, what they're learning about, and how they're—they're being so supported by these men, and these brothers, and these women? Right? Strong, strong people. But the future looks really, really good for our community, right? I think that we're planting some beautiful seeds in our community for young boys, and for their fathers and uncles and grandfathers, to see themselves in community, right? And that's what this is all been about is redefining ourselves as, as Indigenous men, as men

> in community and society, right? And how we have a soft side. (Sharing Circle)

Another participant reflected on his son and a shirt that was gifted to him from the Boys with Braids campaign: 1 "Fire Bear was super, super proud of this picture and the shirt because of the way his braid was. He said it's the same thickness and the same length of that one. So, he's like, 'Mom, Dad, this shirt was modeled after me!' So he was really proud." (P, Figure #5). Importantly, P's son felt proud because others around him affirmed his way of being, not as strange or unmanly, but as something to be proud of.

FIGURE 5. "Boys with Braids" – Participant P

This same participant also stated the following:

> "So, I pray every day, thankful every day. Um, my son, E, my daughter asked him a long time ago, my daughter asked him, "What do you identify as?" And I just—I was I was kind of listening, but I wasn't listening. But out of the corner of my eye, and I see him, he kind of puffs up his shoulders, and kind of cocks his head to the side and says, "I'm a proud Dakota." And holy shit, that made me proud. So, when they get dressed, it's an honor for me to braid their hair. That's the first thing I've tried to do; sometimes, they'll ask for me and my wife to do it sometimes. If I get to do it, you know? Brush his hair, braid his hair. It's a privilege, it's an honour. (Sharing Circle)

The Akicita Cante Waste men have also impacted the broader urban Indigenous community by sharing their renewed knowledge, stories, and experiences. The men's group has become a staple at public gatherings, ceremony, marches, and special events. They have become advocates for important causes and often march for murdered and missing women, girls, boys, and men. They stand tall during Pride festivities to support Two-Spirit individuals and serve as firekeepers at local ceremonies and community events. The pride the men felt towards their identity, their experiences, and the work that they were doing with the men's group was evident in all interactions. They also fostered this in one another through the support they offered, the relationships they built, the knowledge they shared, and their common purpose.

6. Discussion

The findings of this research project show the multifaceted benefits that are created when Indigenous men have a group and space that supports connection, knowledge sharing, purpose, and pride. Connection was one of the most prominent findings from the Akicita Cante Waste men's group. The connections and relationships the men built on the land through the hunt-to-drum process directly impacted and influenced their healing. Many of the men came to the Akicita Cante Waste men's group with experiences of hardship, trauma, and other negative impacts of colonization. Through the process of the hunt-to-drum and their ongoing activities, these men are on the path of tokatakiya wichoni washte ("the good life"), which not only encourages them to remain on that path but also encourages others to join them. (Innes & Anderson, 2015). These findings are consistent with other structured programs, such as men's sheds and DUDES clubs (Efimoff et al., 2021), as well as a variety of men's healing programs in Australia (Horak & Thompson, 2025). Like a program in Kettle and Stoney Point First Nation (George et al., 2019), the Akicita Cante Waste men's group developed organically, with the men determining how best to engage with culture, ceremony, and intergenerational leadership. The program was not prescribed; there was no set agenda. Among themselves, the men determined what was required and how they would engage with culture, ceremony, and one another.

The connection they gained was more than a friendship; in fact, most of them now speak of a brotherhood that developed through the process. The land-based activities, such as the hunt-to-drum cycle, allowed for a structure where relationships could develop in an organic fashion, creating deeper, more meaningful connections. Walsh et al. (2020) determined that the nature of land-based programs provides an opportunity for strong relationships to develop due to the tendency for men to rely on one another for survival. The nature of the land-based programming in the Akicita Cante men's group had a similar effect. Many of the men had been raised in urban centres and had not had the opportunity to hunt before this experience. Once strangers to each other, these men developed a strong connection because they became dependent on one another for safety, support, and knowledge to reach their objectives (McDonald, 2023).

Many of the men are now encouraging the next generation of Indigenous boys to become involved in their activities. This resonates through the contributions of E, the youngest member of the Akicita Cante Waste men's group at the time the research took place. Since the completion of the research project, participation has increased, and the men's group now has many younger men who regularly attend. The importance of intergenerational sharing as a method to combat the destruction caused by colonization is consistent with findings from other jurisdictions (Golding & Foley, 2017; Walsh et al., 2020; Yang & Warburton, 2018). An important future direction for research will be to consider Indigenous boys and their relationship to masculinity and manhood, bringing together Indigenous studies alongside boyhood studies.

7. Conclusions

Through the Akicita Cante Waste men's group, land-based programs enabled Indigenous men in this study to reclaim connections to land, culture, and family, develop and share knowledge, and regain purpose and pride in the traditional lifeways that were formerly inaccessible to them. The men support themselves and other community members in living tokatakiya wichoni washte ("the good life"). The involvement in the program provides a venue for Indigenous men to engage with their children in meaningful ways, which impacts the cycle of dysfunction that colonization has created while also helping to heal ongoing generational traumas. However, like many Indigenous-led programs, the future of the Akicita Cante Waste men's group is uncertain due to precarious funding. More research is required to understand the positive impact Indigenous men's programming is having on individuals, families, and communities. Future projects should also prioritize sustainable funding to ensure that all Indigenous people have access to programming, especially land-based cultural revitalization programming. Indigenous families and communities' well-being depends on resisting colonization's effects by revitalizing cultural practices and supporting opportunities for positive connections.

8. References

Ahmed, F., Zuk, A. M., & Tsuji, L. J. S. (2021). The impact of land-based physical activity interventions on self-reported health and well-being of indigenous adults: A systematic review. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18(13). https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18137099

Alfred, T., & Corntassel, J. (2005). Being Indigenous: Resurgences against contemporary colonialism. Government and Opposition, 40(4), 597–614. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2005.00166.x

Allen, P. G. (1992). The sacred hoop: Recovering the feminine in American Indian Traditions. Beacon Press.

Andrew-Gee, E. (2014, August 22). Aboriginal men murdered at higher rate than aboriginal women. Toronto Star. https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/aboriginal-men-murdered-at-higher-rate-than-aboriginal-women/article_f767b37b-f718-534d-a5e6-95d8b22f65ae.html

Banerji, A., & Shah, C. (2017). Ten-year experience of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder; diagnostic and resource challenges in Indigenous children. Paediatrics and Child Health, 22(3), 143–147. https://doi.org/10.1093/pch/pxx052

Bird, S., Wiles, J. L., Okalik, L., Kilabuk, J., & Egeland, G. M. (2009). Methodological consideration of storytelling in qualitative research involving Indigenous Peoples. Global Health Promotion, 16(4), 16–26. https://doi.org/10.1177/1757975909348111

Bombay, A., Matheson, K., & Anisman, H. (2014). The intergenerational effects of Indian residential schools: Implications for the concept of historical trauma. Transcultural Psychiatry, 51(3), 320–338. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461513503380

Brandon University. (2018). Seeking mino-pimatisiwin (The Good Life): A photo voice research project. https://www.bucares.ca/publications/seeking-mino-pimatisiwin-the-good-life-a-photovoice-research-project

Butina, M. (2015). A narrative approach to qualitative inquiry. Clinical Laboratory Science, 28(3), 190–196. https://doi.org/10.29074/ascls.28.3.190

Castleden, H., Garvin, T., & Huu-ay-aht First Nation. (2008). Modifying Photovoice for community-based participatory Indigenous research. Social Science and Medicine, 66(6), 1393–1405. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2007.11.030

Cooper, E., Driedger, S. M., & Lavoie, J. G. (2019). Employing a harm-reduction approach between women and girls within Indigenous familial relationships. Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry, 43(1), 134–159. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-018-9603-x

Cowan, K. (2020). How residential schools led to intergenerational trauma in the Canadian Indigenous population to influence parenting styles and family structures over generations. https://doi.org/10.29173/cjfy29511

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. International Indigenous Policy Journal, 12(2), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.18584/IIPJ.2021.12.2.10896

Ford, M. (2023). Self-knowledge of First Nations adolescents with a student residence [Doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota Duluth]. https://hdl.handle.net/11299/257002

George, J., Morton Ninomiya, M., Graham, K., Bernards, S., & Wells, S. (2019). The rationale for developing a programme of services by and for Indigenous men in a First Nations community. AlterNative, 15(2), 158–167.https://doi.org/10.1177/1177180119841620

Gittings, L., Malama, K., Logie, C., Lys, C., Taylor, S. B., McNamee, C., Mackay, K. I., & Admassu, Z. (2024). Peer and land-based approaches for fostering empowering and healthy relationships with Indigenous and northern young people in the Northwest Territories. PLoS ONE, 19, Article e0298166. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0298166

Golding, B., & Foley, A. (2017). Men and boys: Sharing the skills across generations. Journal of Intergenerational Relationships, 15(1), 52–63. https://doi.org/10.1080/15350770.2017.1260362

Hart, M. A. (2002). Seeking Mino-Pimatisiwin: An Aboriginal approach to helping. Fernwood Publishing.

Horak, E., & Thompson, S. C. (2025). Exploring the efficacy of Aboriginal men's socioemotional healing programs in Australia: A scoping review of evaluated programs. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 22(1), Article 88. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph22010088

Innes, R., & Anderson, K. (2015). Indigenous men and masculinities. University of Manitoba Press.

Iwama, M., Marshall, M., Marshall, A., & Bartlett, C. (2009). Two-eyed seeing and the language of healing in community-based research. Canadian Journal of Native Education, 32(2), 3–23. https://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/CJNE/article/view/196493

Iwasaki, Y., & Bartlett, J. G. (2006). Culturally meaningful leisure as a way of coping with stress among Aboriginal individuals with diabetes. Journal of Leisure Research, 38(3), 321–338. https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.2006.11950081

Kovach, M. (2009). Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations and contexts. University of Toronto Press.

Lavallée, L. F. (2009). Practical application of an Indigenous research framework and two qualitative Indigenous research methods: Sharing circles and Anishnaabe symbol-based reflection. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 8(1), 21–40. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800103

Liebenberg, L., Wall, D., Wood, M., & Hutt-MacLeod, D. (2019). Spaces & places: Understanding sense of belonging and cultural engagement among Indigenous youth. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 18. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919840547

McCalman, J., Tsey, K., Wenitong, M., & Whiteside, M. (2006). A literature review for Indigenous men's groups [Report]. School of Indigenous Australian Studies and School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, James Cook University. https://researchonline.jcu.edu.au/10647/

McCleary, G. (2023). Coming to know Ishkode: Re-encountering Indigenous male wholistic [sic] 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 International. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-22174-3_7

McDonald, J., & Haswell, M. (2013). Indigenous men's groups and social and emotional well-being: An indigenous doctor's perspective. Australasian Psychiatry, 21(5), 490–493. https://doi.org/10.1177/1039856213498430

McDonald, M. (2023). Indigenous land-based education in theory and practice. Yellowhead Institute. https://yellowheadinstitute.org/report/land-based-education/

McKegney, S. (2014). Masculindians: Conversations about Indigenous manhood. University of Manitoba Press.

Murrup-Stewart, C., Whyman, T., Jobson, L., & Adams, K. (2021). "Connection to culture is like a massive lifeline": Yarning with Aboriginal young people about culture and social and emotional wellbeing. Qualitative Health Research, 31(10), 1833–1846. https://doi.org/10.1177/10497323211009475

Neeganagwedgin, E. (2013). Ancestral knowledges, spirituality and Indigenous narratives as self-determination. AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples, 9(4), 322–334. https://doi.org/10.1177/117718011300900404

Nelson, S. E., & Wilson, K. (2017). The mental health of Indigenous peoples in Canada: A critical review of research. Social Science and Medicine, 176, 93–112. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2017.01.021

Ogden, C., & Tutty, L. M. (2023). My parents, my grandparents went through residential school, and all this abuse has come from it: Examining intimate partner violence against Canadian Indigenous women in the context of colonialism. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 38(23–24), 12185–12209. https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605231192580

Prehn, J., & Ezzy, D. (2020). Decolonising the health and well-being of Aboriginal men in Australia. Journal of Sociology, 56(2), 151–166. https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783319856618

Robertson, S., & Ljubicic, G. (2019). Nunamii'luni quvianaqtuq (It is a happy moment to be on the land): Feelings, freedom and the spatial political ontology of well-being in Gjoa Haven and Tikiranajuk, Nunavut.

Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 37(3), 542–560. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775818821129

Schwartz, S. J., Donnellan, M. B., Ravert, R. D., Luyckx, K., & Zamboanga, B. L. (2012). Identity, development, personality, and well-being in adolescent and emerging adulthood. In R. M. Lerner, M. A. Easterbrooks, J. Mistry, & I. B. Weiner (Eds.), Handbook of psychology: Developmental psychology (2nd ed., pp. 339–364). John Wiley & Sons.

Smallwood, R., Woods, C., Power, T., & Usher, K. (2021). Understanding the impact of historical trauma due to colonization on the health and well-being of Indigenous young peoples: A systematic scoping review. Journal of Transcultural Nursing, 32(1), 59–68. https://doi.org/10.1177/1043659620935955

Sommerfeld, J., & Danto, D. (2019). Indigenous land-based interventions and nature-oriented wellness programs: Commonalities and important differences. Journal of Concurrent Disorders, 1(3), 37–45. https://doi.org/10.54127/QHPP7238

Southern First Nations Network of Care. (2022). The seven teachings. https://www.southernnetwork.org/site/seven-teachings

Tsosie, R., Grant, A., Harrington, J., Wu, K., Thomas, A., Chase, S., Barnett, D., & Beaumont Hill, S. (2022). The six Rs of Indigenous research. Journal of American Indian Higher Education, 33(4). https://tribalcollegejournal.org/the-six-rs-of-indigenous-research/

Waddell- Henowitch, C. M. Gobeil, J., Tacan, F., Ford, M., Herron, R., Allan, J., Kruth, M., & Spence, S. (2022). A collaborative multi-method approach to evaluating Indigenous land-based learning with men. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 21. 1-8. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221082359

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.

Waddell, C.M., Herron, R.V., Gobeil, J., Tacan, F., De Jager, M. D, Allan, J. A, Roger, K. (2020). Grounded in Culture: Reflections on sitting outside the circle in community-based research with Indigenous men. Qualitative Health Research, 30(14). 2343-2350. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732320960050

Walsh, R., Danto, D., & Sommerfeld, J. (2020). Land-based intervention: A qualitative study of the knowledge and practices associated with one approach to mental health in a Cree community. International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction, 18(1), 207–221. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-018-9996-3

Weaver, H. N. (2009). The colonial context of violence: Reflections on violence in the lives of Native American women. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 24(9), 1552–1563. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260508323665

Wenger-Nabigon, A. (2010). The Cree medicine wheel is an organizing paradigm of theories of human development. Native Social Work Journal, 7, pp. 139–161.https://laurentian.scholaris.ca/handle/10219/387

Whitbeck, L. B., Sittner Hartshorn, K. J., & Walls, M. L. (2014). Indigenous adolescent development: Psychological, social, and historic contexts. Routledge.

Whitbeck, L. B., Walls, M. L., Johnson, K. D., Morrisseau, A. D., & McDougall, C. M. (2009). Depressed affect and historical loss among North American Indigenous adolescents. American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research, 16(3), 16–41. https://doi.org/10.5820/aian.1603.2009.16

Wright, A. L., Gabel, C., Ballantyne, M., Jack, S. M., & Wahoush, O. (2019). Using two-eyed seeing in research with Indigenous people: An integrative review. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 18. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919869695

Yang, T. Y., & Warburton, D. E. R. (2018). Indigenous Elders' role in fostering intergenerational relationships with youth. Health & Fitness Journal of Canada, 11(4), 88–93. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919869695

[1] Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba, Canada

Email address: Marti.ford@umanitoba.ca

[2] Department of Psychiatric Nursing, Brandon University, Canada

[3] English, Drama, and Creative Writing and Gender and Women's Studies, Brandon University, Canada

[4] Independent Researcher, Canada

[5] Department of Geography and Environment, Brandon University, Canada

[5] Dakota knowledge keeper