

The Indigenous Medicine Wheel



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Abstract

Introduction and Definition: The Medicine Wheel, also known as the Sacred Hoop, is a vital Indigenous symbol that “has been used by generations of [Indigenous] people for health and healing” long before European colonizers arrived in North America. Depicted as a circle divided into four quadrants, it represents the four cardinal directions as well as Father Sky, Mother Earth, and the Spirit Tree. Each quadrant is linked to specific colors, elements, animal totems, and stages of life, promoting a balanced and harmonious existence.

Body: The Medicine Wheel’s historical origins trace back thousands of years, with ancient stone structures found in North America indicating its ceremonial and astronomical significance. Today, it appears in various forms, such as artifacts and paintings. The Medicine Wheel’s structure includes four quadrants representing North, East, South, and West - each associated with unique colors, elements, animals, and life stages. For example, the East symbolizes birth and new beginnings, while the North represents wisdom and spiritual understanding. The circular shape reflects the cyclical nature of life and the interconnectedness of all beings, emphasizing balance and harmony for overall well-being. In Indigenous communities, the Medicine Wheel is crucial for spiritual and healing practices, guiding ceremonies, and rituals to restore balance. Traditional healers use it alongside ceremonial plants and spiritual energies from each direction. The Medicine Wheel also fosters communal connection and emphasizes collective well-being. Contemporary healthcare and research increasingly recognize the importance of incorporating Indigenous perspectives. As such, the Medicine Wheel offers valuable insights into holistic health and wellness, challenging the Western biomedical model. Researchers have applied its teachings to understand social determinants of health, mental health, and nutrition, for instance. This decolonized approach enhances research methodologies and improves healthcare for Indigenous communities by promoting cultural safety and better patient outcomes. Overall, the Medicine Wheel is a profound symbol of balance, harmony, and interconnectedness – all of which are essential for holistic health. Its historical roots and modern applications highlight its significance. By integrating Indigenous knowledge into healthcare and research, the Medicine Wheel advances a more inclusive, diverse, and equitable approach to healthcare, benefiting both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

Keywords: medicine wheel; indigenous; indigenization; decolonization; reconciliation; Canada; indigenous methodologies; holistic health; spirituality; traditional medicine

Introduction

The Medicine Wheel, also known as the Sacred Hoop, is a fundamental symbol and concept that “has been used by generations of [Indigenous] people for health and healing” [1] prior to the arrival of European colonizers to Canada in the early 16th century [2]. It is often depicted as a circle divided into four quadrants and embodies the four cardinal directions as well as Father Sky, Mother Earth, and Spirit Tree [1]. Although individual tribes or nations may have different interpretations of the teachings of the Medicine Wheel, each quadrant is typically associated with different colours, directions, elements, and animal totems, signifying a balanced and harmonious life [1].

Body

Historical Origins

The origins of the Medicine Wheel date back thousands of years and are deeply rooted in the cultures and traditions of various Indigenous nations. Archaeological evidence of ancient stone medicine wheels found in Turtle Island (North America), particularly in the plains of Canada and the United States and of the Plains Aboriginal People, indicates their historical significance [3]. These ancient structures, made of stones arranged in a circular pattern, are believed to have been used for ceremonial and astronomical purposes [3]. Today, the Medicine Wheel can be depicted in many forms, such as artifacts, paintings, or physical structures on lands [1].

Structure and Symbolism

Mashford-Pringle (Timiskaming First Nation) and Shawanda (Wikwemikong First Nation) express that Indigenous people follow a way of life that is centered around cycles and harmony with nature [4]. To this end, Dr. Jim Dumont (also known as Onaubinisay) shares his knowledge of the Medicine Wheel in the following passage [5]:

“The circle, more than any other symbol, is most expressive of the Anishinaabe view of the world. It is the first design the Creator drew on the darkness of the universe before the creation began. It has, since that beginning time, been the primary pattern by which all things begin, have being, change and grow toward fulfillment – and eventually begin again. Within creation, all life maintains itself and operates within this circular and cyclical pattern (p. 30).”

It is important to note that each Indigenous culture may have its own distinct teachings and principles from the Medicine Wheel, and that not all First Nations, Métis or Inuit people use the Medicine Wheel. For the Anishinaabe and Cree nations in particular, the Medicine Wheel is typically divided into four quadrants, each representing one of the four cardinal directions: North, East, South, and West. Each direction is typically linked to specific colors, elements, animals, and stages of life, though these associations may vary between different cultures. The East symbolizes birth, spring, the element of air, and the eagle; it is associated with new beginnings, vision, and enlightenment [1, 6]. The South represents youth, summer, the element of fire, and the coyote; it signifies growth, energy, and passion [1, 6]. The West corresponds to adulthood, autumn, the element of water, and the bear; it is connected to introspection, healing, and emotional depth [1, 6]. Finally, The North denotes old age, winter, the element of earth, and the buffalo; it embodies wisdom, rest, and spiritual understanding [1, 6]. As mentioned, the four directions are also associated with different colours. Being mindful of cultural differences, the Ojibway and Algonquin teachings of the Medicine Wheel assign the East as yellow, the South as red, the West as black, and the North as white, while the Cree Medicine Wheel substitutes black for blue [7]. The center of the Medicine Wheel is often reserved for the self or the Creator – emphasizing the need for inner harmony and connection to the divine [1, 6].

Importantly, for the Anishinaabe, Cree, and Ojibway cultures, the circular shape of the Medicine Wheel symbolizes the cyclical nature of our world, including the cycle of the seasons, the stages of human life, and the various dimensions of personal health (i.e., physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual) [7]. To this end, the Medicine Wheel also teaches that every living being and element in the universe is interconnected and interdependent, forming a web of relationships that must be honoured and respected. This concept of balance and harmony is central to the Medicine Wheel and maintaining equilibrium among these aspects is essential for overall

wellbeing and peace within oneself and their community. Interestingly, for the Anishinaabe, traversal of the Medicine Wheel usually proceeds in the clockwise direction starting from the East. This is akin to the circular and clockwise (or “sunwise”) movement in the annual Sun Dance, performed by several First Nations in the Prairies [8]. Indigenous people believe that this symmetry and symbolism helps them to better align with the forces of Nature, such as gravity and the rising and setting of the Sun [1]. To further this discussion, Koithan and Farrell [9] provide an excellent narrative of the powerful healing energy of symbolism in Indigenous practices that embrace the “bio-psycho-social-spiritual nature of health.” This leads us well into the next section where I will explore the purpose of the Medicine Wheel in Indigenous healing.

Spiritual and Healing Practices among Indigenous Communities

The Medicine Wheel plays a vital role in Indigenous spiritual and healing practices. Indigenous people often consult it for guidance, seeking wisdom to navigate life’s many challenges and decisions. Traditional healers may also use the Medicine Wheel to guide their healing ceremonies, rituals, and medicinal practices. One such ceremony is smudging. Although individual Indigenous nations may have their own culturally specific smudging traditions, the ritual typically involves the burning of sacred herbs (e.g., sage, sweetgrass, cedar, tobacco) to cleanse spaces, people, and objects of negative energy. As a spiritual ritual, smudging aims to improve spiritual health by connecting Indigenous people closer to the Creator and bestowing them with spiritual protection and blessings [10]. These traditional healing practices often involve utilizing the various ceremonial plants and connecting with the spiritual energies associated with each direction to restore balance and harmony with the Earth [1, 9]. Lastly, the Medicine Wheel fosters a sense of communal connection among Indigenous people, as it emphasizes the importance of collective wellbeing and interdependency of all members in the community.

Contemporary Relevance in Healthcare and Research

As Canadians continue to work towards reconciliation and decolonization with Indigenous people, it is becoming increasingly important for healthcare providers and researchers to incorporate Indigenous perspectives in various areas of healthcare and medical research [11–13].

Notably, the biomedical paradigm of Western medicine has long been criticized for its reductionistic assumptions and neglect of non-biological elements of health, such as psychological, sociocultural, or spiritual factors [14–16]. Notably, the foundational assumptions of the biomedical model fundamentally contrasts with the World Health Organization’s widely accepted definition of health, which explicitly contends that health is “not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” [17]. In light of this holistic definition

of health, Indigenous conceptions of health, such as the Medicine Wheel, can provide valuable insight into research methodologies and wholistic approaches to health and wellness (holism). For instance, recognizing the lack of research on the psychological, social, and cultural benefits of physical activity, Lavallée [18] employed the Medicine Wheel as a theoretical framework to develop research questions exploring its impact on the emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being of Indigenous women. This particular study focused on the perspectives of four women of Ojibwe, Cree, and Métis heritage. The discussions during the participant-led sharing circles were also guided by the Medicine Wheel teachings [18]. Similarly, Mashford-Pringle and Shawanda reviewed how Anishinaabe teachings of the Medicine Wheel can be used to enrich both Indigenous and non-Indigenous research as a theory, conceptual framework, evaluation model, and data analysis tool [4]. In the health sciences space, many researchers have investigated how the teachings and philosophies of the Medicine Wheel may be applied to better understand the social determinants of health [19], tuberculosis outbreaks [20], gastric cancer [21], rhetoric surrounding nutrition and diet [22], therapy and counselling [23–25], and mental health disorders [26] from an Indigenous lens. Using decolonized approaches in research ensures a safe space for “deep learning and knowledge co-creation” with our Indigenous patient partners and aids in redistributing power to the voices that have been historically and presently oppressed by colonial forces [27, 28]. Additionally, clinical implications of this decolonized research include improving patient care and outcomes for underserved Indigenous communities, among other marginalized groups. To further this point, culturally safe care has been identified by the Public Health Agency of Canada as a key priority in reconciliation efforts with Indigenous peoples. The term refers to an approach to healthcare that is respectful of and responsive to the cultural identities and needs of patients by encouraging healthcare providers to recognize and address power imbalances, biases, and institutional barriers that may affect marginalized communities' access to equitable care [29]. As noted below, this approach is especially critical when serving Indigenous populations, where past and ongoing colonial practices have contributed to mistrust in healthcare systems [30–32]. Finally, although not directly connected with the Medicine Wheel, several studies have also underscored the importance of incorporating traditional therapies and Indigenous health knowledge into modern medical practices to improve the health and patient experience of Indigenous people [26, 33, 34].

Potential Challenges and Limitations

Incorporating Indigenous knowledge and practices into healthcare remains a pressing issue and requires careful attention to several critical challenges. For example, mechanisms should be developed to prevent the misappropriation of Indigenous knowledge and cultures,

ensuring that these traditions are used respectfully and authentically [35]. One approach would be encouraging health researchers and practitioners to reflect and decolonize their minds, where individuals are asked to reflect on the existence and legitimacy of colonial systems and perspectives [36, 37]. Anti-Indigenous racism also presents a significant barrier for implementing Indigenous practices into healthcare. Scholars have established that the structural nature of racism would call for systemic change on multiple levels, including anti-racism education or training, transparent accountability measures, and the dismantling of colonial structures within healthcare institutions [38–40].

Furthermore, it is essential to respect Indigenous self-determination by prioritizing Indigenous leadership and decision-making throughout the integration process. As health researchers, we can support Indigenous leadership by facilitating community-based participatory research practices that empower our Indigenous community partners to lead efforts in addressing their health priorities, aligned with their unique needs, values, and beliefs [41–43]. In thinking about a “Nothing about us without us” approach to research [44], we ought to further reflect on our positionality as researchers and the ways in which our passive participation in the Eurocentric academic system may inadvertently uphold systems of oppression that continue to perpetuate historical inequities [45].

In the Canadian context, the political climate plays a vital role in shaping these reconciliation efforts. As such, special attention should be paid towards the government's progress on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action, particularly #22 on the need to “recognize the value of Aboriginal healing practices and use them in the treatment of Aboriginal patients in collaboration with Aboriginal healers and Elders...” [46]. Similarly, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) is recognized in Canada (and internationally) to be the accepted framework for reconciliation [11]. UNDRIP was formally adopted by British Columbia in 2019 through the passing of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act [47] and was further reinforced at the federal level with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act in 2021 [48]. Overall, these legislative frameworks underscore the importance of integrating Indigenous healing practices and respecting Indigenous rights as essential components of reconciliation in Canada's healthcare system.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Medicine Wheel stands as a profound symbol and guiding framework within Indigenous cultures, embodying principles of balance, harmony, and interconnectedness that are essential for holistic health and wellbeing. Its historical roots and contemporary applications highlight its enduring importance. Through its

depiction of the cyclical nature of life and the intercedence of all beings, the Medicine Wheel offers valuable insights into Indigenous spiritual and healing practices, emphasizing the importance of community and collective wellbeing.

In the realm of healthcare and research, the Medicine Wheel provides a robust framework that can enhance the understanding of health and wellness from an Indigenous perspective. Its teachings challenge the predominantly biomedical model of Western medicine, advocating for a more inclusive approach that respects and integrates Indigenous knowledge and practices. This integration is crucial in the ongoing efforts toward reconciliation and decolonization in Canada, ensuring that healthcare delivery is culturally safe and equitable.

Lastly, the Medicine Wheel's relevance extends beyond Indigenous communities, offering a universal model for holistic health that can inform and transform contemporary healthcare practices. By embracing the principles embodied in the Medicine Wheel, healthcare providers and researchers can foster deeper connections with the Indigenous communities they hope to serve, promoting better health outcomes and contributing to the overall goal of health equity. As we continue to learn from and incorporate Indigenous perspectives, the Medicine Wheel remains a vital tool in the journey toward a more inclusive, diverse, and equitable approach to health and healing.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that they have no conflict of interests.

Authors' Contributions

TL: made substantial contributions to the design of the study, the collection of data as well as interpretation and analysis of the data, drafted and revised the manuscript critically, and gave final approval of the version to be published.

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