

Definition of Culture

ALTHOUGH THERE ARE MANY WAYS BY WHICH CULTURE IS EXPRESSED AMONGST THE VARIOUS FIRST NATIONS, THERE ARE PRINCIPAL, FOUNDATIONAL BELIEFS AND CONCEPTS THAT ARE COMMONLY HELD THAT SUPPORT A UNIFIED DEFINITION OF "INDIGENOUS CULTURE". IN WHAT FOLLOWS ARE THESE PRIMARY CONCEPTS OF THE INDIGENOUS WORLDVIEW.

THE SPIRIT: The most fundamental feature of the Indigenous worldview is the Spirit. Within this reality the spirit is housed within an inclusive concept of body-mind-heart-spirit. In our life within this earth realm these work together in such a way as to be inseparably functioning as a whole. The spirit is always central and always works in relationship to the other levels of being. Spirit is in all things and throughout all things. In the Indigenous worldview we live in a spirit-ual universe and within a spirit-ual relationship.

THE CIRCLE: The circle, more than any other symbol, is most expressive of the Indigenous view of the world. The circle is primary to all of life and life process, and, is also of primary significance in relating to and understanding life itself in all its dimensions and diversity. Human beings, amongst other beings, are in harmony with the life flow and grow to their greatest fulfillment when they too operate in a circular fashion. The Circle, then, being primary, influences, in every way, how we see the world. The Circle is synonymous with Wholeness. Wholeness is the perception of the undivided entirety of things. To see in a circular manner is to envision the interconnectedness and the interdependence within life. The Wholeness of life is the Circle of life.

HARMONY AND BALANCE: Desire for harmony is the pre-disposition of all of the created world. Harmony is a central value of the Indigenous worldview, which pre-supposes that all of life consciously cares for one another, and while respecting the individual's autonomy, strives to achieve and maintain an interrelationship that assures quality of life for the collective whole. Balance is a fundamental principle within the way that harmony in interrelationship works. A worldview that presumes a disposition toward balance causes people to see the dynamic character of their "real world" as always striving to maintain an equilibrium and symmetry in all aspects of the total economy of its ecology. Simply put: the Indigenous person sees the world as always and naturally striving to maintain an equilibrium and symmetry – everything will ultimately try to achieve a balanced solution. The value of harmony works well within such a worldview because it assumes that people lean toward this same balance, and therefore, desire to be in harmony with one another.

"ALL MY RELATIONS": All that is created consciously cares about the harmony and well-being of life; all things are regarded as "persons" and as "relatives". Personhood not only applies to human persons, but plants, trees, animals, rocks, and visible and

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unseen forces of nature are also considered as "persons". Because they are persons, they have the range and qualities of personhood that are commonly attributed in western ideology exclusively to human persons. Once this is accepted, it elevates the prevailing view of other-than-human beings to a higher quality of being and moves the nature of relationship to an all-inclusive ethical level. We are all related to one another as persons, and are responsible for maintaining good and harmonious relationships within the "extended family" of persons.

KINDNESS/CARING/RESPECT: Another key to understanding the Indigenous worldview is the recognition of the fundamental precept: the universe cares. The Creator cares for his creation. The Earth cares about her off-spring and all of earth-life. The beings within creation care about each other and about how they relate to one another within the interconnectedness and interdependence of the web of life. In that the creation originated in this way, it sustains itself and thrives by means of an underlying orientation toward kindness. The key to harmony in a life that is conceived as "all my relations" is respect. Respect is understood as the honouring of the harmonious interconnectedness of all of life, which is a relationship that is reciprocal and interpersonal. The Indigenous person is predisposed to have in his or her interest both the greatest good for the Individual as well as the collective good.

EARTH CONNECTION: We are all relatives because we have the same Mother. In the Indigenous mind, the human person is of the earth and from the

earth. Like all of the created world, the human being is part of the balance of nature and must find a special yet interconnected place within the created whole. The human person is a relative to all other "persons" of the Earth, and, along with all creatures calls the Earth, Mother. The Earth herself is a living, breathing, conscious being, complete with heart/feeling, soul/spirit, and physical/organic life, as it is with all the relatives of creation. Indigenous identity and relationship is defined by the land and the connection the natural world.

PATH OF LIFE CONTINUUM: The experience of living in this world is understood as a journey of the spirit moving progressively through stages that are interconnected and continuous. In the same way, lives are connected inter-generationally as "strings of lives" connecting us to our ancestors and to those yet unborn.

LANGUAGE: The original language is the most expressive communication of the spirit, emotions, thinking, behaviour and actions of the people. Language is the "voice" of the culture and therefore the true and most expressive means for the transmission of the original way of life and way of being in the world.

Culture is the expression, the life-ways, and the spiritual, psychological, social, material practice of this Indigenous worldview.



Elder Jim Dumont, National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation, Honouring Our Strengths: Indigenous Culture as Intervention in Addictions Treatment Project - University of Saskatchewan. (2014). *Definition of Culture*©.Muskoday, Saskatchewan: Author. Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Funding Reference Number AHI-120535.