

# Identity as a Social Indicator of Health & Wellness:

First Nations Women on  
Manitoulin Island

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## Research Question

How do different determinants of First Nations identity (legal and policy based, social and culturally based definitions, and the self-identification ideology) interplay and influence a sense of authenticity which informs self-worth and the ability to realize health and wellness for First Nations women on Manitoulin Island?

- Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence (2001)
- Aboriginal Women's Health Research Synthesis Report (2001)
- Reid (2002)
- Wilson and Rosenberg (2002)
- Ontario Women's Health Status Report (2002)
- Bent (2004)
- Bartlett (2005)
- Healey (2008)

## Community Collaborators

- Noojmowin Teg Health Centre
- Manitoulin Anishnawbek Research Review Committee (MARRC)
- Indigenous Health Research Development Program (CIHR)



Canadian Institutes  
of Health Research



**Noojmowin Teg**  
Health Centre  
A place of healing

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7 First Nation Communities

Transient population

Long history of inter-mixing with non-native  
population

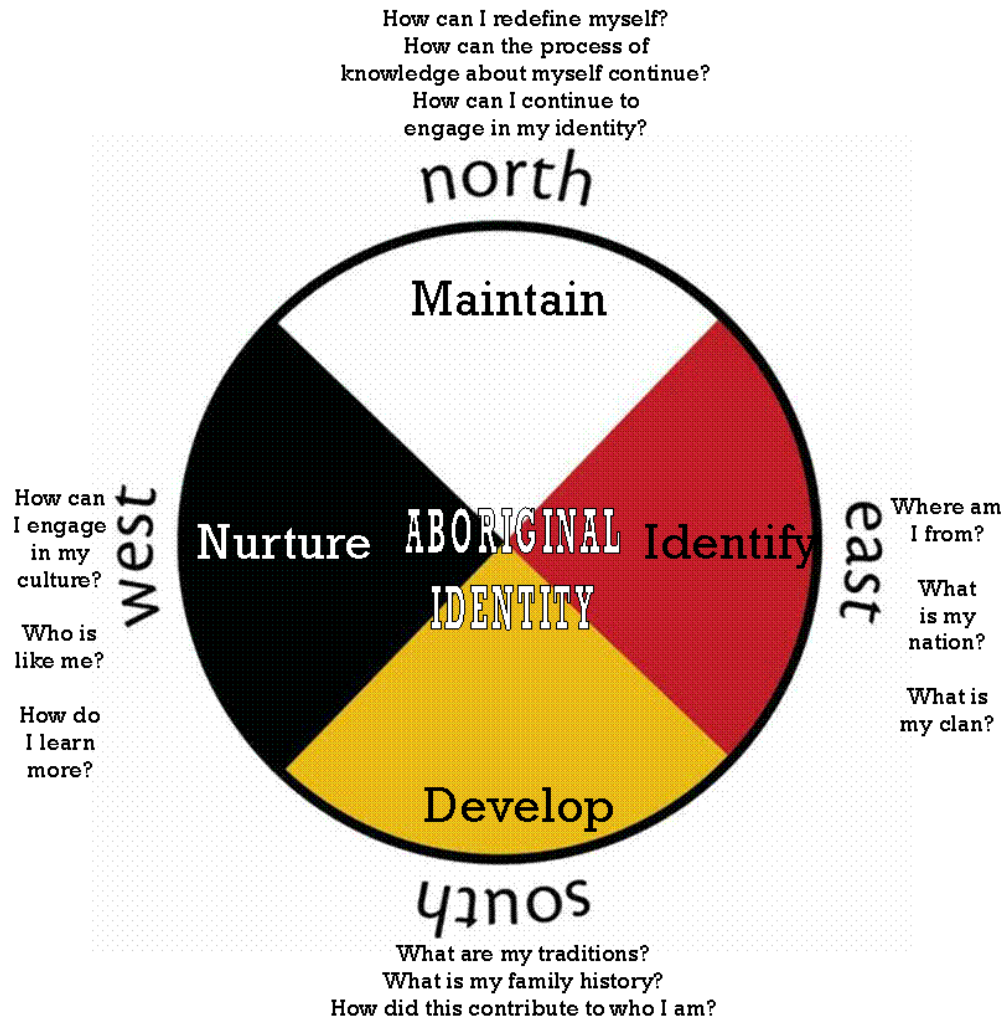
## Methodology

Life histories with 10-15 women (life history generally, identity, health)

- Identity Wheel reflection piece (Anderson, 2001)

Key informant interviews with health and human service workers

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## Methodology

- Coded using grounded theory
- Nanabush story for contextualization
- Community presentations

## Findings: Identity

- Authenticity: exclusion, growing up off reserve, passing & physical appearance
- Culture and Traditions: language, traditional teachers, ceremonies & spirituality
- Place & Relocation: push & pull factors, relocating, stability

When people ask me where I am from, I have different answers for different people on different days. Sometimes I feel like Nanabush, like where do you want me to be from. I feel a little trickster about it, because I can. I am Ojibway and I am crane clan. There's no definitive answer to any of these things. (LH 6)

Once I accepted who I was as a native woman, and living on the reserve, I became a much stronger and prouder person because I didn't have to deal with hiding who I was. I could let who I was out, and I felt better about myself. Once I learned the things about our history, it made me prouder to be a native. (LH 5)

That's the one thing that really bothers me about the elders on the reserve is that they complain about how the youth don't speak they language, but when you try, they laugh at you" (LH 1).

I always asked this question, because people have a different take, some say you get your clan from your father. What about me, because my father is non-native? So many people have so many different opinions on it" (LH 4)

If that's the path that you walk, then your whole life has to reflect that. It's the same as the drummers, who drink and use drugs; you can't sit round the drum. If you choose that life, you choose the whole life. (LH 7)

I remember that it was an awesome feeling that I was connected even though I wasn't raised there. I felt an awesome connection to the land. It was nice to feel like I felt somewhere for the first time in my life. (LH 7)

Where I am from, that all came about when I got our status cards. Before that, I didn't have a sense of where my dad was from or that mattered. We were living in (local town), and the whole idea that I wasn't from there, and once we got our status cards, and saw the benefits. Once I knew that, then I wanted to know who I was and where I belonged. This was kind of interesting because it created more of a problem – what do you mean, I don't belong here, the fact that I wasn't just from (local town). And then still not knowing how that all fit together. (LH 7)

## Findings: Health

- Physical Health: chronic disease, smoking, nutrition, & exercise
- Men & Relationships: men & addictions, culture, relationship with children, marriage & dating
- Mental Health & Addictions: depression, suicide, drugs & alcohol abuse, experiences as youth

## Findings: Health

- Abuse: childhood abuse, domestic violence
- Education: high school and post secondary completion
- Children & Family: parents & residential school, parental influence on parenting style, raising children, childhood and poverty
- Society & Community: Commitment to improving First Nation community, role models, racism & discrimination, lateral violence

He chooses his addiction over his family, but that's what he does. I know if I put pressure on, he'll walk; I need his presence to help with the children. If I make him chose between us and the drugs, I know what he'll choose. He's a chronic, he does drugs like people smoke cigarettes. (LH 12)

Where am I going to meet someone, at the bar? If you go the bar, who are you going to meet there? If you go to the powwows, a lot of the people aren't healthy there either. All of the healthy guys are taken, and with the age that I am at, I'm only going to be with someone whose been dumped by a woman, so he probably has issues. I'll have to find someone whose wife died. I would always be asking, why is this guy single? Why isn't he with some one? So what do you do? (LH 12)

This man would say he would kill himself if I left him. I believed him, and I didn't want that on my conscious. It came to the point where he was following me, and I decided that I was done and leaving. He shot himself about 20 minutes after I said I was leaving. (LH 10)

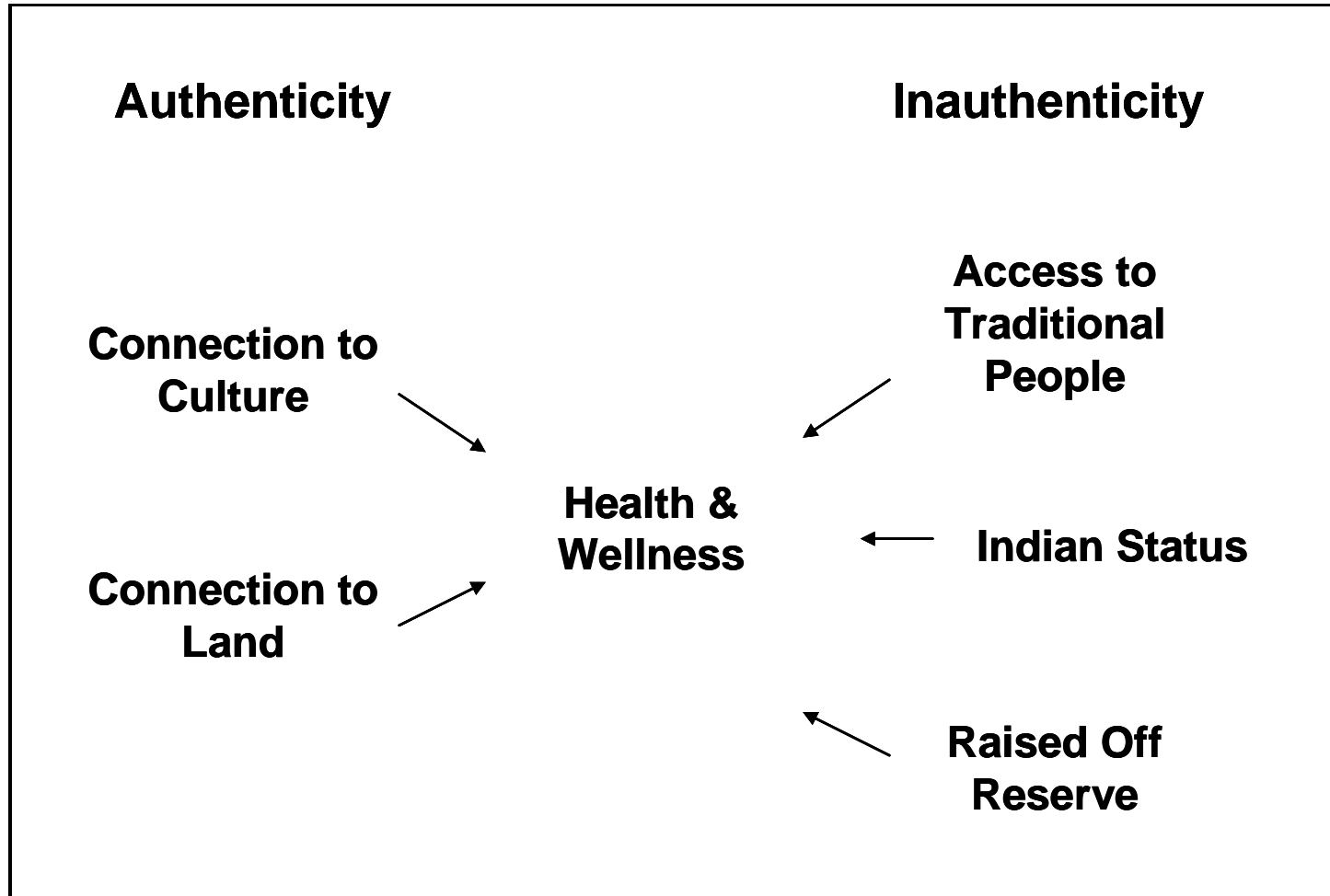
My oldest brother who committed suicide, it had a lot to do with identity. He couldn't live in either world, he couldn't live in the native world, and he couldn't fit in the white world. It was too hard for him to figure out where he fit. (LH 7)

When I moved here, it was to fit in. It was the thing all my friends were doing, was drinking; they don't do anything else. If I didn't drink, they wouldn't hang around me anymore. Even right now, all the ones I used to hang out with all drink. So now, it's just me and my partner. If you're not drinking, you're isolated. (LH 5)

I was seeing the amount of alcohol being consumed was directly related to the amount of chaos around me with my relationships. It's hard to have any clarity while you are using. The only thing I could control was my part in it.  
(LH 6)

I know how my sexual abuse has affected me to this day. I'm a perfectionist. I need to feel in control of my life at all times. That's why I have trouble committing to relationships. Subconsciously it would be like giving up my control. I am used to being independent. I don't look at it as negative. (LH 3)

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## Research Application & Urgent Concerns

- Indian status
- Smoking/Health Practitioners
- Traditional teachers/availability
- Welcoming “home” community members & outreach to off reserve community members
- Resiliency strategies of women
- Men