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OUR PERSPECTIVE

Wholistic versus Holistic: Words Matter for Indigenous Peoples

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Abstract

Background: The term holistic is commonly used in Canadian academia and healthcare settings to address the whole of something rather than its individual parts. We argue that the term wholistic should be seen to hold a distinctive meaning and be used in place of the term holistic, especially when relating to Indigenous pedagogies, cultures, practices, traditions, health, and wellness. We contend that the term wholistic is more inclusive of Indigenous ways of knowing, understanding, being, and doing. This includes being more reflective of the coming together of the four elements in life encompassing the physical, spiritual, emotional, and mental elements of wellbeing as reflected in the Medicine Wheel. **Conclusions:** The term wholistic is also consistent with the Indigenous tenets of wholeness and wholism. Therefore, we recommend that the term wholistic be incorporated into academic literature and healthcare settings, serving as a more culturally respectful, relevant, and safe term that reflects Indigenous perspectives, traditions, cultures, and practices. **Health & Fitness Journal of Canada 2023;16(3):3-7**. https://doi.org/10.14288/hfjc.v16i3.830

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Introduction

The importance of the critical reflection and incorporation of Indigenous ways of knowing, understanding, being, and doing into higher education and healthcare settings has increasingly gained widespread support. This mandate directly meets the Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC). This work has demonstrated consistently the importance of pedagogies that are culturally safe and relevant through an Indigenous lens. The term *holistic* is often used when discussing the health and wellbeing of non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples. However, we advocate for the more inclusive *wholistic* term when discussing issues related to Indigenous pedagogies, health, wellness, cultures, traditions, and practices. Within this context, the purpose of this brief narrative review is to explore the

importance of replacing the term *holistic* with *wholistic* when referring to Indigenous ways of knowing, understanding, being, and doing within academic papers and healthcare settings. In the past, Canadian and Colonial academia included the word holistic or holism within Indigenous literature. However, since the release of the TRC's 94 Calls to Action in 2015, the importance of honouring Indigenous worldviews and reflecting on culturally safe and relevant approaches in academia has empowered Indigenous scholars and writers to further advance healthcare theories by honouring and incorporating sacred teachings, knowledge, and language. We postulate that the term *wholistic* is more culturally safe and relevant, and may better reflect Indigenous perspectives, traditions, and cultural practices versus the term *holistic*. We argue that this culturally relevant improvement can help address the complexity of what makes a human whole, rather than looking at a simple linear dimension that is found often in Colonial academic and healthcare institutions and settings.

Narrative Review of the Literature

2.1. How is the term holistic commonly utilized in a Colonial context?

The term *holistic* is used commonly in academic institutions of higher learning, healthcare settings, and in the research literature emanating from Colonial institutions. Often times when the word *wholistic* is used, it is flagged as incorrect for reviewers or academics who rely on current spelling and grammar word processing tools for proofing (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2023a). Despite being similar, there are very important (and often overlooked) differences in these words that need greater consideration, particularly when working with and for Indigenous peoples. From a Colonial perspective, the term *holistic* is defined in diverse ways such as being associated with the complete medical treatment of a person, viewing something as a whole to be superior than the sum of its parts, and the coming together of individual parts (Collins English Dictionary, 2023; Oxford Advanced American Dictionary, 2023; Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2023b). The latter definition is often credited to General Jan Smuts and the nineteenth-century philosopher, Emile Durkheim (Dahnke & Dreher, 2010; Járos, 2002). Merriam-Webster has recently released an article elaborating on the differences between spelling *holistic* with an "h" and a "w", addressing the evolution of the word in contemporary society (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2023a). This article acknowledges that the terms are often used interchangeably, indicating that these words are frequently nothing more than synonyms (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2023a). However, from an Indigenous perspective, these words can carry very different and culturally relevant meanings. Importantly, the term *wholistic* can be broken down into smaller parts including the word whole and can be used to reflect the wholeness of the individual, which is consistent with Indigenous ways of doing and being.

2.2. What does the addition of a "w" to holistic signify?

Many Indigenous scholars have opted to use the term *wholistic* when discussing Indigenous ways of knowing, understanding, being, and doing. For instance, Indigenous wholistic theory relates to Indigenous cultures, practices, traditions, and epistemologies (Absolon, 2020). Also, the term *wholistic* is consistent with the Indigenous tenets of wholism that

focus on relationships, interconnectedness, and balance in all domains of knowing, being, and doing (Marsden, 2005). The term *wholistic* incorporates the coming together of the four elements in life to form one single whole human entity encompassing the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical elements of wellbeing as reflected in the Medicine Wheel (Absolon, 2020; Hoffman, 2013). Therefore, when approaching complex topics in academic and healthcare settings, a wholistic perspective can strengthen or facilitate one's understanding and insight (Absolon, 2020).

2.3. Why is it important to decolonize language through spelling?

Importantly, using the term *wholistic* may also allow one to move away from some of the negative connotations that have arisen throughout the years with holistic science and holism (Harrington, 1995). Although generally viewed as a more inclusive term representing the entire being, the term *holism* has been used by organizations and institutions in a manner that would be criticized by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. A key example is the use of holism and holistic science within Nazi doctrine and propaganda during World War II (Harrington, 1995). Others have also associated holism with the religious term *holy*. This religious-based association is problematic for many Indigenous peoples, particularly considering the lasting intergenerational trauma and health deficits emanating from the Indian Residential Schools that were supported by Western religious institutions (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015; Wilk et al., 2017). Books such as, *The Healing Gods: Complementary and Alternative Medicine in Christian America,* use the component of spirit to manifest parallels between the use of holism, complementary and alternative medicine, and religion (Brown, 2013). Using the terms *holism* or *holistic* may intentionally (or unintentionally) relate to a specific history of Western religion, philosophy, and medicine (Dahnke & Dreher, 2010; Brown, 2013; Brosnan et al., 2018). This does not parallel the distinct history that some Indigenous cultures may self-reflect upon when they refer to the terms orally as *wholism* and *wholistic*. Often, Indigenous ways of knowing include a wholistic view of health and wellness, using a non-linear approach that is diverse and reflects each community's culture, traditions, and history (Hoffman, 2013). Further, for some Indigenous peoples, the term *wholistic* includes connections to land and family, acknowledging the previous and future seven generations as they all contribute to the existence and continuation of the whole self (Hoffman, 2013; Jojola, 2013).

Discussion

It is recommended that the academic society incorporates the term *wholistic* into their discussions related to Indigenous health and wellbeing. This modification is culturally sensitive, appropriate, and reflective of Indigenous community work, specifically when including the four components of health and wellness, which are spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical wellbeing (Absolon, 2020). We recommend that the term *wholistic* should explicitly be applied within Indigenous health and wellness discussions recognizing the entirety of a whole and the connectedness with land, family, and community. It is also recommended that Indigenous communities carry their own native or traditional words that reflect the aspects of the term *wholistic*. Using Indigenous language is ideal and the

ultimate goal for all community-based and Indigenous-led research. However, when academia refers generally to the interconnected elements of wellbeing (as reflected in the Medicine Wheel), the term *wholistic* should be utilized versus *holistic*.

Conclusions

Recently, health and wellness experts and agencies have argued that the terms *wholistic* and *holistic* have distinct meanings and should not be used interchangeably (Canadian College of Homeopathic Medicine, 2011). It has been argued that the term *wholistic* is much more inclusive and reflective of the mind, body, heart, and spirit (Hoffman, 2013). Similarly, the Medicine Wheel, used by many Indigenous peoples and communities, emphasizes the interconnectedness of various dimensions of wholism including spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical wellbeing (Hoffman, 2013; Jojola, 2013). In Western academia, this cyclical and interdependent perspective is often a missing component of holism and holistic science (McGrady & Moss, 2018). Therefore, when reflecting on ways to decolonize academic and healthcare, we should recognize the power of using language that is culturally relevant and appropriate for Indigenous communities.

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Authors' Qualifications

The authors' qualifications are as follows: Rosalin M. Miles, EdD; Maddison I. Chow, MSc; Gemma Tomasky, BKin; Shannon S. D. Bredin, PhD; Kai L. Kaufman, MKin; and Darren E.R. Warburton, PhD.

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