Sense of belonging and well-being among Indigenous Peoples of Canada:

The role of community involvement

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Well-being is a multidimensional construct whose conceptualizations vary across disciplines, cultures, and contexts. Belonging is a fundamental human need that plays a key role in fostering well-being with extensive research showing that stronger sense of belonging is linked to better mental and physical health. Indigenous conceptualizations of well-being and belonging reflect a holistic, relational understanding of health as balance among mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual domains, that are cultivated through reciprocal relationships with family, community, natural world, ancestors, and culture. Community involvement represents an avenue through which belonging and well-being are cultivated. While there is extensive research exploring the association between well-being, belonging, and community involvement there remains a lack of research exploring these associations within Indigenous populations in Canada. The present study used data from the 2017 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (N = 18,679) to examine whether two types of community involvement (organizational volunteering and helping others) moderated the association between belonging and well-being among Indigenous Peoples living off reserve in Canada. By running two separate moderation regression analysis, we hypothesized that belonging (H1) and both forms of community involvement (H2) would be positively associated with well-being, and that both types of community involvement would moderate this association (H3). In Model 1 (organizational volunteering), did not reveal a main effect for belonging. Community involvement significantly predicted well-being (b = .05, p < .001), and no significant interaction was found. In Model 2 (helping others), we found a significant main effect for both belonging (b = .03, p = .006), and community involvement in (b = .01, p = .028) Model 2 also revealed a significant interaction between belonging and helping others (b = .02, p = .028), indicating that the positive association between belonging and well-

being was stronger at higher levels of helping others. Our findings highlight that different forms of community involvement may have unique impacts on the belonging-well-being relationship, and that informal participation in community may be meaningful target of focus to promote well-being among Indigenous Peoples.

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Literature Review

Defining well-being

Well-being is a multidimensional construct that reflects more than the absence of illness, though its conceptualizations vary across disciplines, cultures, and contexts. Models differ on the emphasis placed on domains of well-being, including mental (e.g. psychological, cognitive, emotional), social (e.g. connection to others and community), physical (e.g. daily activities, physical function), spiritual (e.g. connection to a higher power, faith), or environmental (e.g. socioeconomic position) well-being (Haim-Litevsky, 2023; Keyes, 1998). Approaches also differ in whether well-being is conceptualized primarily as subjective or objective in nature. Subjective aspects of well-being including presence of positive emotions, low negative emotions, and satisfaction with life, as well as the psychological aspects (e.g. mastery, self-acceptance, meaning and purpose in life, positive relationships with others, autonomy, and personal growth) (Ryff, 1989). Objective aspects include measurable indicators such as physical health status, functional ability in daily life, income and socioeconomic conditions, educational attainment and other material and environmental conditions that shape quality of life (Diener,1984; Haim-Litevsky, 2023). Broader conceptualizations of well-being further illustrate these differing cultural perspectives. Historically, the "health" dimension of well-being was primarily defined through the medical model, which emphasizes the absence of disease or illness. More recently models have incorporated more expansive definitions including the World Health Organization's definition of health as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (WHO, 2018). While more comprehensive, this framing maintains a narrower approach than other models employed today.

Current definitions of well-being have been conceptualized as a more holistic construct that extends beyond health to include physical, emotional, intellectual, social, environmental and spiritual dimensions (Swarbrick, 2024). The University of Maryland's model further expands this perspective to include eight interdependent dimensions including physical, emotional, intellectual, social, spiritual, vocational, financial, and environmental. In their model they emphasize that each domain influences the others, and that imbalance in one area can affect overall health, well-being, and quality of life (University of Maryland, 2017; Stoewen, 2017).

Taken together, these frameworks illustrate a continuum of conceptualizations ranging from more reductionist, illness-focused models, to more holistic, integrative approaches. These differences reflect broader ideological and disciplinary perspectives on what it means to be healthy or well, and how well-being should be understood and measured. Consequently, definitions of health and wellness shape the ways in which individuals, cultures, and societies approach the promotion and maintenance of well-being.

Well-being through an Indigenous lens

Indigenous conceptualizations of well-being include a holistic and relational understanding of health that extends beyond Western individualistic frameworks. Using pan-Indigenous approach, rather than approaching and viewing well-being as a linear, compartmentalized process, Indigenous perspectives view it as an infinite, circular process of striving for balance and harmony amongst integrated mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual domains. These domains are viewed as equally important both in the role they play in well-being, and the attention and prioritization they are given in applied contexts (Gall et al., 2021; Fiedeldey-Van Dijik et al., 2016; Nightingale et al., 2026; Assembly of First Nations, n.d; Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, 2023; Hill, 2006; Brown et al., 2016).

Maintaining familial, community, and ancestral relationships are critical components of well-being. Equally important is the relationship and connection to land, along with participating in cultural practices. The land is understood and viewed as a vital source of knowledge, stories, and teachings that extend to multiple domains, including well-being (National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health, 2022; Salerno et al., 2021; Fiedeldey-Van Dijik et al., 2016), and is often utilized as a medium to achieve interconnectedness between all entities important for well-being. Mother Earth provides people with traditional medicines, ceremony, and physical and spiritual connection, all of which are critical elements for well-being. As such, engaging in culture, especially land-based practice, enhances well-being by fostering interconnectedness and healing. More specifically, participating in ceremony (e.g. Sweat Lodge, Sundance, Cedar Bath), traditional medicines, hunting and fishing practices, connection to Mother Earth, and storytelling are often the ways in which wellness is cultivated and sustained, reflecting a natural, holistic, and communal approach (Auger et al., 2016; Graham et al., 2021).

Indigenous perspectives of well-being emphasize reciprocity and responsibility in relation to the natural world (i.e., Mother Earth). To foster interconnected well-being among all entities, it is critical for people to engage in reciprocal and responsible relationships with other species. In practice, these principles are reflected in actions such as taking only what is needed, seeking permission before harvesting or collecting (e.g. through the offering of a gift), making full use of what is taken, expressing gratitude, and minimizing harm. It also includes taking responsibility for knowledge transmission, care and support towards other people and species (Auger et al., 2016).

Well-being among Indigenous Peoples

When considering Indigenous approaches to well-being, the impacts of colonization cannot be excluded. Indeed, the consequences of the Indian residential school system, Sixties Scoop, and child welfare models have resulted in a disruption in wellness practices. Indigenous people of Canada represent disproportionate rates of lower health across numerous areas including psychological and physical health (McQuaid et al., 2017; Hus et al., 2024; Hackett et al., 2016; Firestone et al., 2015). Indigenous-specific determinants of health are linked to past and current colonial policies and practices, including dispossession of traditional lands; forced relocation to reserves or settlements; child apprehensions related to Indian residential schools; past and current child welfare policies; oppression through the Indian Act; and systemic discrimination (Tanner et al., 2022; Bombay et al., 2014; Hicks et al., 2023; Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, 2023; Gracey & King, 2009; Greenwood et al., 2018). These determinants serve to perpetuate structural inequities and systemic disadvantage across the lifespan and across generations (National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health, 2022).

First Nations people are 20–50% more affected by disability compared to non-Indigenous persons and are more likely to be diagnosed with chronic conditions (56% compared to 48% of other Canadians), experience suicide rates 5 to 6 times higher than non-Indigenous populations, and have far lower levels of income (Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, 2023), as well as higher rates of substance use and related harms (Assembly of First Nations, n.d.). On-reserve First Nations populations also experience substantially higher rates of food insecurity and overcrowded housing, with over one-third of households reporting food insecurity and significantly higher rates of inadequate housing compared to the national average (National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health, 2022).

In addition to these physical and social disparities, Indigenous populations also experience significant mental health inequities. Recent national data indicate that fewer than half of Indigenous adults report very good or excellent mental health, including approximately 45.8% of First Nations people living off reserve, 47.8% of Inuit, and 52.8% of Métis, compared to 61.5% of non-Indigenous adults (Statistics Canada, 2025). Rates of diagnosed anxiety and mood disorders are also approximately double those of non-Indigenous populations, particularly among First Nations adults (Statistics Canada, 2025, Canadian Community Health Survey). These disparities reflect higher levels of psychological distress, depression, and anxiety symptoms across Indigenous populations, alongside increased exposure to intergenerational trauma and systemic inequities in access to culturally safe mental health care (National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health, 2023).

Métis populations are also more likely to experience chronic health conditions such as diabetes, obesity, and asthma. A study conducted in Manitoba found that life expectancy for the Métis population was approximately 5 to 6 years lower than the general population (Macdougall, 2017), with higher rates of cardiovascular disease and diabetes contributing to this gap (Statistics Canada, 2021a). Compared to non-Indigenous populations, Inuit experience some of the most severe health disparities in Canada, including suicide rates that are approximately 9 times higher (Statistics Canada, 2020), food insecurity rates affecting more than half of households in some Inuit regions, and tuberculosis rates more than 300 times higher than the national average in certain Inuit Nunangat regions (National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health, 2023).

To support efforts to reduce health disparities and promote cultural reclamation Indigenous communities continue to advocate and implement *culture as treatment*. The effectiveness of culture as treatment has been supported in numerous studies with results finding

reduced mental health difficulties (e.g. depression, anxiety, addictions), and better physical health outcomes (Graham et al., 2021; Fiedeldey-Van Dijk et al., 2016; Rowan et al., 2014). Importantly, despite these overall health challenges, Indigenous Peoples and communities have demonstrated remarkable resilience through ongoing efforts to reclaim traditional knowledge, revitalize cultural practices, and strengthen connections to language, land, and community. These initiatives continue to support the renewal and preservation of Indigenous cultures and wellness traditions across generations.

Beyond the chronic and intergenerational adversities (produced by colonial policy) that contribute to the health disparities mentioned, Indigenous Peoples in Canada also experience disproportionate exposure to acute and discrete traumatic events (Aguiar & Halseth, 2015; Bombay et al., 2014). Traumas endured include sudden deaths, serious accidents, interpersonal violence, and house fires (Nelson & Wilson, 2017). Provincial and national governmental reports and statistics suggest that these types of trauma are particularly prominent in remote First Nation communities (Statistics Canada, 2024). For example, national data show that Indigenous people account for approximately 20% of fire-related deaths in Canada despite representing approximately 5% of the population (Statistics Canada, 2024). Remote First Nations communities are more than 10 times likely, and Inuit over 17 times more likely to die in a fire than non-Indigenous Canadians (Statistics Canada, 2021b). These disparities are attributed to inadequate housing, overcrowding, and chronically underfunded fire services (National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2017; Statistics Canada, 2024). Indigenous women and girls face disproportionate rates of violence and homicide, being 12 times more likely to be murdered or go missing than other women in Canada, and 16 times more likely than white women (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). The

elevated number of youth suicide in remote First Nations reflect an especially stark disparity with First Nations youth dying by suicide at approximately 6 times the rate of non-Indigenous youth, and Inuit youth at approximately 24 times the rate (Kumar & Tjepkema, 2019). When these acute trauma occur in a First Nations community that is tightly interconnected, the loss and impact is deeply and collectively experienced resulting in compounding grief across the community (Kirmayer et al., 2014). The accumulation of acute and historical trauma amplifies the adverse health conditions that are pervasive across First Nations, and Indigenous communities more generally (Aguiar & Halseth, 2015; Kirmayer et al., 2014).

These alarming realities across Indigenous communities and groups further highlight the urgency of understanding how well-being is shaped, sustained, and prevented within these contexts, as well as identifying ways it can be promoted. While the health disparities experienced by Indigenous Peoples are well documented, there remains substantial variability in well-being, reflecting the diversity in experiences, strengths, and resources within Indigenous communities. Therefore, examining the factors that promote well-being is important to properly advance health in Indigenous communities. Among many factors, belonging has emerged as a critical determinant of well-being.

Defining belonging

Belonging has been identified as a fundamental need that most individuals seek to fulfill, though (like well-being) there is variation in the way it is conceptualized, defined, and understood (Hagerty et al., 1992; Allen et al., 2021). Early conceptualizations of belonging primarily emphasized interpersonal relationships and social connectedness. For example, seminal work by Baumeister and Leary (1995) focused on the quality of interpersonal relationships, reflecting the critical components of micro-level influences on belonging. Other approaches have

expanded to include broader social, cultural, institutional, and environmental dimensions, reflecting more macro-level understandings of belonging (Michalski et al., 2020).

Hagerty et al. (1992) define belonging as a subjective feeling that one is an integral part of their surrounding systems including family, friends, school, work environments, communities, cultural groups, and physical places. This expansion reflects the recognition that belonging is not merely shaped by the quality of one's personal relationships, but by the broader contexts, communities, and cultural systems within which individuals are embedded. As a result, belonging has evolved to be understood not solely as a subjective individual feeling, but as a relational phenomenon that is context dependent and that operates across and within a circumplex of systems, structures, and environments. It is now generally recognized that each component involves distinct but interconnected implications for how individuals experience a sense of membership, acceptance, and connection in their lives (Allen et al., 2021).

Although belonging has emerged as a distinct construct, it has historically been studied alongside several conceptually related constructs including social inclusion, connectedness, support, and sense of community. These constructs share common themes of interpersonal relationships, acceptance, integration, while also each emphasizing different aspects of people's social experiences. Consequently, the belonging literature has been characterized by considerable conceptual overlap (Allen et al., 2021; Leary, 2010). Conversely, loneliness, social rejection, and social isolation are often explored as experiences associated with unmet needs or diminished feelings of belonging (Mellor et al., 2008). Relatedly, a growing body of evidence has underscored the profound impact that a sense of belonging has on individual and collective well-being, prompting researchers across fields to examine the conditions under which it is cultivated, maintained, or disrupted. As sociopolitical landscapes continue to shift and approaches to human

connection evolve (e.g. increase of technology and social media), understanding the determinants of belonging has increasingly become a priority in psychological and public health fields.

It is widely accepted that sense of belonging is essential for overall well-being (Allen et al., 2021). Maslow's hierarchy of needs was among one of the first to emphasize belonging as a fundamental need, including belonging as one of the five fundamental needs that drive human behaviour. Specifically, he argued and explained how (mostly all) humans have a fundamental need of love and belongingness that we seek to satisfy through genuine connections with our family, friends, groups, and communities (Maslow, 1943; 1954). Maslow's work laid the foundation for further focus on human motivation, and later theories of belonging. Following Maslow's conceptualization of belonging as a fundamental human need, several influential theoretical frameworks have further advanced understanding of belonging, including Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), Bowlby's Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969), Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory (Erikson, 1968), Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Sullivan's Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry, (Sullivan, 1953), and object relations theorists including Winnicott (1965), who emphasized the role of early relational experiences in shaping an individual's capacity for connection and belonging. Across these frameworks, belonging is understood not only as a fundamental human need but as a motivational force that drives individuals to seek and maintain meaningful social bonds, a view further elaborated in Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory. They position relatedness, referred to as the need to feel connected to others, as one of the three core psychological needs that motivate human behaviour and essential for well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Since Maslow's work, a growing body of literature has underscored that the need to belong is both biologically (e.g., evolutionarily) and psychosocially driven, shaping our thoughts, emotions, behaviours, and relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty et al., 1992). Notably, Baumeister and Leary's (1995) belongingness hypothesis has been foundational in the more recent advancement of belonging research. Based on extensive review of literature, they concluded that belonging is a fundamental human need that permeates our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant relationships. Due to its evolutionary and innate basis, individuals will extensively seek out social bonds to satisfy the need to belong (Buss, 1990; Bowlby, 1969). When the need is not satisfied, there are detrimental impacts on mental and physical well-being. They also highlight two key features to belonging: the need for frequent personal contacts with others and the perception of a stable relationship. The biological basis of belonging has been repetitively supported; that our safety and well-being are closely tied to the quality of our relationships and our environment, and staying connected to people and places is essential for our survival and is equally important as other basic needs such as food, water, shelter, and physical safety (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Allen et al., 2021). It is now widely accepted across fields that belonging is a fundamental human need both interpersonally and communally.

Belonging and well-being

Mental and emotional well-being

Amid rising rates of mental health concerns, loneliness, and suicidality, increasing attention has been directed toward understanding the social factors that contribute to health and well-being. As a result, belonging has emerged as an important focus of research, policy, and practice. Evidence has accumulated demonstrating belonging's role as a determinant to health

and well-being, increasing priority in understanding how belonging is fostered, sustained, and disrupted across different contexts and population has also increased.

Individuals who report a stronger sense of belonging tend to experience better mental health and psychosocial functioning in general (Michalski et al., 2020; Allen et al. 2021). More specifically, individuals who feel that they belong often report higher levels of happiness, life satisfaction, and meaning in life (Lambert et al., 2013). In a series of studies, Lambert et al. (2013) found that a stronger sense of belonging was consistently associated with greater perceptions that life is meaningful and purposeful, suggesting that belonging contributes to how individuals evaluate the quality and significance of their lives. Individuals with stronger feelings of belonging also report higher self-esteem, consistently lower rates of anxiety and depression, and less psychological distress than those who feel disconnected from others (Hagerty & Williams, 1999; Jose & Lim, 2014; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Allen et al., 2021). Belonging has also been associated with improved social functioning, greater educational attainment and academic success, and better occupational outcomes across the lifespan (Allen et al., 2021). These associations have been observed across diverse populations and settings, indicating that the benefits of belonging extend throughout the lifespan and across social contexts.

The benefits of belonging extend beyond mental health and into physical and physiological functioning. Research has linked stronger social connectedness with reduced risk of stroke (Boden-Albala et al., 2005), lower susceptibility to disease (Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2009), and reduced mortality risk (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Jetten et al., 2009). Notably, a meta-analysis of 148 studies involving over 300,000 participants found that individuals with stronger social relationships had a 50% greater likelihood of survival than those with weaker social relationships, an effect comparable to established health risk factors such as smoking and

physical inactivity (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). Collectively these findings demonstrate that belonging is imperative to all aspects of well-being. Conversely, individuals who experience insufficient acceptance and belonging present with a variety of adverse effects including increased stress, depression, poorer psychological adjustment, reduced self-regulation, and physical health problems (Allen et al., 2021; Leary & Gabriel, 2022). The literature on loneliness is substantial in supporting a positive relationship with depression (Jose et al., 2014; Cacioppo et al., 2006; Fisher et al., 2015; Hagerty & Williams, 1999). Loneliness and social disconnection have been linked to reduced immune functioning (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010), increased morbidity and mortality risk (Caspi et al., 2006; Penninx et al., 1997).

For young people, social exclusion has been linked to maladaptive behaviours and more chronic negative affect. Belonging within the school context represents a substantial portion of the belonging literature. Specifically, there is a robust negative correlation linking lower belonging and anxiety and depression among students in elementary and high school (Arslan, 2021; Parr et al., 2020), in addition to increased substance use (Bond et al., 2007), socioemotional problems (Arslan & Coşkun, 2023), and academic underachievement (Gülşen et al., 2024). The school context is particularly important in influencing belonging given that children and adolescents spend a substantial portion of time within this context. The school environment represents one of the most formative social environments during a critical developmental period where identity development, peer relationship formation, and psychosocial growth take place (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Slaten et al., 2016). Young people begin to develop a broader sense of social membership and belonging beyond the family unit, making experiences of inclusion or exclusion during this developmental period and the school environment particularly impactful. The importance of belonging during child and adolescent period extend

beyond the school environment. In their multilevel study of youth in Southern Ontario, Sloss et al. (2025) found that the association between belonging and well-being varied significantly across neighbourhoods, and based on gender, family support, country of birth, and neighbourhood safety. These results underscoring that belonging operates within a complex, multilayered ecology, rather than simply an individual experience. This body of evidence suggests that when individuals experience low belonging or social disconnection, they are more likely to experience difficulties within psychological, emotional, occupational, and physical domains.

Components of belonging

Interpersonal component

Interpersonal relationships play a fundamental, critical role in our need to belong (Mertika et al., 2020; Mellor et al., 2008; WHO, 2018). When considering belonging through a social lens, there are a vast number of interconnected elements that shape it, ranging from interpersonal relationships such as family, friends, peers, to the broader forms of social connectedness and support. Belonging is often cultivated through ongoing interactions with family members, peers, friends, and communities that provide individuals with social connectedness and support (Pezirkianidis et al., 2023). Interpersonal relationships comprise the most micro-level component comprising the need to belong. Key hallmarks that satisfy our need to belong include: (1) emotional investment through care, support, and trust; (2) acceptance and value; (3) frequency of contact (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty et al., 1992; Allen et al., 2021; Pezirkianidis et al., 2023). When these elements are present within a relationship, it allows an individual to be vulnerable which has a reinforcing effect on the relationship through an enhanced sense of intimacy (Drolet & Arcand, 2013).

Research within this realm highlights that both quality of relationships and frequency of contact in satisfying our need to belong. According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), an individual must have a *minimum amount* of quality relationships to feel higher levels of belonging, and these relationships require a minimum amount of contact. In other words, merely having a close, good quality relationship with your partner does not satisfy an individual's need for belonging; there must be quality relationships comprised of familial, friendships, and romantic connections. Furthermore, having a relationship with someone with no contact will not satisfy our required level of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Additionally, an important distinction is that belonging is more heavily influenced by an individual's *perceived* quality of relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Individuals with numerous social ties may lack feelings of belonging if they perceive minimal connection, support, reciprocity, acceptance, or value within those interpersonal relationships. However, individuals who perceive their relationships to be emotionally deep and responsive report feeling connected, accepted, and valued, thereby amplifying feelings of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty et al., 1992; Allen et al., 2021).

Relationships shape our need to belong through connectedness and support (Thoits, 2011), and can be provided by significant others (parents, partners, close friends), as well as people that represent more distant relationships (coworkers, classmates, teachers, acquaintances) (Sprecher, 2022; Granovetter,1973). Supportive relationships foster belonging by creating feelings of connection security, and psychological safety, allowing individuals to engage authentically without fear of rejection or exclusion (Edmonson, 1999; Merolla et al., 2024; Itzchakov & DeMarree, 2022). Research shows that people are more likely to seek support and

participate in their social environments when they perceive their relationships within these environments to be responsive and dependable (Merolla et al., 2024; Reis et al., 2004)

When positive and close relationships have a supportive component, this leads to positive psychological outcomes and fewer mental health challenges. Research consistently shows that individuals who perceive higher levels of social support from peers, family, and broader community networks report stronger feelings of belonging (Allen, 2021; Wentzel, 1998; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty & Patusky, 1995). Research also indicates that having positive and trusting relationships is positively associated with increased sense of belonging (Arslan, 2018; Easterbrook et al., 2013), as well as positive psychological development and outcomes, including greater life satisfaction, happiness, positive affect, and physical health across the lifespan (Pezirkianidis et al., 2023; Mertika et al., 2020; Drolet & Arcand, 2013).

Environmental component

The environmental approach to belonging is multifaceted with both physical psychological factors playing a critical role in an individual's belonging and well-being (Stout, 2018; Hanson & Stout, 2008). An individual's belonging is highly dependent on the places and spaces they occupy. Literature focused in this area commonly emphasizes the development of belonging through the interconnection of emotional, psychological, and physical attributes of an environment. Kim and Kaplan's (2004) framework outlines the intersection of these elements within a community that reinforce one another to cultivate community belonging and is widely used in both the literature on physical environment and community belonging. They outline that community belonging is fostered by place attachment (i.e. feeling at home in your community), identity (i.e. there is a good fit between you and your community), social interaction (i.e.

interaction with neighbours or people in your community more broadly), and pedestrianism (i.e. walkability of the environment) (Kim & Kaplan, 2004).

Several positive associations between physical characteristics and sense of belonging have been identified, including the walkability, architecture, and green space (Kim & Kaplan, 2004; Lund, 2002; Stout, 2018). For example, Kim & Kaplan found that natural features, open spaces, as well as the overall layout and architectural style had a significant impact on sense of community, where these characteristics increased belonging among residents (Kim & Kaplan, 2004). Lund (2002) found that sense of community was greater among residents living in an area with more trees and parks, closer proximity to amenities, and that was more pedestrian friendly (Lund, 2002). Other studies have found similar results that features such as architectural design and quality, access to greenspace, proximity of amenities, walkability, and the availability of public and semiprivate gathering space is associated with higher levels sense of community, and in turn well-being (Maleknia et al., 2025; Taheri et al., 2021b; Shabani et al., 2026; Plas & Lewis, 1996).

While the physical features of an environment can directly influence belonging, they also have an indirect effect through the extent to which they offer opportunity for social engagement and connectedness. For example, environments that are pedestrian friendly through urban design that oriented towards walking and biking (and less towards driving through increased public transportation systems) offer more opportunity for people to engage and interact (Lund, 2002; Schellenberg, 2018). Similarly, public spaces such as parks, community centres and cafes, influence community belonging through providing opportunity for both planned and spontaneous interactions. Over time, these interactions lead to familiarity with people and spaces, fostering feelings of trust and safety which are important for the development of belonging.

Factors such as individual's attitude (e.g. attraction) toward their neighbourhood, neighbourhood satisfaction and safety have also been identified as important in cultivating belonging within a physical space, with findings across studies revealing positively impacts on community belonging (Lund, 2002; Buckner 1988; Nasar & Julian, 1995). The concept of rootedness is an important aspect in which environments shape belonging and reflects the emotional element within our physical environments, therefore can be defined as the psychological attachment to a physical place (Lewicka, 2011; Tuan, 1977). It involves an individual's emotional investment and familiarity in a place resulting from memories and meaningful experiences (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). A sense of rootedness is derived from various factors including length of residency, the depth of social ties formed within a place, and the degree to which and individual has invested meaning in their surroundings over time (Cross, 2003; Goudy, 1990). Through the accumulation of experience and memory, a place becomes an aspect of identity and emotional security in addition to a physical space. This is demonstrated in the literature with studies finding a positive correlation between place attachment and age, length of residence, and strength of social ties (Lewicka, 2011). Length of residence has also been identified as a key variable influencing attachment to one's community, with longer residency providing greater opportunity for accumulated shared experiences and relationships that underlie sense of belonging (Goudy, 1990). Studies examining the relationship between rootedness and belonging have found rootedness and place attachment to be positively associated with community belonging (Buttazzoni & Irwin, 2024; Briggs & Smith, 2023).

Belonging at the community level

Sense of community has been identified as an important determinant of both individual and collective well-being. While one approach to belonging involves the interpersonal

component focused on one's relationships and their quality, community belonging reflects a broader, more macro level dimension of belonging extending into a collective. Beyond interpersonal relationships and connections, belonging is also shaped by broader structures and systems, ranging from institutional and economic structures to socially structures nature (Michalski et al., 2020). These systems and structures influence belonging through the degree to which they provide accessibility and opportunity for connection, participation, and inclusion. A notable amount of research has explored the role neighbourhood factors play in community belonging, both in the physical and social quality they provide. Neighbour quality, which encompasses factors such as safety, access to resources, and the degree of concentrated disadvantage, influences the extent to which residents feel connected to and comfortable within their community. Central to this is the concept of collective efficacy, defined as social cohesion among neighbour combined with their willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good (Sampson et al., 1997). Neighbourhoods high in collective efficacy are characterized by mutual trust, shared norms, and a sense of shared responsibility, all of which create conditions conducive to belonging and community integration (Sampson et al., 1977).

Community belonging can be examined across vastly different types of settings including religious and cultural spaces, civic engagement such as political participation and volunteer work, as well as neighbourhoods. Community belonging reflects an individual's perceived sense of connection and identity to a community, as well as attachment to and comfort within a community. It is a shared, collective experience that emerges from relational bonds, shared identity, and sense of attachment that develop among community members over time (Hystad & Carpiano, 2010). Like the broader construct of belonging, community belonging is

multidimensional, incorporating the physical, emotional, and social characteristics of places and the people that reside in them (Schellenberg et al., 2018).

McMillan and Chavis (1986) conceptualize community belonging as having four major elements: membership, referring to a feeling of belonging and personal relatedness to the group; influence, reflecting the sense that one can make a difference within the group and that the group matters to its members; integration and fulfillment of needs, capturing the belief that membership will provide access to resources that meet members' needs; and shared emotional connection, encompassing the commitment and belief that members share a common history experiences, and time spent together (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In their framework, they also proposed two ways in which community belonging impacts well-being. Firstly, individuals who feel connected to their community are more likely to participate in collective efforts to address shared challenges and improve community conditions. Second, community belonging and engagement can enhance quality of life by fostering a stronger sense of identity, purpose, and confidence while reducing feelings of isolation and loneliness (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Their work remains a widely used within the community belonging literature with consistent support for their proposed framework.

Social capital

Community belonging operates through an interweb of the social and structural conditions within an individual's environment that facilitate connection, participation, and inclusion. Social capital is one of the most widely researched and primary social conditions associated with community belonging (Halpern, 2005). Although distinct concepts, social capital and community belonging are closely related constructs (Schellenberg et al., 2018; Carpiano & Hystad, 2011). Whereas community belonging reflects an individual's perceived sense of

connectedness, attachment, and identification with a community, social capital refers to the resources embedded within social networks that facilitate social interaction, trust, reciprocity, and collective action. Social capital can be conceptualized as the material, informational, and affective resources embedded within social networks that individuals can access and mobilize to pursue individual or collective goals (Carpiano & Hystad, 2011; Schellenberg et al., 2018; Kawachi et al., 2008).

Research consistently identifies social factors as among the strongest predictors of community belonging (Perkins & Long, 2002; Lewicka, 2011). Individuals with more extensive social networks within their community tend to report stronger feelings of belonging compared to those with fewer social connections (Carpiano & Hystad, 2011), and a study using a Canadian sample found that social capital had the strongest correlation with sense of community belonging (Schellenberg et al., 2018). Neighbourhood ties appear to be particularly significant in this regard. Research shows that positive relationships with neighbours provide opportunities for social support, cooperation, and participation in collective activities that reinforce one's sense of membership within a community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Perkins & Long, 2002; Lochner et al., 1999). Research also increasingly suggests a reciprocal relationship in which social capital promotes belonging, and a higher sense of belonging strengthens social capital (Carpiano & Hystad, 2011; Ahn & Davis, 2020; Jun, 2023).

Community involvement's role in belonging and well-being

Although our present work does not directly examine the relationship between community involvement and belonging, it remains important to understand given the ambiguity in the literature pertaining to the directionality among belonging, community involvement, and well-being, as well as the significant interconnection among constructs. Community involvement

represents a common dimension of social capital and community belonging. Community involvement fosters belonging both at the interpersonal and collective level. At the interpersonal level, involvement creates opportunities for social interaction, emotional support, trust, acceptance, and relationship-building. At the collective level, these settings promote shared identity, values, goals, responsibility, and worldviews (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Talò et al., 2014). Together, these interpersonal and collective experiences provide important foundations for individual and communal belonging. Research points to similar trends across distinct types of community involvement pertaining to their relationship to sense of community. Research shows that when individuals are more engaged in their community regardless of the type of participation, they report stronger belonging including connection, attachment, and identification with their communities (Albanesi et al., 2007; Perkins & Long, 2002; Auger et al., 2016) and vice versa: individuals with higher belonging tend to participate in community more (Omoto & Packard, 2016). A meta-analysis confirmed the association between sense of community and participation, revealing that the magnitude of association is moderate and quite stable across studies (Talò et al., 2014).

Many forms of community involvement can be understood as expressions of prosocial behaviour which can be referred to as voluntary actions that benefit others or society, driven by altruism, empathy, and social responsibility, without expecting personal gain (Penner et al., 2005). These behaviours include helping, sharing, cooperating, and showing empathy toward others for their well-being and positive outcomes (Chen, 2024). Regardless of the specific type or context of prosocial behaviour, engaging prosocially is associated with greater well-being, including both psychological and physical benefits (Hui et al., 2020; Kim & Sul, 2026). The literature commonly distinguishes between two broad forms of community involvement and

prosocial engagement: more structured, formal types of participation, and more informal, everyday forms of engagement. Although both are associated with positive outcomes for belonging and well-being, they operate through somewhat different mechanisms and carry different implications, which reflects a distinction that is central to the present study.

Formal/structured community involvement

Formal community involvement refers to planned, organized, and sustained forms of participation that typically occur through institutions or established community structures. Referred to as planned and sustained activities performed without monetary compensation that are intended to benefit another person, group, or organization, community service and volunteerism are among the most commonly studied forms of formal community involvement (Horn, 2012). Civic engagement broadly spans multiple domains including social, environmental, and political participation, and encompasses formal community activities ranging from participating in community organizations to political advocacy and collective action.

Across settings and age groups, formal civic engagement has been linked to the development of prosocial values, particularly benevolence and universalism, which emphasize concern for the welfare of others and the broader social and environmental good (Schwartz, 1992; Horn, 2012). Through participation in civic activities, individuals often develop a greater sense of responsibility, agency, and influence within their communities, which can contribute to collective action, altruism, and broader community development. In turn, these prosocial orientations may reinforce a sense of belonging by aligning individuals' values with collective goals, thereby strengthening perceived membership, shared identity, and emotional connection to community (Albanesi et al., 2007; McMillan & Chavis). Conversely, when opportunities for civic participation are limited or inaccessible, individuals may experience adverse consequences

to their belonging due to reduced access to social support, identity affirmation, and meaningful opportunities for connection (Walters & Simoni, 2002).

Studies exploring formal community involvement using large datasets, have found that people who volunteered more reported higher levels of happiness, life satisfaction, psychological well-being (Haski-Leventhal, 2009; Borgonovi, 2008; Aknin et al., 2019; Shdaifat, 2025).). Raposa et al. (2016) found that volunteering and other forms of prosocial engagement were associated with improved psychological well-being as well as reduced symptoms of depression. More broadly, meta-analytic evidence confirms that prosocial behaviour is reliably associated with increased well-being, with experimental evidence showing that structured acts of giving including charitable donations and prosocial spending enhance subjective well-being (Hui et al., 2020; Curry et al., 2018). In a cross-cultural survey of 136 countries followed by two experimental studies, Aknin et al. (2013) found that spending money on others was associated with greater happiness and produced causal increases in positive affect across diverse populations, even when spending did not provide an opportunity to build or strengthen social ties. These findings support that benefits for well-being of formal prosocial engagement extend beyond the relational context in which they occur, though social connection remains an important part of the picture.

Religious involvement can also take on a more formal character, particularly when it involves regular participation in organized religious services, congregation-based activities, or faith community programs. Research has found that individuals who attend religious services more frequently report higher levels of belonging (Krause et al., 2016; Dunbar, 2020) and greater social connectedness (Hastings, 2016). Findings from a nationwide survey demonstrated that individuals who received emotional support from fellow congregation members were more likely

to feel that they belonged within their religious community, and those with stronger feelings of belonging reported greater satisfaction with their health (Krause & Wulff, 2005). Similarly, Lim and Putnam (2010) found that religious individuals reported higher life satisfaction, an effect largely attributed to the social networks developed through regular participation in religious activities. The features of a religious community can extend beyond the religious setting itself, contributing to stronger neighbourhood and community ties and promoting the collective connections that underpin communal belonging (Putnam, 2000; Lim & Putnam, 2010).

Informal community involvement

Informal community involvement refers to more spontaneous, personally motivated, and relationally driven forms of engagement that occur in everyday community life, outside of formal organizational structures. These include everyday acts of helping, caring for neighbours, sharing resources, random acts of kindness, and supporting others within one's community. While less studied than formal volunteerism, informal prosocial engagement is increasingly recognized as an important and distinct pathway through which well-being is cultivated and in many communities, particularly those with fewer resources or greater structural barriers to formal participation, informal engagement may represent the primary mode of community engagement.

A particularly robust and consistent finding within the area of positive psychology is the positive association between helping others and increased happiness for the person providing the help (Aknin & Whillans, 2021). Studies have found that prosocial engagement is associated with reduced symptoms of depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Aknin, 2022; Miles et al., 2022; Raposa et al., 2016), as well as reduced stress, enhanced immune function, and greater longevity (Kim & Sul, 2026). Across retrospective and experimental studies, individuals experienced

greater subjective well-being when focusing on making others happy rather than themselves, even in the absence of direct social interaction, highlighting that the benefits of prosocial behaviour extend even without formal structure or contact (Titova & Sheldon, 2022a). Furthermore, Titova and Sheldon (2022b) found that when people are prevented from acting prosocially, this reduced happiness. Longitudinal evidence showed that prosocial acts of kindness enhanced psychological flourishing, whereas self-focused acts did not, with changes in positive and negative affect mediating these benefits (Nelson et al., 2016).

Religious and cultural involvement also frequently take on informal, everyday expressions that are embedded in community life and connection. Cultural involvement is commonly characterized by participation in shared traditions, practices, and expressions of heritage that reinforce collective identity and cultural continuity and can range from organized cultural events to more informal intergenerational sharing of knowledge, storytelling, and everyday cultural practices. Across different cultural and religious groups, greater engagement in cultural activities has been associated with increased feelings of belonging and connection to one's cultural community (Sáez-Velasco et al., 2025; Peters et al., 2024; Ng & Fisher, 2015; Obst & Tham, 2009). More broadly, research across Indigenous, immigrant, and ethnocultural communities suggests that engagement with cultural practices can support cultural connection, psychological well-being, and a sense of belonging. Among Indigenous populations, engagement in cultural practices, including ceremonies, connection to land, language, and traditional knowledge systems, has been associated with stronger cultural identity, resilience, and holistic well-being (Kirmayer et al., 2011; Snowshoe et al., 2017). Similarly, Phinney and Chavira (1992) found that ethnic identity and self-esteem were significantly associated across multiple time points over a three-year period, highlighting the relationship between cultural identity

development and positive self-evaluation. Beyond interpersonal connections, cultural participation also fosters collective cohesion by strengthening shared identity, intergenerational continuity, and community resilience, contributing to both within-group belonging and broader social integration.

Some research points to informal prosocial behaviour and well-being operating within a positive feedback loop where engaging prosocially increases well-being, which then encourages an individual to engage in further prosocial behaviours (Layous et al., 2017; Aknin et al., 2012). This self-reinforcing cycle is consistent with the broader literature on community involvement and belonging, in which greater participation strengthens belonging and a stronger sense of belonging motivates continued participation (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Talò et al., 2014). As a result, informal prosocial behaviour embedded within everyday community life may be especially powerful precisely because it activates multiple reinforcing pathways simultaneously through belonging, social connection, and the direct psychological benefits of helping.

Importantly, however, the well-being benefits of prosocial behaviour are not unconditional. Research has found that the degree to which a prosocial act is volitional or autonomous predicts its effect on well-being, with helping that feels freely chosen and personally meaningful more likely to yield well-being benefits than helping that feels obligatory or externally pressured (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). Research grounded in SDT suggests that prosocial behaviour satisfies three basic psychological needs: 1) autonomy, 2) competence, and 3) relatedness. It is through the fulfilment of these needs that prosocial behaviour translates into enhanced well-being (Ryan & Deci, Weinstein & Ryan, 2010; Chen, 2024). Of these three needs, relatedness (i.e. the need to feel connected with significant others) is particularly relevant, as it mimics the relational dimensions of belonging that are central to understanding how community

involvement shapes well-being. This nuance is especially relevant when considering informal helping behaviour specifically, which tends to be spontaneous and personally motivated reflecting conditions under which the well-being benefits of prosocial engagement are most consistently realized.

Community involvement, belonging, and well-being

The relationships between sense of community, community involvement, belonging, and well-being are complex and highly interconnected with evidence suggesting bidirectional and mutually reinforcing associations rather than clear linear pathways. A bidirectional pattern is evident in the relationship between community involvement and well-being. Research consistently shows that participation in civic and broader community activities is associated with higher levels of psychological and physical well-being, including greater life satisfaction, improved mental health, and lower psychological distress (Lim & Putnam, 2010; Greenfield & Marks, 2004; Santini et al., 2015; Helliwell & Putnam, 2004). Evidence also suggests a reverse pathway whereby individuals with better psychological well-being may be more likely to engage in community activities over time; however, this direction appears somewhat less consistent across studies. Overall, these findings point to a reinforcing relationship in which well-being both predicts and is predicted by community involvement, although the strength of each pathway may vary depending on context and type of participation.

One explanation for these associations is that community participation provides access to key social and psychological resources (e.g. social support, capital, and meaningful social roles). These resources are widely recognized as protective factors for mental and physical health. In addition, participation offers opportunities for purpose, identity development, and contribution to collective goals which are consistently linked to improved well-being outcomes (Putnam, 2000;

Haslam et al., 2018). Belonging appears to be one important factor within these broader associations, as individuals who engage in community contexts often experience increased acceptance, connection, and membership, which in turn contribute psychological well-being. Consistent with this, belonging has been robustly associated with better health, as discussed previously (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Allen et al., 2021). Belonging however, operates alongside other mediators that are closely related including social support, social capital and social identity.

Importantly, sense of community, belonging, and well-being also appear to operate within a triadic relationship, acting as a mutually reinforcing system. Across different developmental age groups (youth, adolescent, and adult populations), and diverse settings, the literature generally demonstrates a positive association between sense of community and overall mental and physical well-being (Stewart & Townley, 2020; Michalski et al., 2020; Palis et al., 2018; Ross, 2002; Haim-Litvesky, 2023; Kitchen et al., 2012). For example, studies have demonstrated those with a sense of community reporting higher levels of well-being (psychological, social, and emotional) and happiness (Prati et al., 2018; Colombe et al., 2019; Kenyon & Carter, 2011; Obst & Tham 2009; Obst & Stafurik, 2010), life satisfaction (Ng & Fisher et al., 2016; Moscato et al., 2014; Ditchman et al., 2017) reduced symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress (Park et al., 2023), functioning, quality of life (Mak et al., 2009), positive developmental outcomes and adjustment (Albanesi et al., 2007).

Institutional and socioeconomic influences

Institutional factors and socioeconomic conditions play a critical role in shaping an individual's access to belonging through resources and opportunities for social participation. Exclusion, marginalization, and inequality can restrict opportunity and ability to cultivate belonging both at micro- and macro-levels. Socioeconomic inequality is understood to erode

belonging through two interrelated pathways: resource deprivation and psychological processes. Resource deprivation limits an individual's ability to participate in the social and civic activities through which belonging is cultivated, and psychosocial processes influence perceived status difference, stigmatization, and exclusion, which undermine the trust and sense of community membership that belonging requires (Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003; Stewart et al., 2009). Higher socioeconomic status (higher-income and high-occupational status) has been consistently associated with greater participation in voluntary associations, civic organizations, and community activities (Uphoff et al., 2013). This is because individuals with higher SES face fewer structural barriers to community involvement including financial costs, irregular work hours, and limited transportation (Ning et al., 2026). Other research has similarly found that individual income is a positive predictor of voluntary association membership, while neighbourhood poverty independently reduces participation, suggesting that the effect of socioeconomic disadvantage on community involvement operates at both the individual and contextual level (Duncan, 2010; Curtis et al., 2001). Research also demonstrates that belonging, mutual aid, and interpersonal trust generated through community involvement are especially critical for those who lack alternative social and economic support systems. These findings illustrate a paradox of compounding disadvantage: although communal and structural supports confer the greatest benefit upon lower-SES and marginalized populations, these same groups remain the most constrained in accessing such resources (Ning et al., 2026; Reutter et al., 2009). This dynamic is particularly salient for Indigenous peoples living off reserve, for whom socioeconomic disadvantage, systemic exclusion, and geographic displacement intersect to restrict access to the community participation (Hajizadeh et al., 2018; Wingert, 2010)

Disruption to belonging among marginalized communities

A more nuanced approach is required when exploring belonging among marginalized communities. The experience of discrimination and displacement by colonial systems and cultures is common among marginalized groups, who experience disruptions to belonging at various angles. They are ostracized from social groups more frequently, encounter more barriers to social support and services, and experience a lack of accessibility to participate in structured community settings (e.g. civic involvement). Due to experiences of social exclusion, discrimination, and systemic marginalization, marginalized communities may experience challenges to belonging within broader society. Consequently, higher rates of depression, loneliness, substance use, suicide, and overall poorer health are found in marginalized groups (Fox et al., 2020; Mallet-García & García-Bedolla, 2021; Meyer, 2003; Toombs et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2019; Williams & Mohammed, 2009) Simultaneously however, many individuals within these groups report strong feelings of belonging within their own cultural, ethnic, or identity-based communities, reflecting a paradox of belonging in which exclusion from dominant social structures coexists with connection and solidarity within one's community (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Allen et al., 2021). This community-based belonging can serve as an important source of resilience and well-being. This highlights the extraordinary impact that shared identity, experiences, and values have on an individual's belonging.

Belonging through an Indigenous lens

Belonging among Indigenous cultures is often cultivated in similar ways to those commonly described in the broader literature, however, there are important nuances to consider when examining belonging within Indigenous contexts. Elements that are important for belonging across all humans (e.g., connection with significant others, social capital, community

participation, and the physical environment) are evidently also important for Indigenous peoples (Gall et al., 2021). Yet nuances emerge in several important ways.

First, Indigenous perspectives on belonging place greater emphasis on the importance of interconnectedness. Belonging is developed and maintained through connections among all aspects of the universe. It is often understood as being rooted in reciprocal relationships with family, community, Creator, the land, the environment, and one's ancestors (Nightingale et al., 2026; Hill, 2006; Macdougall, 2017). The collective and reciprocal nature of these relationships is vital for cultivating and maintaining belonging (Chamberlain et al., 2021; Fiedeldey-Van Dijik et al., 2016). Furthermore, belonging within many Indigenous worldviews extends beyond feelings of connection and acceptance to encompass relational responsibilities. Individuals are not only connected to family, community, ancestors, and the land, but also hold obligations to care for and maintain these relationships (Ore et al., 2006). Thus, belonging is understood as both a relational and reciprocal process, grounded in responsibilities to others and to the broader interconnection among all entities.

Secondly, relationships and connections to the land warrant equal consideration for their role in shaping belonging as connections to persons (Macdougall, 2017; Tobias & Richmond, 2014). Within many Indigenous worldviews, the land and its species are understood as profound sources of knowledge and teaching. The land is often understood as a foundation of identity, culture, spirituality, and worldview, such that belonging is deeply attached to an ongoing relationship with traditional lands and the knowledge embedded within them. Therefore, connection to Mother Earth is viewed as a reciprocal and meaningful relationship, equal in importance to bonds with significant others, family members, and community to cultivate belonging (Tobias & Richmond; Anderson et al., 2022; Gall et al., 2021). Indigenous conceptions

of belonging also frequently transcend the present moment, linking individuals to their ancestors while simultaneously positioning them as stewards for future generations. Within this context, belonging is often experienced as a sense of continuity across generations, reinforcing identity, purpose, and collective responsibility (Wexler et al., 2014; Anderson et al., 2022).

Finally, cultural continuity represents another important pathway through which belonging is cultivated and sustained. Participation in cultural practices, ceremonies, traditional activities, language revitalization, and the transmission of Indigenous knowledge can strengthen connections to Indigenous identity, community, and shared histories (Ore et al., 2006; Auger, 2016; Wexler, 2014). These practices provide opportunities for individuals to engage with cultural values, worldviews, and traditions, while also fostering meaningful relationships with Elders, family members, and other community members (Graham et al., 2021). Thus, cultural engagement promotes belonging at both an interpersonal and collective level, connecting individuals to a broader cultural community, while reinforcing a shared sense of identity, history, and purpose.

A systematic review conducted by Graham et al. (2021) revealed that *culture as treatment* has various benefits to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit groups. Culture as treatment was conceptualized as facilitating culturally grounded indoor and outdoor activities (e.g. land-based, ceremony, traditional medicines, storytelling), peer-to-peer or Elder mentorship and other activities with other Indigenous people and an Elder (e.g. meal sharing, circle discussion, teachings of the Medicine Wheel). The results revealed that incorporating these culturally grounded practices improved mental health difficulties including depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts. Connection with Elders, other Indigenous people, and a shared culture made participants feel more included and wanted (i.e. fostered a shared identity and belonging) and

amplified feelings of pride in their Indigenous identity (Graham et al., 2021). Results from this review highlight the important role of interconnection between individuals, communities, culture, the natural world, and intergenerational transmission in cultivating feelings of inclusion and belonging as well as in promoting better mental health.

Historical and policy-related threats to Indigenous belonging

Although beyond the scope of this work, it is important to outline the impact of history and policy on belonging among Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous experiences of belonging cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism. Rather than affecting individuals in isolation, colonial policies systematically disrupted the relationships, cultural practices, and connections to land that are foundational to Indigenous understandings of belonging (Bombay et al., 2014; Kirmayer et al., 2011). Consequently, belonging among Indigenous peoples must be considered within the broader historical and sociopolitical contexts that have shaped opportunities to maintain connections with family, community, culture, language, and traditional territories.

Across Canadian history colonial policies sought to assimilate Indigenous peoples by disrupting the intergenerational transmission of culture, language, identity, and kinship systems. Policies and practices including the Indian Act, the residential school system, the Sixties Scoop, and the ongoing overrepresentation of Indigenous children in child welfare have contributed to the fragmentation of families and communities while limiting opportunities to maintain cultural continuity (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015; Bombay et al., 2014; Greenwood et al., 2018). Although these policies differed in their implementation and immediate objectives, they collectively undermined many of the relational systems through which belonging is developed and sustained.

Psychological research has demonstrated that these disruptions have implications that extend beyond historical events themselves. The erosion of cultural continuity, community connectedness, and Indigenous identity has been associated with poorer mental health outcomes, whereas stronger connections to culture, community, and traditional practices serve as protective factors that promote resilience and well-being (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Kirmayer et al., 2011; Allen et al., 2022). Understanding these historical and contemporary threats to belonging therefore provides essential context for examining the role of belonging in Indigenous well-being and highlights the importance of identifying factors that may strengthen belonging within Indigenous communities.

Introduction to the empirical study

A substantial body of research has established that well-being is a complex, multidimensional construct that is understood and approached differently across cultures, disciplines, and contexts. Across this literature, belonging has emerged as a consistent and powerful determinant of well-being, with those who report a stronger sense of belonging experiencing better mental and physical health outcomes, and those who lack belonging suffering from poorer psychological functioning, increased depression and anxiety, and elevated mortality risk (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Allen et al., 2021; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). The ways in which individuals cultivate belonging are equally varied, spanning the quality of interpersonal relationships, the physical and environmental contexts people inhabit, the communities and institutions they participate in, and the broader structural and socioeconomic conditions that either enable or restrict access to social connection and participation (Hagerty et al., 1992; Kim & Kaplan, 2004; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Ning et al., 2026). Marginalized communities, including Indigenous Peoples, face compounding disruptions to belonging, experiencing exclusion from dominant social structures while simultaneously drawing on their own cultural communities as a source of connection, resilience, and identity (Toombs et al., 2022). Indigenous worldviews approach well-being and belonging in ways that share some commonalities with the broader literature but also reflect important and distinct emphases, including the primacy of reciprocal relationships with the land, the interconnectivity of all species, the centrality of cultural practices as pathways to belonging and well-being, and the intergenerational transmission of identity and responsibility that extends belonging beyond the individual to the community and across time (Hill, 2006; Gall et al., 2021; Nightingale et al., 2026).

Despite this breadth of knowledge, considerably less is understood about how belonging, well-being, and community involvement operate specifically among Indigenous Peoples living off reserve in Canada, and how these constructs interact and influence one another within this population. Indigenous Peoples have, and continue to endure, profound and ongoing disruptions to their belonging and well-being through colonial policies and practices, including the Residential School System, the Sixties Scoop, and ongoing child welfare systems, each of which has systematically eroded the relational, cultural, and land-based foundations through which belonging is cultivated and sustained within Indigenous communities. Because Indigenous Peoples understand, cultivate, and sustain belonging and well-being in ways that are meaningfully distinct from the Western, individualistic frameworks that dominate much of the existing literature, it cannot be assumed that findings from general population research will generalize to Indigenous contexts.

The present study addresses this gap in several important and distinct ways. To our knowledge, no prior study has drawn on a national dataset to examine the relationship between belonging and well-being among Indigenous Peoples living off reserve in Canada, nor to investigate how community involvement shapes this relationship within this population. The use of a national dataset is a particular strength, as it captures Indigenous Peoples from across Canada who represent diverse communities, backgrounds, languages, and traditions, allowing for a more representative understanding of how belonging and well-being operate across the heterogeneity of Indigenous experience. Of additional significance, the present study examines two distinct forms of community involvement, specifically structured organizational volunteering and informal helping behaviour, which enables an examination of whether the type of community involvement matters for the belonging and well-being relationship, rather than

treating participation as a monolithic construct. The following review of the literature outlines what is known about well-being, belonging, and community involvement broadly and within Indigenous populations specifically, before presenting the present study.

Well-being

Well-being is a multidimensional construct whose conceptualizations vary across disciplines, cultures, and contexts, with models differing in their emphasis on subjective dimensions such as positive emotions and life satisfaction (Ryff, 1989), objective dimensions such as physical health status and educational attainment (Diener, 1984), and the specific domains they prioritize, including mental, social, physical, spiritual, and environmental well-being (Haim-Litevsky, 2023; Keyes, 1998). Over time, conceptualizations have evolved from the narrower medical model toward more holistic frameworks that recognize the interdependence of multiple dimensions of health and functioning (WHO, 2018; Swarbrick, 2024). Indigenous conceptualizations extend this holism further, viewing well-being as an infinite, circular process of striving for balance and harmony among mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual interconnected domains, with familial, community, and ancestral relationships, connection to the land, and participation in cultural practices all recognized as critical to cultivating that balance (Gall et al., 2021; Fiedeldey-Van Dijik et al., 2016; Hill, 2006; Auger et al., 2016). These understandings cannot be separated from the ongoing impacts of colonization, which has disrupted the ability of many Indigenous communities to maintain and transmit their traditional approaches to wellness, contributing to significant and persistent health disparities relative to non-Indigenous Canadians (National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health, 2022; McQuaid et al., 2017; Hus et al., 2024). These varying conceptualizations underscore the importance of examining well-being using data that captures the diversity of Indigenous

experiences, as cultural context and historical experience may shape how respondents understand and report their belonging and well-being. Additionally, due to these implications, it is important to understand different potential contextual factors that may influence, if at all, how belonging and well-being relate. Community represents a crucial factor for belonging and well-being among Indigenous populations, therefore making it particularly important to explore how different communal factors shape the belonging- well-being association.

Belonging and well-being

Belonging has been identified as a fundamental human need, equally important to physical survival, whose conceptualizations have evolved from early frameworks emphasizing interpersonal relationships at a micro level to more expansive approaches recognizing broader social, cultural, institutional, and environmental dimensions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Allen et al., 2021; Maslow, 1943; Michalski et al., 2020). Baumeister and Leary's (1995) belongingness hypothesis remains the most foundational and widely cited framework, concluding that belonging is an innate drive requiring at minimum a set of lasting, positive, and significant relationships characterized by frequent contact and perceived stability, while more recent definitions encompass family, friends, work environments, communities, cultural groups, and physical places as systems within which individuals can experience belonging (Hagerty et al., 1992; Allen et al., 2021). The evidence linking belonging to well-being is robust and extensive: individuals who report a stronger sense of belonging experience better mental health and psychosocial functioning, higher life satisfaction and meaning in life, and consistently lower rates of anxiety and depression (Michalski et al., 2020; Allen et al., 2021; Lambert et al., 2013; Hagerty & Williams, 1999), while a meta-analysis of over 300,000 participants found that stronger social relationships were associated with a 50% greater likelihood of survival, an effect

comparable to established health risk factors such as smoking (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). Conversely, insufficient belonging is associated with increased stress, depression, and poorer physical health (Allen et al., 2021; Leary, 2010; Cacioppo et al., 2006; Fisher et al., 2015). These well-established associations form the foundation of our first research question and examining them within a nationally representative sample of Indigenous Peoples living off reserve allows for a test of whether this relationship holds in a population whose experiences of belonging are shaped by distinct cultural, relational, and historical contexts.

Components of belonging

Belonging is cultivated across interpersonal, environmental, communal, and institutional contexts. At the interpersonal level, relationships characterized by emotional investment, acceptance, trust, and frequent contact are foundational to satisfying our need to belong, with perceived quality of relationships mattering as much as, if not more than, the quantity of social ties (Hagerty et al., 1992; Allen et al., 2021). At the environmental level, physical characteristics such as walkability and green space promote belonging through social interaction and place attachment, while rootedness, defined as the psychological attachment to a physical place derived from length of residency and depth of social ties, is positively associated with community belonging and is particularly relevant given the forced displacement from traditional lands that many Indigenous Peoples have experienced (Kim & Kaplan, 2004; Tobias & Richmond, 2014). At the communal level, social capital, defined as the resources embedded within social networks that facilitate trust, reciprocity, and collective action, is among the strongest predictors of community belonging, operating within a reciprocal cycle in which stronger belonging also reinforces social capital (Carpiano & Hystad, 2011; Schellenberg et al., 2018; Perkins & Long, 2002). At the institutional level, a paradox of compounding disadvantage

exists whereby those who stand to benefit most from community participation often face the greatest structural barriers to accessing it, a dynamic especially salient for Indigenous Peoples living off reserve whose opportunities to cultivate belonging are constrained by intersecting socioeconomic disadvantage, systemic exclusion, and geographic displacement (Ning et al., 2026; Hajizadeh et al., 2018; Wingert, 2010). Although the mechanisms are important for understanding how belonging develops, the complexity of belonging also highlights the need to examine the contextual factors that may shape its relationship with well-being. Given that belonging is embedded within social and communal environments, different community involvement represents an important context in which the association between belonging and well-being may be impacted.

The role of community involvement in belonging and well-being

Community involvement represents a common behavioural avenue through which individuals cultivate social capital and community belonging, fostering belonging at both the interpersonal level through social interaction, emotional support, trust, and relationship-building, and at the collective level through shared identity, values, goals, and responsibility (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Albanesi et al., 2007). Research consistently finds that greater community engagement is associated with stronger belonging regardless of the type of participation, with a meta-analysis confirming a moderate and stable positive association between sense of community and participation, and evidence suggesting this relationship is reciprocal, with stronger belonging in turn motivating greater participation (Talò et al., 2014; Albanesi et al., 2007; Omoto & Packard, 2016). Community participation is similarly and consistently associated with improved psychological and physical well-being, including greater life satisfaction, improved mental health, and lower psychological distress (Lim & Putnam, 2010;

Greenfield & Marks, 2004; Santini et al., 2015; Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; Talò et al., 2014). Research suggests that belonging may represent one pathway through which community participation contributes to well-being, alongside other social and psychological processes including social support, social capital, meaningful social roles, and identity development (Putnam, 2000; Haslam et al., 2018). However these processes likely operate within broader social contexts, and the relationships between belonging and well-being may vary depending on opportunities for community engagement. This body of evidence indicates that community belonging, participation, and well-being are interrelated constructs, highlighting the importance of examining how these constructs may influence each other, as well as the contexts that belonging most strongly impacts well-being.

The literature distinguishes between two broad forms of community involvement. Formal community involvement, including volunteerism, civic participation, and attendance at religious or cultural organizations, has been consistently associated with stronger belonging, higher happiness and life satisfaction, and better mental health outcomes (Albanesi et al., 2007; Omoto & Snyder, 2002; Borgonovi, 2008; Raposa et al., 2016). Informal community involvement, encompassing everyday acts of helping, caring for neighbours, and supporting others in one's community, is increasingly recognized as an equally important and distinct pathway through which belonging and well-being are cultivated, with research consistently demonstrating that helping others is associated with increased happiness, reduced depression, anxiety, and loneliness, and greater longevity (Aknin & Whillans, 2021; Raposa et al., 2016; Kim & Sul, 2026). These benefits are thought to operate through the satisfaction of basic psychological needs including autonomy, competence, and relatedness, the last of which mirrors the relational dimensions of belonging most directly and are strongest when the helping feels freely chosen and

personally meaningful (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010; Chen, 2024). This makes informal helping particularly powerful for Indigenous Peoples, for whom reciprocity, mutual care, and collective responsibility are foundational to how belonging and community are understood and lived (Hill, 2006; Auger et al., 2016; Chamberlain et al., 2021). Given the diverse settings and relational structures through which community involvement can occur, it is important to examine how different forms of participation contribute to the relationship between belonging and well-being. Our study therefore examines two forms of community involvement reflecting formal and informal participation to better understand how each shapes the belonging and well-being relationship among Indigenous Peoples living off reserve in Canada.

Belonging among Indigenous Peoples

Exploring belonging among marginalized communities requires a nuanced approach, as experiences of social exclusion, discrimination, and systemic marginalization can disrupt belonging at multiple levels simultaneously, resulting in higher rates of depression, loneliness, and social isolation (Fox et al., 2020; Toombs et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2019). Simultaneously, many individuals within these groups report strong feelings of belonging within their own cultural, ethnic, or identity-based communities, reflecting a paradox of belonging in which exclusion from dominant social structures coexists with connection and solidarity within one's community, serving as an important source of resilience and well-being (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Allen et al., 2021).

While belonging among Indigenous cultures is often cultivated through mechanisms similar to those described in the broader literature, several important nuances emerge. Indigenous worldviews place greater emphasis on interconnectedness, with belonging understood as rooted in reciprocal relationships with family, community, Creator, the land and environment, and one's

ancestors, and extending beyond feelings of connection to encompass relational responsibilities toward both human and non-human entities (Nightingale et al., 2026; Hill, 2006; Macdougall, 2017; Ore et al., 2006). Connections to the land warrant equal consideration as connections to persons, with the land understood as a foundation of identity, culture, spirituality, and worldview (Tobias & Richmond, 2014; Wexler et al., 2014). Cultural continuity also represents an important pathway through which belonging is cultivated, with culturally grounded practices including land-based activities, ceremonies, storytelling, and Elder mentorship found to improve mental health difficulties while fostering belonging, inclusion, and pride in Indigenous identity (Graham et al., 2021; Ore et al., 2006; Auger, 2016). These culturally specific dimensions of belonging emphasize the importance of studying belonging and well-being within an Indigenous population using evidence that reflects the diversity of Indigenous experiences and point to the particular relevance of both formal and informal community involvement as pathways through which Indigenous Peoples may cultivate belonging in ways that reflect their relational values and distinct historical experiences.

Current Study

As highlighted above, belonging, community involvement, and well-being have been studied extensively. However, there are still gaps that remain in the literature, which warrant further investigation to better understand the complex ways in which belonging, community participation, and well-being interact and influence each other. Firstly, belonging, community involvement, and well-being have predominantly been studied within general population samples, approaching these constructs through a Westernized lens, leaving a lack of understanding about how these constructs specifically operate within different cultural groups, especially Indigenous persons. Although there exists some research exploring these constructs among Indigenous populations, little research examines how different forms of community involvement influences the relationship between belonging and well-being, specifically among Indigenous Peoples of Canada. To our knowledge, no study has yet examined the relationship between sense of belonging and well-being, and the moderating role of community involvement in this relationship, using a national dataset of Indigenous Peoples living off reserve in Canada. As a result, it remains unclear whether the association between belonging and well-being is consistent across varying levels and forms of community involvement or whether community involvement serves as an important contextual factor in the belonging and well-being association. This represents a notable gap, given that Indigenous Peoples experience disproportionate health disparities. They also continue to endure complex challenges with establishing individual and group identity in relation to Indigenous culture. It is still important to understand, under which communal contexts the belonging and well-being relationship can be amplified to better support Indigenous well-being.

Although previous research has suggested that community involvement may contribute to well-being by fostering a greater sense of belonging (as highlighted in reviewing the literature), these relationships have more commonly been examined by focusing on the mechanisms through which community involvement influences well-being. While understanding these mechanisms is important, considerably less attention has been directed toward identifying the contextual factors that may strengthen or weaken the association between belonging and well-being. In particular, there is ambiguity pertaining to whether different forms of community involvement across different populations differently influence the strength of this relationship and whether some forms of community involvement are more influential than others. Understanding these nuances across different contexts, particularly due to the social and communal nature of belonging. Furthermore, given the cross-sectional nature of the present dataset, it cannot establish the temporal ordering required to draw causal inferences about indirect effects of mediation models (MacKinnon et al., 2007; Fiedler et al., 2011; Maxwell et al., 2011); it is not possible to determine whether community involvement precedes the development of belonging, whether belonging encourages greater community involvement, or whether these processes may operate in a reciprocal way. Consequently, rather than framing community involvement as a mechanism through which belonging influences well-being, the present study conceptualizes community involvement as a contextual factor that may influence the strength of the association between belonging and well-being.

Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to address the above-mentioned research gap by using national data from the 2017 Aboriginal People's Survey (APS) to investigate the association between sense of belonging and well-being among Indigenous Peoples living off reserve in Canada and examine how two distinct forms of community involvement

(organizational volunteering, informal helping behaviour) moderate this relationship. Examining moderation processes will allow us to determine whether the benefits of belonging are experienced similarly across levels of community involvement, or whether community involvement enhances the association between belonging and well-being. This will provide a more nuanced understanding of the contexts in which belonging may be most beneficial for well-being beyond the independent contributions of belonging and community involvement.

The first aim of our study was to examine the association between sense of belonging and well-being (R1). Based on research findings demonstrating a consistent and robust association between sense of belonging and well-being across diverse populations (Michalski et al., 2020; Allen et al., 2021; Lambert et al., 2013), we hypothesized that this pattern would similarly hold among Indigenous Peoples living off reserve. That is respondents who have a higher sense of belonging would have higher levels of well-being (H1). The second aim of our study was to explore the association between two different forms of community involvement (organizational volunteering; helping others) and well-being (R2). Given the well-documented links between more structured community participation (Lim & Putnam, 2010; Greenfield & Marks, 2004; Santini et al., 2015; Putnam, 2000) and informal involvement (Aknin et al., 2013; 2012; Chen, 2024) and well-being , we expected that both structured and informal forms of community involvement would be positively associated with well-being (H2). Lastly, our third research question focused on the moderating role of community involvement on the association linking belonging and well-being (R3). Drawing on literature suggesting that community involvement provides opportunities for connection, reciprocity, and engagement (Carpiano & Hystad, 2011; Ahn & Davis, 2020; McMillan & Chavis, 1986), we expected that the association between sense of belonging and well-being would differ across levels of community involvement. Thus, we

hypothesized that community involvement would moderate the relationship between sense of belonging and well-being such that sense of belonging would be more strongly associated with well-being among individuals with higher levels of community involvement.

Methods

Participants

Participants for this study included survey respondents from Statistics Canada Aboriginal Peoples Survey 2017 (APS). Respondents were 15 years of age and older living off reserve in Canada. Respondents reported their demographic information based on the categories provided. The categories included for Indigenous identity included First Nations, Métis, Inuit, multiple identities; sex categories included Male and Female; age categories included 15-18, 19-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, and 55 and over; education included grade 8 equivalent or lower, some secondary education, secondary school diploma or equivalent, some postsecondary education, postsecondary certificate or diploma below bachelor level, bachelor degree or university certificate/diploma/degree above bachelor level.

The total sample included 18,679 respondents and consisted of First Nations (43.8%), Métis (41.8%), Inuk (13%), and multiple Indigenous identities (1%). The sample was almost evenly split, with 45.8% reporting as male, and 54.2% reporting as female. Further demographic information is reported in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 18,679)

Variable	*n*	%
Age Group		
15–18	748	4.0
19–24	4,271	22.9
25–34	2,667	14.3
35–44	2,395	12.8
45–54	2,634	14.1
55 and over	5,964	31.9
Sex		

Variable	*n*	%
Male	8,563	45.8
Female	10,116	54.2
Indigenous Identity		
First Nations	8,190	43.8
Métis	7,815	41.8
Inuk (Inuit)	2,431	13.0
Multiple Indigenous Identities	183	1.0
Highest Level of Educational Attainment		
Grade 8 or Equivalent or Lower	1,178	6.3
Some Secondary Education	2,477	13.3
Secondary School Diploma or Equivalent	3,096	16.6
Some Postsecondary Education	3,756	20.1
Postsecondary Below Bachelor Level	6,228	33.3
Postsecondary Above Bachelor Level	1,944	10.4

Note. n = frequency; % = valid percent. Percentages within each variable may not sum exactly to 100.0 due to rounding. Age group was treated as a continuous variable in subsequent analyses (M = 4.06, SD = 1.683, range = 1–6), as was highest level of educational attainment (M = 3.92, SD = 1.417, range = 1–6). Indigenous identity reference category in subsequent analyses = First Nations.

National Indigenous data

The Aboriginal Peoples Survey (2017) is the fifth cross-sectional national dataset on Indigenous people including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit living off reserve in Canada. The survey includes demographic information, health outcomes, and determinants of health. The cycle for this survey ran from January 2016 to August 15, 2017. Data collection was conducted using a Computer-Assisted Interviewing (CAI) platform, which facilitated complex skip patterns and real-time data validation. Interviews were conducted through both computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) and computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). The 2017 APS Public Use Microdata File (PUMF) was accessed online for free for this study. Data are available on the Odesi repository for Canadian social sciences (https://odesi.ca/en). (Aboriginal Peoples Survey, Statistics Canada, 2017).

Well-being

Well-being was measured using a composite of two self-report items assessing mental and general health. Respondents rated each on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Poor" to "Excellent," with higher scores reflecting better health status. The two items were averaged to create a single well-being composite score, which was used as the outcome variable in both moderation models. Internal consistency for the two-item composite was acceptable, Cronbach's $\alpha = .71$.

The operationalization of well-being used in our models is limited in comparison to the multidimensional conceptualization outlined in the literature review, which encompass psychological, emotional, social, physical, spiritual dimensions. This reflects a common trade-off in national epidemiological research where the breadth of large Canadian datasets (i.e., Statistics Canada archive) is considered alongside the depth and specificity of measurement available for constructs. Therefore, the two-item composite should be understood as a partial indicator of well-being rather than a comprehensive measure. Notwithstanding this limitation, our moderation model as a whole encompasses widely recognized core dimensions of well-being (i.e. sense of belonging, community involvement, and their interaction) therefore reflecting a broader lens of well-being (Hill, 2006; Gall et al., 2021; Allen et al., 2021).

Sense of belonging to Indigenous community

Sense of belonging was assessed using a four-item composite derived from five belonging-related items available in APS. After conducting reliability analysis, one item was excluded due to poor fit. The final belonging composite assessed: (1) how much respondents wanted to find out more about their Indigenous history, traditions, and culture; (2) how active they were in Indigenous group events and activities; (3) how good they feel about their own

Indigenous group identity; and (4) their sense of belonging to their own Indigenous group. Respondents rated each question on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from “Disagree or strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”. All items were rescaled so that higher scores indicated stronger sense of belonging. Internal consistency for the four-item composite was acceptable (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .69$).

Community involvement

Two types of community involvement were examined as moderators in the study. In the first moderation model, the community involvement measurement assessed a structured, formal type of community involvement. Respondents were asked “In the past 12 months, how often did you volunteer for a group or organization?” In the second model, the community involvement measure assessed an informal type of community involvement. Participants were prompted with “Now think about helping people on your own, not on behalf of an organization. For example, caring for someone’s home, driving someone to an appointment, visiting the elderly, shoveling snow or unpaid babysitting,” and then asked, “In the past 12 months, how often did you carry out any of these types of activities without pay?” Answer categories for both measures included at least once a week, at least once a month, less than once a month, not at all in the past 12 months. Both items were rescaled so that higher scores reflected more frequent participation.

Analysis

Our analysis included two separate moderation analyses. Both models had well-being as the dependent variable. In Model 1, sense of belonging served as the independent variable, and community involvement (organizational volunteering) was our moderator. Sense of belonging and community involvement (organizational volunteering) served as our interaction term. For Model 2, sense of belonging remained as our independent variable, and community involvement (helping others) was our moderator. Community involvement (helping others) served as our interaction term. The same covariates were included in both models: Indigenous identity, biological sex at birth, age, and education. For all analyses normalized survey weights were applied to account for the APS survey design and to produce unbiased population estimates while preserving the observed sample size for analyses. Analyses were pre-registered prior to data collection and analysis. Missing data were handled with listwise deletion. This approach was selected given the additional methodological complexity with implementing multiple imputation in analyses incorporating complex survey weights (Enders, 2010; Heeringa et al., 2017). After listwise deletion, there were N =18659 cases remaining for Model 1, and N =18679 for Model 2. This discrepancy in sample size reflects differing patterns of missing data across the two community involvement measures used in each model. Sex and Indigenous identity were dummy coded for inclusion in the regression models. Sex was coded such that female respondents served as the reference category (0 = Female, 1 = Male). Indigenous identity was dummy coded into three variables (Métis, Inuit, and Multiple Indigenous Identities), with First Nations respondents serving as the reference category. Sense of belonging and both community involvement variables were centered prior to computing the interaction terms, consistent with standard practice for moderation analyses conducted using the PROCESS macro. Where significant interactions were

identified, simple slopes were examined at one standard deviation below, at, and above the mean. Prior to conducting the moderation analyses, multicollinearity among predictors and covariates was assessed using variance inflation factors (VIF). Across both models, all VIF values were low (range = 1.005–1.190) and tolerance values were high (range = .840–.995), indicating that multicollinearity was not a concern in either model.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2, along with Pearson correlations. Sense of belonging was significantly positively correlated with self-reported mental health (r = .03, p < .001), volunteering with an organization (r = .14, p < .001), and helping others independently (r = .11, p < .001). Interestingly, sense of belonging was significantly negatively correlated with self-reported general health (r = -.04, p < .001). General health and mental health were strongly positively correlated (r = .55, p < .001). Volunteering and helping others independently were also significantly positively correlated with one another (r = .20, p < .001). Mental health was also weakly correlated with helping others independently (r = .02, p = .042). All correlations were statistically significant at the p < .05 level or below, with the majority significant at p < .001 (see table 2).

Table 2

Bivariate Correlations Among General Health, Mental Health, Community Involvement, and Sense of Belonging

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Volunteering with an Organization	1.86	1.10	—					
2. Helping Others Independently	2.87	1.12	.20**	—				
3. Sense of Belonging	2.65	.73	.14**	.11**	—			
4. Wellbeing	2.48	.97	.08**	.04**	−.00	—		
5. General Health	2.39	1.11	.09**	.05**	−.04**	.89**	—	
6. Mental Health	2.58	1.08	.05**	.02*	.03**	.88**	.55**	—

Note. N ranges from 18,631 to 18,679 due to pairwise missing data.
*p < .05. **p < .001.

Moderation Analysis

Well-being & Structured Volunteering. Model 1 examined the association between sense of belonging and well-being, and whether a structured type of community involvement (organizational volunteering) moderated this association. Moderation was tested using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022) with all predictors, covariates, and interaction term estimated simultaneously. Using organizational volunteering (i.e. community involvement) as the moderator the overall model was significant, explaining 4.3% of the variance in well-being, R^2 = .043, $F(9, 18649) = 92.97$, $p < .001$. Sense of belonging was not a significant predictor of well-being, $b = .02$, $SE = .01$, $t = 1.85$, $p = .064$. In contrast, community involvement with structured volunteering was a significant positive predictor of well-being, $b = .05$, $SE = .01$, $t = 7.08$, $p < .001$, where those who volunteered more frequently had higher levels of well-being. No significant interaction between sense of belonging and community involvement was found for this model, $b = -.013$, $SE = .009$, $t = -1.46$, $p = .145$. These results support our second hypothesis however, does not support our first or third hypothesis. Community involvement through structured volunteering predicted well-being, however belonging did not. Additionally, no significant interaction between belonging and structured volunteering was found.

Among the covariates, relative to First Nations respondents, identifying as Métis was a significant positive predictor of well-being, $b = .07$, $SE = .02$, $t = 4.42$, $p < .001$, indicating that Métis respondents reported higher levels of well-being compared to First Nations respondents. Identifying as Inuit, $b = .03$, $SE = .02$, $t = 1.41$, $p = .159$, and identifying with multiple Indigenous identities, $b = -.08$, $SE = .07$, $t = -1.06$, $p = .288$, did not differ significantly from First Nations respondents in terms of well-being. Education was a significant positive predictor of well-being, $b = .10$, $SE = .01$, $t = 20.27$, $p < .001$, such that respondents with higher levels of

educational attainment reported higher well-being. Being male was a significant negative predictor of well-being relative to being female, b = -.20, SE = .01, t = -14.04, p < .001, indicating that male respondents reported lower well-being than female respondents. Lastly, age was a significant negative predictor of well-being, b = -.04, SE = .00, t = -10.20, p < .001, such that older respondents reported lower levels of well-being (see table 3).

Table 3

Interaction Between Sense of Belonging and Community Involvement (Organizational Volunteering) in predicting Well-Being

Predictor	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*p*	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	2.52	0.03	72.18	< .001	2.47	2.59
Sense of Belonging	0.02	0.01	1.85	.064	-0.00	0.04
Comm. Involvement (Org.)	0.05	0.01	7.08	< .001	0.03	0.06
Belonging × Comm. Involvement	-0.01	0.01	-1.46	.145	-0.03	0.00
Métis	0.07	0.02	4.42	< .001	0.04	0.10
Inuit	0.03	0.02	1.41	.159	-0.01	0.08
Multiple Identities	-0.08	0.07	-1.06	.288	-0.21	0.06
Education	0.10	0.01	20.27	< .001	0.09	0.11
Gender (Male)	-0.20	0.01	-14.04	< .001	-0.22	-0.17
Age	-0.04	0.00	-10.20	< .001	-0.05	-0.03

Note. N = 18,659. Model R^2 = .043, F(9, 18649) = 92.97, p < .001. b = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error of b; LLCI/ULCI = 95% lower/upper limit confidence interval. Reference category for Indigenous identity = First Nations. Reference category for gender = Female

Well-being & Helping others. Model 2 examined the association between sense of belonging and well-being and whether an informal type of community involvement (helping others) moderated this association. Again, moderation was tested using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022) with all predictors, covariates, and the interaction term estimated simultaneously. Using community involvement (helping others) as the moderator, the overall model was

significant, $R^2 = .041$, $F(9, 18669) = 88.58$, $p < .001$, explaining approximately 4.1% of the variance in well-being. Sense of belonging was a significant positive predictor of well-being, $b = .03$, $SE = .010$, $t = 2.73$, $p = .006$, where those with a higher sense of belonging have higher levels of well-being. Community involvement through helping others was also a significant positive predictor of well-being, $b = .01$, $SE = .01$, $t = 2.20$, $p = .028$, indicating that respondents who more frequently helped others in their community, reported higher levels of well-being. A significant interaction between sense of belonging and community involvement was found for this model, $b = .02$, $SE = .01$, $t = 2.20$, $p = .028$. The interaction accounted for an additional 0.02% of the variance in well-being ($R^2 = .0002\%$), indicating a statistically significant but very small moderation effect. Simple slopes analyses indicated that the positive association between sense of belonging and well-being was not significant at low levels of helping others but became significant at average and high levels, with the strongest positive association observed among respondents reporting higher levels (i.e. more frequent) levels of helping others.

Table 4

Moderation of the Relationship Between Sense of Belonging and Well-Being by Community Involvement (Helping Others Independently)

Predictor	*b*	*SE*	*T*	*p*	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	2.49	0.03	72.78	< .001	2.42	2.56
Sense of Belonging	0.03	0.01	2.73	.006	0.01	0.05
Comm. Involvement (Helping)	0.01	0.01	2.20	.028	0.00	0.03
Belonging × Comm. Involvement	0.02	0.01	2.20	.028	0.00	0.04
Métis	0.07	0.02	4.71	< .001	0.04	0.10
Inuit	0.03	0.02	1.24	.215	-0.02	0.07

Predictor	*b*	*SE*	*T*	*p*	LLCI	ULCI
Multiple Identities	-0.08	0.07	-1.10	.273	-0.22	0.06
Education	0.11	0.01	21.70	< .001	0.10	0.12
Gender (Male)	-0.19	0.01	-13.80	< .001	-0.22	-0.17
Age	-0.04	0.00	-10.12	< .001	-0.05	-0.03

Note. N = 18,679. Model R^2 = .041, F(9, 18669) = 88.58, p < .001. b = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error of b; LLCI/ULCI = 95% lower/upper limit confidence interval. Reference category for Indigenous identity = First Nations. Reference category for gender = Female.

To probe this interaction conditional effects of sense of belonging on well-being were examined at low, average, and high levels of community involvement through helping others. Corresponding values reflecting one standard deviation below the mean, at the mean, and above the mean of the moderator (i.e. helping others) were generated by PROCESS macro. As demonstrated in Figure 1, at low levels of helping others, the association between belonging and well-being was not significant, b = .01, SE = .01, t = 0.51, p = .610. At mean levels of helping others, the association between belonging on well-being was positive and significant, b = .03, SE = .010, t = 2.76, p = .006. At high levels of helping others, the association between belonging and well-being was significant and stronger in magnitude, b = .05, SE = .014, t = 3.52, p < .001.

These results suggest that the positive association between sense of belonging and well-being strengthens as community involvement through helping others increases. Specifically, belonging was significantly associated with well-being among individuals reporting average and high levels of helping others, whereas this association was not significant among individuals reporting lower levels of helping others (see Table 5). Taken together, all three of our hypotheses were supported in this model. Both belonging and community involvement through helping others predicted well-being. Additionally, community involvement through helping others significantly moderated the association between belonging and well-being, with belonging most

associated with well-being among those with greater informal community involvement by helping others.

Table 5

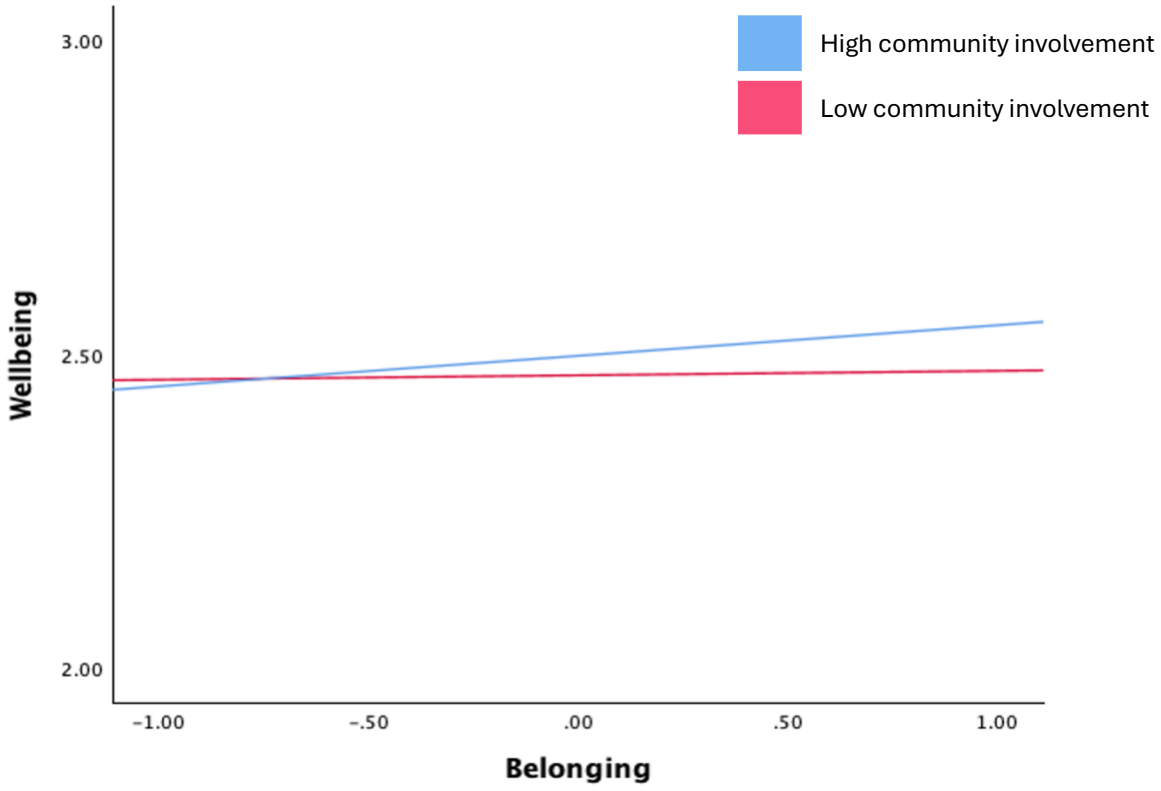
Conditional Effects of Sense of Belonging on Well-Being at Values of Community Involvement (Helping Others Independently)

Level of Helping Others	Effect	*SE*	*t*	*p*	LLCI	ULCI
Low (–1 SD)	0.01	0.01	0.51	.610	-0.02	0.03
Mean	0.03	0.01	2.76	.006	0.01	0.05
High (+1 SD)	0.05	0.01	3.52	< .001	0.02	0.08

Note. Values reflect the conditional effect of sense of belonging on well-being at low, mean, and high levels of community involvement (helping others independently), centered at –1.10, 0.02, and 1.14, respectively.

Figure 1

Simple Slopes of Sense of Belonging Predicting Well-Being at Low and High Levels of Community Involvement (Helping Others Independently)



Among the covariates, age was significantly negatively associated with well-being, b = -.04, SE = .00, t = -10.12, p < .001, such that older respondents reported lower levels of well-being. Being male was a significant negative predictor of well-being relative to being female, b = -.19, SE = .01, t = -13.80, p < .001, indicating that male respondents reported lower levels of well-being than female respondents. Education was a significant positive predictor of well-being, b = .11, SE = .01, t = 21.70, p < .001, where respondents with higher education reported higher well-being. Relative to First Nations respondents, identifying as Métis was a significant positive predictor of well-being, b = .07, SE = .02, t = 4.71, p < .001, indicating that Métis respondents reported higher well-being compared to First Nations respondents. Identifying as Inuit, b = .03, SE = .02, t = 1.24, p = .215, and with multiple Indigenous identities, b = -.08, SE = .07, t = -1.10,

p = .273, did not differ significantly from First Nations respondents in terms of well-being (see Table 4).

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the association between sense of belonging and well-being among Indigenous Peoples living off reserve in Canada, and whether two different types of community involvement (organizational volunteering and informal helping behaviour) moderated this relationship. Both the independent associations of belonging and community with well-being, as well as their interactive effect were examined as main effects and an interaction term within each moderation model. Overall, our hypotheses were partially supported. Belonging was significantly associated with well-being in our second model, but not our first model; both community involvement through organizational volunteering (Model 1) and helping others (Model 2) were positively associated with well-being; and organizational volunteering did not moderate the relationship between sense of belonging and well-being in our first model, however helping others did moderate the relationship between belonging and well-being in our second model.

Partially consistent with H1, belonging was positively associated with well-being in Model 2 (helping others), however was not in Model 1 (organizational volunteering). The difference in belonging's significance across models may be attributable to the slightly stronger correlation with organizational volunteering (r = .14) than with helping others (r = .11), where in Model 1 volunteering may account for a small portion of the variance in well-being that belonging would otherwise explain. In Model 2, respondents who reported a higher sense of belonging also reported higher levels of well-being. This finding aligns with a robust and extensive body of literature demonstrating that belonging is a fundamental human need with far-reaching implications for psychological and physical health (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Allen et al., 2021; Michalski et al., 2020), which extends to our work using a nationally representative

sample of Indigenous Peoples of Canada. These findings stress the importance of belonging as a determinant of well-being among Indigenous Peoples of Canada (National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health, 2022; McQuaid et al., 2017).

Supporting our second hypothesis, both forms of community involvement were significant positive predictors of well-being. Those who reported volunteering with an organization more frequently reported higher levels of well-being. The same pattern was found for informal community involvement; those who helped others in their community more, reported higher levels of well-being. These findings highlight that across both structured and informal forms of community participation contribute to well-being among this population, consistent with research showing that community participation across a range of forms (e.g. volunteering, randoms acts of kindness, prosocial spending) is associated with improved mental and physical health. Mechanisms of this association may include greater social support, social capital, and meaningful relationships (Aknin et al., 2013; 2012; Chen, 2024; Putnam, 2000; Haslam et al., 2018; Lim & Putnam, 2010; Greenfield & Marks, 2004).

Our third hypothesis was partially supported. The interaction between belonging and organizational volunteering was not significant in Model 1, indicating that formal volunteering did not moderate the association between belonging and well-being. However, there was a significant interaction between belonging and helping others in Model 2. Conditional effects analysis revealed that the association between belonging and well-being was stronger at higher levels of informal helping behaviour. Specifically, belonging was significantly associated with well-being among individuals reporting average and high levels of helping others, whereas this association was not significant among individuals reporting lower levels of helping others. Importantly, the distribution of organizational volunteering scores was notably left-skewed

relative to helping others (M = 1.86, SD = 1.10 vs. M = 2.87, SD = 1.12). This suggests a potential floor effect in the organizational volunteering variable, which may have attenuated the statistical power to detect a moderation effect in Model 1 (McClelland et al., 1993).

Our moderation findings shed light on the conditions under which belonging is most strongly related to well-being, and importantly on the conditions under which belonging alone may not be sufficient to promote well-being. Specifically, our results revealed that at low levels of helping others (i.e. less frequent helping), sense of belonging was not a significant predictor of well-being. This suggests that the well-being benefits of belonging may require being active in one's community, and that belonging alone may not improve well-being to the same extent for those with more limited community engagement.

Furthermore, the pattern of conditional effects reveals an important nuance pertaining to informal community participation. The impact of helping others extends further than simply promoting well-being and amplifies the extent to which belonging and well-being relate to each other. Among individuals who help others in their community, a stronger sense of belonging is more powerfully associated with well-being. Conversely, among individuals with low levels of informal helping, the relationship between belonging and well-being was not observed. This could suggest that belonging, while a fundamental need, may not directly translate into well-being unless it is enacted and expressed through active participation in communal life. Relatedly, the combination of higher belonging and helping others is aligned with the construct of "mattering", whereby people are (1) noticed, (2) are cared about, (3) are depended upon, (4) and would be missed if they were absent, and (5) worried about if something happened to them (Rosenberg & McCullogh, 1981; Paradisi et al., 2024). It is notable that this pattern emerged specifically for informal helping behaviour and not for formal organizational volunteering

despite research consistently demonstrating that both forms of community participation are associated with improved well-being (Lim & Putnam, 2010; Greenfield & Marks, 2004; Santini et al., 2015). Two possible explanations may account for this distinction.

First, unlike formal volunteering which often requires financial resources, reliable transportation, scheduled availability, and organizational membership, informal helping is likely more accessible, particularly to Indigenous people in Canada. Informal helping occurs naturally within everyday community life. For marginalized populations including Indigenous Peoples living off reserve who disproportionately face socioeconomic disadvantage and systemic exclusion, barriers to formal community participation are well-documented (Ning et al., 2026; Reutter et al., 2009; Hajizadeh et al., 2018), and may explain why informal helping shows a stronger relationship with how belonging translates into well-being in this population. Second, informal helping may be more culturally embedded for Indigenous Peoples. Reciprocity, mutual care, and collective responsibility are foundational to how belonging and community are understood and lived in many Indigenous worldviews (Hill, 2006; Auger et al., 2016; Chamberlain et al., 2021). Helping others in one's community is engrained as a form of expression of Indigenous relational values, making it a particularly meaningful pathway through which belonging is enacted, and in turn experienced as well-being. These findings therefore suggest that *how* one participates in community life (and not just whether one participates) may be an important consideration when examining the belonging-well-being relationship among Indigenous populations.

Organizational volunteering was significantly associated with well-being, indicating that structured community participation may contribute positively to well-being *independent of sense of belonging*. While there remains ambiguity in the literature about directionality, this finding

supports some previous research suggesting that formal volunteerism promotes various aspects of well-being including greater life satisfaction, improved mental health, and reduced psychological distress through access to social networks, resources, and opportunities for civic engagement (Putnam, 2000; Haslam et al., 2018; Lim & Putnam, 2010; Greenfield & Marks, 2004). Notably, the interaction between organizational volunteering and belonging was not significant in Model 1. This indicates that the well-being benefits of formal volunteering operate independently from belonging, where formal volunteering appears to contribute to well-being regardless of how strongly an individual feels they belong. This is a meaningful conceptual distinction from the pattern observed with informal helping behaviour and suggests that more structured forms of community participation may promote well-being through different mechanisms, such as access to structured social roles, resources, and institutional networks rather than through the relational and reciprocal pathways through which belonging most directly shapes well-being.

Additionally, it is important to note that the main effect of organizational volunteering on well-being was larger in magnitude than the main effect of helping others independently. This difference in effect size is best understood in the context of the moderation finding in our second model. In Model 1, where no significant interaction was found, the main effect of organizational volunteering on well-being is more straightforward as a direct, unconditional effect. However, in Model 2, the effect of informal helping behaviour is more complex, where it is associated with well-being directly, but also interacts with belonging, indicating that its association with well-being is conditional on an individual's level of belonging. These differences are consistent with the literature suggesting that different forms of participation generate well-being through different mechanisms; structured volunteering tends to foster social capital and integration

(Putnam, 2000; Lim & Putnam, 2010), while informal helping is more closely tied to relational reciprocity and emotional connection (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010; Aknin & Whillans, 2021).

Several covariate findings are also worth noting. Education was a consistent positive predictor of well-being across both models, with those with higher education reporting high well-being. This reflects patterns well-documented in the broader health literature linking educational attainment to improved health outcomes through better access to resources, employment, and health knowledge (National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health, 2022). Age was negatively associated with well-being in both models, with older respondents reporting poorer well-being, which may reflect the accumulating health burdens associated with aging, as well as the compounding effects of colonial trauma experienced by older Indigenous adults who may be more likely to have directly experienced residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and other colonial policies (McQuaid et al., 2017). A gender difference was found, with males reporting lower well-being, a finding that may reflect gendered patterns in help-seeking, social connection, and health reporting rather than underlying differences in objective well-being. Compared to First Nations, Métis respondents reported better well-being, consistent with national data showing Métis populations report somewhat better health outcomes than First Nations populations, though still below non-Indigenous Canadians (Statistics Canada, 2025).

Limitations

Several important limitations of the present study should be considered when interpreting these findings. Firstly, a fundamental limitation is the nature of the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and Statistics Canada, the governmental body that administered the Aboriginal Peoples Survey. Statistics Canada has historically been used as a surveillance tool of the Canadian state in ways that have directly harmed Indigenous communities, most notably

through the residential school system and other colonial policies. Indigenous respondents' trust in governmental data collection bodies therefore may be understandably limited, and this may have meaningfully impacted survey participation and response patterns. Specifically, response bias may be a concern whereby respondents underreport experiences of poor well-being, low belonging, or limited community involvement out of concern for surveillance, or stigmatization. This may impact the extent to which the findings capture the full range of how respondents or Indigenous groups differ systematically in their experiences of belonging, community involvement, and well-being. This highlights the importance of when interpreting findings derived from governmental datasets in the context of Indigenous well-being to approach it responsibly, and with cultural humility.

Second, the survey was limited to Indigenous Peoples living off-reserve, excluding First Nations communities living on reserve entirely from this dataset. Noteworthy, the Aboriginal People's Survey remains the largest national health survey of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, and as such represents an invaluable source of population-level data on Indigenous health and well-being. At the same time, the exclusion of on-reserve populations is a meaningful limitation worth considering. It is well-established that Indigenous Peoples living on reserve experience some of the most severe and persistent health disparities in Canada, including higher rates of poverty, overcrowded housing, food insecurity, and limited access to health services (National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health, 2022), and their experiences of belonging, community involvement, and well-being may differ in important ways from those of off-reserve populations. Including on-reserve populations in future research could meaningfully enrich our understanding of these relationships, particularly given evidence that community life in on-reserve and rural contexts is often more tightly knit and interdependent, with mutual support and

helping further embedded in everyday life. These patterns may interact with belonging and well-being in ways that differ from what was observed in our study (Carpiano & Hystad, 2011).

Third, the cross-sectional design of the study limits the conclusions that can be drawn about the directionality of the relationships among belonging, community involvement, and well-being. It is unclear whether belonging drives well-being, or whether individuals with higher well-being are more likely to feel a sense of belonging. This is not unique to the present study, with the broader literature not yet reaching a clear consensus on the directionality of these relationships, with multiple studies documenting bidirectional and reciprocal associations, or revealing various longitudinal results (Prati et al., 2016; Haim-Litevsky, 2023; Obst et al., 2002; Albanesi et al., 2007; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Longitudinal data would be required to untangle these pathways and establish causal inference. The trade-off of this cross-sectional design, however, is high external validity with a nationally representative sample of over 18,000 Indigenous Peoples living off reserve. As such, the findings offer a broad and generalizable picture of these relationships that smaller and more controlled studies lack.

Implications

Despite these limitations the findings of the present study carry several meaningful implications. First, this study contributes to an important but still relatively limited body of research examining belonging and well-being specifically among Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Given the disproportionate health disparities experienced by Indigenous populations, identifying factors that promote or hinder well-being within this population has direct relevance for the design and delivery of health services, social supports, and community-based interventions. By demonstrating that sense of belonging and community involvement each contribute to well-being individually, and that informal helping behaviour is associated with a stronger relationship

between belonging and well-being, our work helps clarify which aspects of community life may be most important to understand and support Indigenous well-being.

Second, the finding that different forms of community involvement show different relationships with belonging and well-being has meaningful implications worth considering for how supports and services for Indigenous Peoples are designed and where resources are directed. The findings from this study suggest that the relationship between community involvement and well-being among Indigenous populations in Canada may vary depending on the type of participation, particularly with respect to how belonging and community involvement interact to predict well-being. Rather than treating community participation as a uniform construct, our work highlights that informal relational forms of engagement deserve attention alongside formal programming. At a broader level, these results point to the potential value of investing in community infrastructure that facilitates informal connection, mutual aid, and culturally grounded forms of collective engagement, particularly given that informal helping already reflects Indigenous relational values of reciprocity, collective responsibility, and care for others (Hill, 2006; Graham et al., 2021; Auger et al., 2016). Given the cross-sectional nature of this study however, observations are exploratory rather than prescriptive and future research is needed before concrete recommendations can be drawn from these findings.

Third, this study makes a methodological contribution by providing a national, large-scale quantitative perspective on factors that influence Indigenous well-being. While qualitative and community-based research remains invaluable for capturing the depth and nuance of Indigenous experiences of belonging and well-being, large-scale national data offer an important understanding of the patterns and predictors of well-being across a diverse Indigenous population. Future research would benefit from combining these approaches using national data

to identify broad patterns, while community-based research illuminates the cultural, contextual, and lived dimensions that quantitative data cannot fully capture.

Conclusion

The present study examined the association between sense of belonging and well-being among Indigenous Peoples living off reserve in Canada, and the role of two distinct forms of community involvement in moderating this association. Findings provided partial support for the study's hypotheses, with belonging significantly predicting well-being in the context of informal community involvement of helping behaviour, but not organizational volunteering, both formal and informal types of community involvement were positively associated with well-being, and the association between belonging and well-being was strengthened only under the context of helping others. These findings underscore the importance of considering both the type and relational quality of community involvement when examining well-being among Indigenous populations, and highlight informal, reciprocal forms of community engagement as particularly meaningful pathways through which belonging may relate to well-being. In conclusion, this study extends current understanding of the complex, interrelated roles of belonging, community participation, and well-being in Indigenous contexts, and points to the importance of continued research and investment in community-level supports that honour the relational and culturally grounded dimensions of Indigenous well-being.

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