

Indigenous Well-Being Practices and Emotional Intelligence: A Conceptual Framework for Promoting Mental Health

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Abstract

Indigenous well-being practices and emotional intelligence: A conceptual framework for promoting mental health Abstract Modern psychological approaches to mental health predominantly emphasize individual cognitive and emotional processes, often overlooking the collective, ecological, and spiritual dimensions of well-being. In contrast, indigenous knowledge systems conceptualize well being as a dynamic state of harmony among the individual, community, nature, and the larger cosmos. These systems highlight relational living, emotional balance, and community-based practices as central to psychological health. Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and utilize emotions effectively in oneself and others. Extensive psychological research has demonstrated that emotional intelligence is strongly associated with mental health, resilience, and adaptive functioning. Notably, many indigenous well-being practices—such as communal rituals, spiritual engagement, nature-based living, and collective participation—implicitly nurture key components of emotional intelligence, including emotional awareness, empathy, self-regulation, and social connectedness. The present conceptual paper aims to develop an integrative framework that bridges indigenous well-being practices with contemporary theories of emotional intelligence to promote mental health. Drawing upon indigenous health philosophies and established psychological models of emotional intelligence, the paper identifies conceptual convergences and complementary mechanisms that support emotional regulation, collective well-being, and psychological resilience. The proposed framework emphasizes community involvement, spiritual practices, and ecological harmony as culturally



grounded pathways for enhancing emotional intelligence. By integrating indigenous wisdom with modern psychological innovation, this paper advocates for a holistic and culturally sensitive approach to mental health promotion. Such an approach has the potential to enrich psychological theory, inform community-based mental health interventions, and guide future empirical research aimed at fostering emotionally intelligent and psychologically resilient societies.

Keywords: indigenous well-being, emotional intelligence, mental health, community well being, cultural psychology

1. Introduction

The development of mental health research and practice has been historical in the context of individual-based paradigms, which put emphasis on cognitive appraisal, emotional regulation and intrapersonal functioning. Although the use of such models has produced significant therapeutic improvements, they tend to underestimate the social and ecological and spiritual contexts influencing the emotional experience and psychological well-being. Consequently, mental health is often presented as a personal issue and not as an interpersonal and social phenomenon (Biles et al., 2024). The alternative epistemological orientation is provided by indigenous knowledge systems. In very different cultural settings, well-being is perceived as relational, in the sense of harmonious relationships between people, people and communities, land, spiritual forces and ancestral continuity. Sustenance of emotional well-being is achieved by means of collective practices, cultural duties, and ecological connectedness instead of individual self-management ((Jongen et al., 2023; Dinku, 2025). Emotional intelligence has now become a strong psychological concept that has been able to connect emotional functioning with mental health outcome (Mackean et al., 2022). Nonetheless, Indigenous epistemologies have seldom been used to test emotional intelligence theory. This gap is addressed in this paper as a conceptual framework to combine the practices of Indigenous well-being with emotional intelligence as per the promotion of mental health in a holistic and culturally centered approach.

2. Literature Review

The fact that the well-being is not determined by the absence of illness, but by the existence of the balance and harmony in the pertinent realms is the cornerstone of indigenous conceptions

of well-being. The emotional well-being is observed as the result of long-lasting respectful relations with relatives, community, land, ancestors and the spiritual forces. Psychological distress is not then regarded as a mere internal dysfunction, but a pointer of broken relationships and undermined ties in these systems of interdependence (Wang et al., 2025). This perspective of life places emotional life in a collective and ecological framework, in which an individual wellbeing cannot be disaggregated in communal and environmental health. In the Indigenous context, relational accountability and shared responsibility are the means to develop emotional regulation and resilience. People are placed in social relationships of relatives and social responsibility, where feelings are recognized, moderated and kept in collective support instead of solitary self-control (Acebes-Sánchez et al., 2025). Shared decision-making, ceremonies, and help-giving are the practices that offer organized opportunities to show emotions and get them justified. Such practices normalize emotion swings and the perception that emotional stability is maintained by engaging in communal living and not by individual regulation. Spiritual participation takes the place of centrality in Indigenous well-being and serves as one of the major processes of emotional regulation and meaning making. Spiritual activities, including rites, prayer, ancestral recollection and cosmological narratives, provide interpretative structures within which emotional experiences are comprehended and welded. Emotions are not our individual response but are connected to moral, spiritual and ecological orders. This spiritual orientation enhances emotional grounding- it locates distress in larger stories of continuity, purpose and relationships to one another, which mitigates fragmentation and encourages psychological coherence (Lv et al., 2024). Connections between ecological and emotional stability and identity are also enhanced through Indigenous systems of well-being. Land is not considered as a passive resource, but as a living being with whom people have mutual relations. The daily exposure to natural environments helps in the regulation of emotions by using senses, rhythmic movement, and bodily awareness. This eco-founding strengthens identity, belonging and continuity across the generation-line and this offers emotional rooting to protect stress and adversity. Emotional intelligence, which may be described as the ability to perceive, interpret, manage and react positively to emotions, is strongly associated with these practices of the Indigenous people when perceived as a relational skill as opposed to an individual ability. Social participation, observation, and common cultural norms help to learn emotional awareness and control (Abualruz, 2024). The Aboriginal



conceptualization of emotional intelligence is built through group experiences, which instill the sense of empathy, responsiveness towards others, restraint of emotions when needed, and open expression in the suitable community environment. These abilities are not imparted overtly but they are nurtured informally through an active experience of cultural activity. Informal, but effective systems of emotional learning include storytelling, rituals, and communal activities. Oral narratives are important in passing emotional knowledge by passing on moral teachings, social implications, and culturally acceptable emotional reactions. Rituals are among the safe and controlled spaces of grief, joy, anger, and hope, which allow regulation of emotions by sharing the same experience. Land-based and spiritual practices add additional support and reinforcement to the emotional reflective and balance, by blending cognitive, emotional, and embodied aspects of experience (Rao, 2024). A combination of Indigenous well-being practices and emotional intelligence are united on the basis of focus on the relationality, contextual sense, and group control over emotional life. When placed on an Indigenous construct, emotional intelligence is not a personalized competence but a culturally enshrined ability, which aids in resilience, social cohesion, and intergenerational continuity. Such convergence indicates the weaknesses of individualistic concepts of the emotional functioning and the importance of Indigenous knowledge systems in shaping the holistic and relational paradigms of mental health (Kannan et al., 2025).

3. Expanded Conceptual Framework: Integrating Indigenous Well-Being Practices and Emotional Intelligence

The conceptual framework proposed makes Indigenous well-being practices as the culturally based mechanisms where emotional intelligence is nurtured and maintained towards the eventual role of promoting mental health. In contrast to traditional models of emotional intelligence that focus on the personal skills related to cognitive-emotional skills, the framework redefines emotional intelligence as a relational, collective, and contextually based ability. Emotional functioning is considered as a result of ongoing interaction of individuals, communities, spiritual belief systems, and ecological environments.

3.1 Ontological and Epistemological Foundations

On the ontological level, the framework presupposes that emotions are not the internalized states that are isolated, but the experiences that are constructed socially and enacted in relations (Biles et al., 2024; Dinku, 2025). Indigenous epistemologies theorize knowledge and emotion as something that cannot be disengaged of lived experience, culture, and moral responsibility (Biles et al., 2024). The emotional intelligence in this worldview has been internalized in social roles, kinship, and ecological relationships and not in the individual person (Mackean et al., 2022). The framework is epistemologically based on the experiential and participatory knowledge systems. Emotional learning is facilitated by observation, imitation, telling stories and participating in rituals as opposed to formalised learning or assessing through standardization (Jongen et al., 2023; Farnbach et al., 2025). This questions prevailing positivist ideology in the psychological science and demands culturally competent interpretations of emotional competence (Biles et al., 2024).

3.2 Structural Building Blocks of the Framework

The conceptual framework offered is a combination of four interdependent areas such as community and social structures, cultural practices and ritual processes, spiritual meaning systems, and ecological embeddedness, which all influence emotional intelligence and mental health (Mackean et al., 2022; Jongen et al., 2023). These spheres are not linear, but dynamic, and create a complex system where emotions are acquired, controlled, and attributed meaning. The most important relational setting of emotional development is offered through the community and social structures. Emotional awareness, empathy, and social sensitivity are developed through the networks of kinship, collective responsibility, and communal support and emotional intelligence is placed as a relational capacity based on collective accountability as opposed to individual control (Acebes-Sánchez et al., 2025; Abualruz, 2024).

Ritual processes and cultural practices serve as systems of emotional control. People learn culturally acceptable ways of expressing emotions and holding them back through recurring performance in rituals and ceremonies and convert emotional expression into a collective experience which strengthens regulation and collective identity and social cohesion (Farnbach et al., 2025; Jongen et al., 2023). The systems of spiritual meaning place the affective experience in larger cosmological and ethical stories, making possible the emotional assimilation and support. Spiritual practices enhance emotional coherence, acceptance, and



adaptive coping by introducing a new meaning to distress and viewing it as meaningful and relational as opposed to pathological (Gannamraju & Chembrolu, 2025; Vance & Young, 2024). Ecological embeddedness helps to establish emotional grounding with the embodied relationship with land and natural cycles. Nature is known to stabilize affective states, enhance identity and belonging and protect against emotional dysregulation, as a result of sensory interaction (Dinku, 2025; Mackean et al., 2022). These domains combined form a whole which presents the emotional intelligence as the product of interplay of social, cultural, spiritual and ecological processes, where mental health should be considered as the community and culturally maintained result (Kannan et al., 2025).

3.3 Community and Social Structures as Learning of Emotions

In the Indigenous context of emotional development, community structures are the main arenas. Kinship ties, community rule, joint work and joint nursing share emotional burden to social networks (Jongen et al., 2023; Farnbach et al., 2025). Emotional intelligence is developed when individuals get to know how to keep a check on their feelings about other people, to predict social outcomes as well as to react in an empathetic manner when they are in a group (Acebes-Sánchez et al., 2025). Under this model emotional knowledge is developed by continuously interacting with others, emotional regulation is assisted by respected social norms that can help us know when to express ourselves and when to hold back. Emotional distress is treated together and it does not allow the individual to internalize the distress and turn it into failure (Kannan et al., 2025; Abualruz, 2024). This emotional process socialization improves psychology safety and strength.

3.4 Ritual Practices and Processes

The rituals, ceremonies, and collective gatherings form a part of the cultural practices that act as a structured emotional regulator in the framework. Rituals offer ritualized and predictable arenas in order to release strong feelings of grief, fear, anger, and joy (Farnbach et al., 2025). By means of repeated involvement, people learn culturally approved modes of emotional expression and emotion control (Jongen et al., 2023). Rituals also turn emotions into a collective experience and decrease the fragmentation of the emotions and strengthen the practice of collective identity. In this case, emotional intelligence consists of the knowledge of

the time, manner, and whom to share emotions with. This interpersonal competence, emotional clarity, and self-regulation are reinforced with the help of this culturally guided modulation (Mackean et al., 2022).

3.5 Storytelling as the Process of Emotional Transmission

Storytelling has an important place in the picture as a tool of intergenerational learning of emotions. Oral histories store emotional information, morality and social anticipations, and provide templates of how emotional outcomes and social obligations work (Dinku, 2025; Vance & Young, 2024). Storytelling enables people to understand empathy as they become exposed to various emotional attitudes and moral issues (Abualruz, 2024). Emotional intelligence is therefore developed as an interpretive art, which allows people to perceive emotions in the context of larger social, ethical, and historical framework. This is a story-based emotional learning, which aids in psychological coherence and continuity of culture (Kannan et al., 2025).

3.6 Spiritual Meaning Systems and Emotional Integration

This dimension evaluates the importance of religion to the health provisions of a given nation. The emotional meaning-making depends on spiritual belief systems in the framework. Spiritual practices put emotions in the cosmological stories which underline continuity, interconnectedness, and purpose (Gannamraju & Chembrolu, 2025; Vance & Young, 2024). Emotional interactions are perceived as significant experiences associated with spiritual imbalance, moral imbalance or disconnection with other people as opposed to personal pathology. Such spiritual framing facilitates emotional acceptance, lessens self-accusation and encourages adaptive coping. Emotional intelligence hence encompasses the ability to make sense of emotions on spiritual/moral levels, which leads to resilience, hope, and psychological assimilation (Lv et al., 2024).

3.7 Ecological Embeddedness and Emotional Grounding

The conceptual framework is based on ecological embeddedness of the environment. Indigenous land relationships are based on reciprocity, stewardship and embodied interaction with the rhythms of nature (Dinku, 2025). Frequent contact with nature helps in the emotional

stabilization due to sensory control, physical activity, and temporal periodicity (Mackean et al., 2022). Such experiences of embodiment stabilize emotional conditions and affirm identity and belonging. In this aspect, emotional intelligence entails being sensitive to the environment and controlling of emotions based on ecological rhythm. This ecological foundation is a preventive measure of stress over time and dysregulation of emotions.

3.8 Dynamic Interaction and Mental Health Outcomes

The framework theorizes emotional intelligence as a product of the dynamic interplay between the community participation, cultural practices, spiritual meaning systems and ecological participation. These dimensions combined develop emotional awareness, empathy, regulation, and social connectedness (Acebes-Sánchez et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025). The competencies, in their turn, lead to better mental health outcomes, such as a decrease in psychological distress and increased resilience and a stronger collective well-being (Abualruz, 2024; Kannan et al., 2025). Instead of considering mental health as a personalized result, the framework places it as a communal success maintained by the culturally integrated emotional practices. Emotional intelligence serves as a mediator and consequence of Indigenous well-being practices, and augments cyclic relationships between emotional and social health.

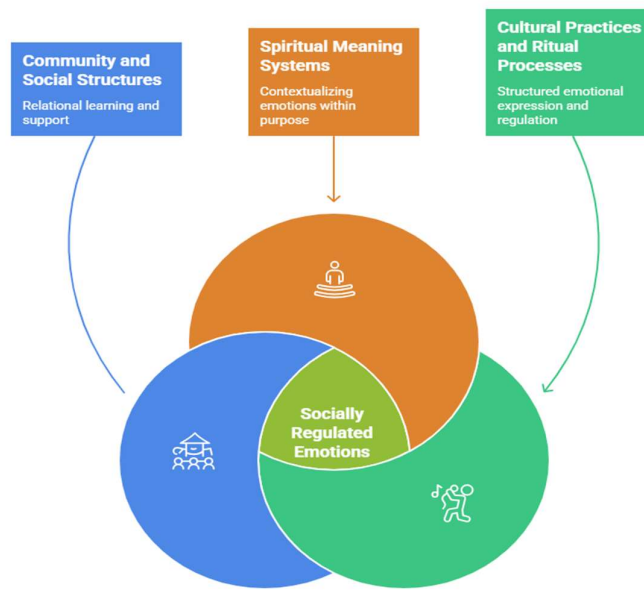


Figure 1: The interplay of Domains in emotional intelligence

5. Theoretical Implications

This theoretical framework presents numerous valuable theoretical contributions to the psychology of emotion, mental research study, and cultural psychology. As an individual ability, emotional intelligence is firstly reconceptualized as a culturally specific and relational phenomenon instead of an individual one. Dominant emotional intelligence theories have conceptualized emotional competence mostly as an intrapersonal skill set, which revolves around the individual awareness and control. The current framework extends emotional intelligence theory to collective, spiritual, and ecological levels by incorporating the Indigenous well-being epistemologies, and thus disproves the belief that emotional functioning can be best explained only in its individual dimension. Second, the framework promotes the theory of mental health by repositioning emotional regulation as a social distribution process. The current psychological frameworks tend to place emotions regulation in the personal mental control processes, and exclude the importance of community and culture, as well as shared meaning structures. Conversely, this system shows how emotional control is incorporated within societal practices, rituals and interpersonal responsibility. This transformation of a solitary regulation to shared emotional control is already a theoretically strong approach to comprehending the nature of resilience, especially among those who are collectivists and Indigenous.

Third, the framework also adds to the cultural psychology because it foregrounds Indigenous knowledge systems as valid theoretical bases instead of a contextual variable or cultural modification of Western models. Indigenous epistemologies are not only posed as cultural manifestations of emotional intelligence but they are thought to be generative systems that play an active role in shaping emotional development, meaning-making and psychological well-being. This criticizes deficit based and universalist paradigms and assists the construction of culturally pluralistic theories of emotion and mental health. Fourth, the fact that it has to include spiritual meaning systems and ecological embeddedness opens up the conceptual framework of emotional intelligence theory. Although the existing models take into consideration social aspects, they seldom consider social spiritual narratives and relationships between man and nature as key emotional integration processes. Theorizing spiritual and ecological participation as fundamental routes to emotional cohesion and strength, the framework brings new areas of



insight into the emotional intelligence research and integrates psychological theory with holistic accounts of well-being.

6. Conclusion

This research supports an empirical approach to the development of an integrative model to merge Indigenous well-being practices with emotional intelligence development to enhance mental health. The results show that cultural inherent, community-based programs can be useful in increasing emotional intelligence and at the same time minimize psychological distress and reinforce well-being and resiliency. The research centers emotional learning in the context of relational, spiritual, and ecological to oppose individualistic mental health paradigms and emphasize the importance of collective and culturally based avenues to psychological health.

The combination of the Indigenous knowledge systems with the modern emotive intelligence theory will further the conceptualization and the actual implementation in promoting mental health. The method provides a culturally responsive framework that may be used to inform community-based interventions, inform policymaking, and control subsequent research to build emotionally intelligent and resilient societies.

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