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Article

Engaging First Nations People at Work: The Influence of Culture and Context

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Abstract: The paper seeks to understand organisational context and culture's influence on engaging First Nations People in Canada in work. Organisations have many opportunities to attract and engage Indigenous people, who have distinct worldviews and unique cultural customs not necessarily reflected in a North American workplace. Indigenous people also grapple with the historical and ongoing disparate impacts of settler colonialism that intersect colonial systems in most every area of their lives. This study worked within Indigenous research principles to encourage the articulation of deeply felt experiences and points of view of how First Nations people viewed and interacted with their work. The findings reviewed the experiences of twelve First Nations individuals working in non-Indigenous organisations. Through anti-colonial and critical organisational theoretical lenses, the study reveals how the context and culture that defined this sample of First Nations people shaped their views of what is essential to engaging them in the workplace. The findings illustrate what First Nations people would like to see in a workplace culture, what they feel needs to be recognised as part of their unique Indigenous context, and the approaches and practises that are most important for engaging them. Understanding the effect of context and culture on positive work interactions provides new information for organisational leaders, managers, diversity officers, and Human Resource practitioners to better support First Nations engagement in the workplace. It may also offer an approach to better engaging other culturally diverse organisational groups. The results add value to the fields of critical theory, anti-colonial theory, critical management studies, and Indigenous wholistic theory. The results further the discussion on the processes of decolonization and the recognition of Indigenous and minority rights in the workplace.

Keywords: indigenous context; indigenous culture; decolonization; engagement; workplace



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1. Introduction

Indigenous people in Canada continue to constitute one of the largest and fastest-growing labour pools, but their equal participation in the workforce is not yet fully recognised. This situation is demonstrated by recent labour force metrics, which indicate the Indigenous labour force participation rate in 2022 is estimated at 77.3%, compared to 84.93% for non-Indigenous persons (Statistics Canada 2022). Underlying this lower rate of participation is the challenge of obtaining and maintaining employment (Brunnen and Jankovic 2009; Human Resources and Skill Development Canada 2013; Statistics Canada, Labor Statistics Division 2010). The documented unemployment rate for Indigenous people in 2021 will be 11.6%, compared to 7.6% for non-Indigenous people, regardless of age, gender, or level of education (Bleakney et al. 2021). In general, researchers indicate that it is necessary to address the issues that have led to lower rates of retention for Indigenous people in Canada compared to non-Indigenous people (Brunnen and Jankovic 2009; Delic and Abele 2010; Howard et al. 2012; Kunz et al. 2012; Oppenheimer 2014; Statistics Canada, Labor Statistics Division 2010; Usalcas 2011). Though the reasons for differences in participation in the workforce are broad and not limited to employment, Canadian organisations will benefit from understanding how to engage Indigenous employees in a manner that facilitates their participation and retention.

The purpose of this study is to explore and expand on how Indigenous culture—specifically First Nations cultures—influences employment and employee retention from an exclusively Indigenous lens. Grounded in intersections between critical theory, anti-colonial theory, critical management studies, and Indigenous wholistic theory, the study focuses on reducing inequality through empowering and promoting social, political, and economic inclusion for Indigenous Peoples. These theoretical frameworks and analytical tools are oriented toward resisting and dismantling the foundational aims of colonial regimes, systems, and ideologies that work against equity and inclusion.

Drawing on Indigenous research methods to privilege the voices, experiences, and lives of participants, this research focused on the organisational and human resource development knowledge base, particularly in work engagement and intercultural practises, by building an understanding specific to the issues of First Nations employees working in North American organisations (Guillaume et al. 2014; Miner 2007). The study's central question asks what problems First Nations people face at work, especially regarding how their culture influences their preferences, behaviours, and how they engage with others.

Canada is responsible for addressing historical and ongoing abuses such as imposed government structures, residential schools, and other forms of cultural erasure in attempts to assimilate Indigenous people and respond to long-standing inequalities. In Canada, Aboriginal rights are enshrined in Section 35 of the Constitution Act, subsequent and numerous Supreme Court decisions, and the United Nations Declaration on Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (Borrows et al. 2019). The diversity of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples, makes it challenging to generalize what constitutes rights without pan-Indigenizing rights. In general, Aboriginal rights are inherent, collective rights resulting from the first inhabitants' possession of the region now known as Canada and from social, governance, and economic structures established before European settlers arrived in North America. The right to an independent Nation's status through self-determination regarding governance, territory, resources, and culture sums up the location of Aboriginal rights. The recognition of rights and the consideration that rights and culture go together provide the impetuous and importance of understanding and supporting Indigenous people in the Canadian workplace.

Most organisations in Canada are aware of national investigations examining Canada's historic relationship with Indigenous peoples and the need for restitution and reconciliation. Significant works include the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP) published in 1996, which called for significant changes to the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and governments, and later the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) 2015 report that contained 94 recommendations to address the legacy of residential schools and improve the reconciliation process in Canada (Exner-Pirot 2018; RCAP 1996; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) 2012). The TRC report issued a 'Call to Action' to audiences, including the public and corporate sectors, that demands engagement with Indigenous Peoples and that organisations implement managerial education and training on Indigenous people's history, intercultural competence, human rights, and anti-racism.

Beyond the human and Aboriginal inherent rights arguments for inclusion and substantive equity efforts for Indigenous Peoples in the employment area, there are demonstrated positive relationships between retention, and employee turnover costs for both the organization and the employee (Al-Emadi et al. 2015; Hom et al. 2020). Consequently, retention is vital for organisations. When an employee departs an organization, the direct and indirect costs of replacing them exceed the costs of retaining them, and the employee incurs financial and emotional costs (Al-Emadi et al. 2015; Chhabra and Mishra 2008; Kim 2012; Ng and Sears 2020). The costs organisations incur when employees leave, in addition to the costs to replace and remediate them, can be quantified in terms of managerial time, coworker readjustments to work processes, and training (Chhabra and Mishra 2008). The high cost of losing talented employees has increased the need for organisations to recognise

and implement Human Resource Management (HRM) policies and practises that promote retention (Allen et al. 2010; Kim 2012; Mahal 2012).

The Indigenous Human Resource Council (2007), the [Canadian Human Rights Commission](#) (2014), the [Canadian Chamber of Commerce](#) (2013), and other scholars all report discrimination, racism, and a lack of cultural comprehension as obstacles to securing and retaining the employment of Indigenous people (Brockie et al. 2023; Hom et al. 2020). Underlying these obstacles is a general misunderstanding of how the interplay between organisational and personal cultures shapes the work experience. While organisations shape and produce their cultural norms and behaviours, each employee contributes their own values, beliefs, and methods of being and doing. Indigenous people are expected to conform to most North American organisations' normative euro-western ideals and standards. While Indigenous people are highly adaptable and can flourish in various work environments, expecting them to assimilate their identities at work is problematic. Expecting Indigenous people to leave their cultural preferences at home when they come to work supports a euro-normative agenda of assimilation and the notion that non-Indigenous methods are the standard by which everything is created and measured. This lack of consideration for alternative methods of being or acting contributes to perpetuating systemic bias and potentially discriminatory processes, policies, and organisational cultures.

Indigenous people in Canada have different cultural histories, languages, values, and customs that may affect how they interact with others in a North American workplace that focuses on the individual (Adu-Febiri and Quinless 2010; Bhatt et al. 2013; Panel on Research Ethics, Canada 2013; Hanson 2013; Kipuri n.d.). Different cultural approaches to working are shown to have an impact on personal interactions with others and work outcomes (Adu-Febiri and Quinless 2010; Bachmann 2006; Bakker and Leiter 2010; Binsiddiq and Alzahmi 2013; Brett et al. 2006; Berg 2012; Cohen and Kassis-Henderson 2012). The lack of understanding by peers and managers of Indigenous cultural approaches to work is a problem for Indigenous people and the organisations that hope to attract and retain them as part of a diverse workforce. (Harell et al. 2014; Lamb 2013; Milke 2013; Presbitero et al. 2016).

Indigenous people have a unique relationship with employment because their values and worldviews differ from those of non-Indigenous people. Their lived experience as "Canadians" differs significantly from that of non-Indigenous North Americans. Indigenous people have different ways of knowing and understanding the world and different ways of organizing their cultures than the Western organisational models that are most common in North American organisations. On the job, all workers may be involved in various tasks, processes, or situations where they must interact and engage with their coworkers, so understanding Indigenous preferences for these interactions helps build inclusive and engaging workplaces. Hatcher (2012) speaks to the importance of building cultural bridges between Indigenous people and their coworkers. Most significant is that in Indigenous cultures, respectful relationships among all participants precede any effective learning or work (Hatcher 2012).

This paper references "Indigenous" people throughout to refer to the collective of First Nations, Inuit, and Metis people in Canada as a way of representing a common experience of colonization, inherent rights, and distinct worldviews from Euro-North American people. This paper references "Indigenous" people throughout to refer to the collective of First Nations, Inuit, and Metis people in Canada as a way of representing a common experience of colonization, inherent rights, and distinct worldviews from Euro-North American people. This study is focused on First Nations experiences to avoid homogenizing distinct cultural preferences and customs between these three groups.

2. Literature Review

While the initial literature review on this paper focused on understanding organisational or workplace culture from a First Nations worldview, as an Indigenous scholar, I began to realise how Indigenous culture and Indigenous personal culture are related to the

contexts in which we express our cultures and what we prioritize and what is prioritized by others. At work, the interplay between organisational culture and personal culture can shift or influence one or the other. Thus, there is a context defining culture. The following literature review provides a snapshot of the research defining culture and points to a need to better understand the context shaping organisational culture and how this affects what people find meaningful and engaging in their work.

2.1. Culture and the Context for Workplace Engagement

Numerous studies examining workplace barriers for racial and ethnic minorities in North America illustrate that the design of many systems, including healthcare, education, policing, law, and for-profit organisations, is based on ethnocentric models that esteem dominant euro-western cultural values (Asey 2022a, 2022b; Emerson and Murphy 2014; Offermann et al. 2014; Wiecek and Hamilton 2014). Organisational culture reproduces behaviour and is embedded in vision, mission, values, beliefs, and common expectations (Deal and Kennedy [1982] 2000; Kotter and Heskett 1992; Schein and Schein 2017; Smircich 1983). Organisational methods, policies, and processes; performance management systems are linked to views of leadership, hierarchies, and employee relationships or understandings of authority and codes of conduct, ethics, and communication practises (Butcher and Baker 2021). Organisational values and subsequent work cultures can act to attract or discourage potential employees, which is inappropriate as, typically, organisations seek to attract employees who are a good ‘cultural fit.’ This argument is flawed, particularly in public organisations where we expect the workforce to represent a diverse society. Through minority rights movements and legislation, increasing numbers of organisations are encouraged to change their practises to support inclusivity, yet deeply ingrained patterns of behaviour and systemic discrimination still exist (Emerson and Murphy 2014; Offermann et al. 2014; Salcedo et al. 2022; Wiecek and Hamilton 2014). Despite legislated employment equity laws in North America and attempts at diversity training, minorities working in homogeneous organisations are often subjected to negative stereotypes, stricter performance evaluations, higher levels of inspection of their work, and social isolation (Ben-Cheikh 2022; Habib et al. 2022; Roberts et al. 2014; Thomas-Hawkins et al. 2022; Wiecek and Hamilton 2014). Racism and its associated behaviours occur across societies. Yet, Indigenous peoples in Canada experience racism framed under the weight of settler colonialism, which adds complexity to solving problems as it interlocks and confounds with white supremacy, the ideology of capitalism, and heteropatriarchy (Asey 2022b; Anderson and Ruhs 2010; Barker 2015; Devereaux 2022; Regan and Alfred 2013; Woolford 2015).

While the literature understands the “what” and identifies racism and a lack of acceptance of another culture from peers and managers as barriers to success for Indigenous employment, engagement, and retention, information on specific “how” Indigenous people are experiencing racism or a lack of cultural understanding is missing from the data (Brunnen and Jankovic 2009; Delic and Abele 2010; Gebhard et al. 2022; Howard et al. 2012; Human Resources and Skill Development Canada 2013; Kunz et al. 2012; Oppenheimer 2014; Saito 2020; Statistics Canada, Labor Statistics Division 2010). The space between an organisation’s expectations for being and doing can be in opposition to Indigenous values and behaviours. There is an opportunity to explore potential connections between the two by better understanding Indigenous experiences and their cultural intersections in work interactions.

2.1.1. The Importance of Culture

Indigenous people in Canada cite a lack of cultural understanding from peers and managers as a significant barrier to retaining employment (Althaus and O’Faircheallaigh 2019; Brunnen and Jankovic 2009; Canadian Chamber of Commerce 2013; Delic and Abele 2010; Howard et al. 2012; Human Resources and Skill Development Canada 2013; Kunz et al. 2012; Salcedo et al. 2022; Statistics Canada, Labor Statistics Division 2010). A lack of cultural understanding and unwillingness to accommodate cultural preferences can

exacerbate experiences of discrimination, racism, or exclusion (Adu-Febiri and Quinless 2010; Ambtman et al. 2010; Ben-Cheikh 2022; Popken et al. 2023). Many organisations have responded to this issue broadly by way of cultural awareness training or recruitment strategies targeted at Indigenous people. Yet, Indigenous people still claim that these types of measures do not go far enough in creating work environments that are accepting and supportive of cultural diversity and, more specifically, Indigenous people (Clark et al. 2014; Doyle-Bedwell 2008; Kandiuk 2014; Mills 2011; O'Loughlin et al. 2022). Organisations might shift some processes, such as recruitment, which serves to invite Indigenous people to the table in the organisation, but they are still eating from the same plates and serving the same food, metaphorically. Within organisations, the role of cultural norms in actively perpetuating inequality is well exemplified (Motapanyane and Shankar 2022). Research also reveals how organisational culture often hinders the promotion or service of disadvantaged groups (Martín Alcázar et al. 2013; Amis et al. 2020; Motapanyane and Shankar 2022; Muzio and Tomlinson 2012; Pedulla et al. 2023; Pedulla and Thébaud 2015).

If Indigenous cultural approaches are misunderstood or marginalised, Indigenous workers' potential will continue to be diminished. The economic and social benefits that stem from ensuring Indigenous participation in the workforce are significant in terms of potential contribution (Adu-Febiri and Quinless 2010; Erhardt 2011; Government of Canada 2014b; Lamb 2013; Mills 2011; O'Loughlin et al. 2022; Ostrowidzki et al. 2009). Moreover, organisational commitment to human rights and decolonization practises that respect and honour Indigenous rights is missed. A better understanding of Indigenous cultural approaches and the interplay of personal culture intersecting with organisational culture offers valuable practical or theoretical insights for managers and researchers. Acknowledging and supporting differences in artefacts of culture may support Indigenous workers' employment success and create equitable and diverse Canadian workplaces (Adu-Febiri and Quinless 2010; Collins 2021; Julien et al. 2010).

Managing a heterogeneous workforce requires a universal transformation of human resource strategies beyond recruitment, from increasing the number of people to engaging them so that they can add value (Hur 2020; Janssens and Zanoni 2014; Kulik 2014). The efforts to define cross-cultural and diversity-oriented models must still be explored and developed to overcome limitations on diversity management in organisations where most employees are homogenous (Anderson and Ruhs 2010; Janssens and Zanoni 2014; Khan et al. 2019; Presbitero et al. 2016). Specifically, researchers must re-examine the concept of diversity and what it means in today's organisations and how it is taken up by First Nations people (Chan et al. 2013; Government of Canada 2020; Ng and Sears 2020). This involves reviewing the relationships between diversity and performance and the psychological processes that govern these interactions to redevelop strategic human resource practises (Janssens and Zanoni 2014; Meyer and Schneider 2021; Schaffer 2019). Performance indicators must be redefined concerning diversity and different cultural approaches to work (Hays-Thomas 2017; Hon and Gamor 2022; Janssens and Zanoni 2014; Kulik 2014).

Diversity and cultural differences are keenly demonstrated in multicultural work groups or teams. There is evidence that workers from diverse backgrounds experienced engagement, performance, or contribution challenges when assigned to multicultural teams in work settings due to a lack of cultural knowledge or racial bias in their interactions (Bachmann 2006; Bakker and Leiter 2010; Binsiddiq and Alzahmi 2013; Brett et al. 2006; Berg 2012; Cohen and Kassis-Henderson 2012; Guillaume et al. 2017; Mannucci and Shallev 2022). All the literature reviewed in diversity, employee engagement, and retention supports the argument for an interdisciplinary approach to listening to and bringing together the voices of diverse populations, including Indigenous people and management science. A multidisciplinary approach would help researchers better understand the relationship building component when communicating with people from distinct cultural backgrounds and designing employment engagement and retention strategies, which are becoming more critical in the work world.

Defining culture through understanding engagement involves an employee's underlying values, whether generational or cultural, which can illuminate more effective approaches towards engagement (Garczynski et al. 2013; Schullery 2013; Shimazu et al. 2010). It defines how individuals engage with their work and engage with others. As such, culture is best understood by understanding how people engage, building an understanding specific to the social and cultural issues of Indigenous employees and the context of working in North American organisations and the jobs they are attracted to and remain in (Guillaume et al. 2014; Miner 2007; Shuck and Reio 2011; McPhee et al. 2017). As such, culture is defined by how people engage (Garczynski et al. 2013).

2.1.2. Understanding the Context Shaping Indigenous Culture

Indigenous cultures (which in Canada include First Nations, Inuit, and Metis Peoples) are complex, intricate, and multifaceted in nature and are shaped by context. This context is linked to a history of colonization and a record of dislocation and isolation, racism, violence, and poverty (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) 2012, p. 50). Culture is also linked to a continuous and localized experience of hereditary and tribal governance practises, clan and family structuring, environmental stewardship, and holistic interpretations of being and doing. In most cases, the context underlying the culture is an important moderator of how culture is defined.

Context is different from culture. Culture is usually described as the values, nuances, and understanding of people and what they share, or, as Schein describes, the pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration. Schein identifies three levels of culture: artefacts (visible), espoused beliefs and values (may appear through surveys), and basic underlying assumptions (unconscious, taken for granted beliefs and values) (these are not visible). While any definition of Indigenous culture might recognise the importance of ideas, practises, knowledge, places, and artistic expressions, there is a close connection to how the context has shaped what is valued and meaningful (Schein and Schein 2017).

The context defines the “situational or environmental constraints and opportunities” ... that affect the “... meaning of organisational behavior” (Johns 2017, p. 577). The context shaping the culture of Indigenous people can be affected by a range of factors, although three factors might be particularly unique for Indigenous people in Canada: the demographic profile of the group, the long-term history, and the short-term history illustrated in recent key events or experiences (Cunningham 2023). The demographic profile of Indigenous people recognises the unique heritages of different Indigenous groups, and while the Canadian Constitution recognises three groups (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis), most Indigenous people would say that it is mistaken to think that they are part of one homogenous group. For example, First Nations consist of over 600 nations, each of which has a unique history, different languages. Anthropologists originally pointed to 10 cultural areas based on linguist divisions, six of which were in Canada (the Arctic, Subarctic, Northwest Coast, Plateau, Plains, and Eastern Woodlands). The classification (Sapir 1916) was later adopted by the Smithsonian Institute's Handbook of North American Indians. While the delineation is described as an imperfect categorization and might not have been more inclusive in involving Indigenous cultures in the classification, it did point to a wide diversity of how culture might be shaped by different contexts.

A second part of the Indigenous context is the historical and ongoing traumatic events experienced by Indigenous people brought on by settler colonization and the ensuing racist policies. For over 500 years, Indigenous Peoples in Canada have felt the impacts of foreign governments-imposed legislation and settler attitudes of European cultural superiority. They have been subject to forced relocation, deliberate starvation, germ warfare, unethical testing, broken treaties, and well-documented stories of the abuse experienced in residential and day schools (Government of Canada 2014a; Canada 2019; Daschuk 2013; Jacobs 2021; (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) 2012, pp. 43, 44)). All of these events altered their traditional ways of life and contributed to the legacy of harm. Today,

Indigenous people continue to shift social, economic, and governance structures that impede community wellness and erode culture. For example, imposed government child welfare practises that are still removing Indigenous children from their homes and placing them with non-Indigenous families; a gross overrepresentation of Indigenous people who are incarcerated; staggering rates of violence perpetuated against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people; child poverty experienced at a rate of 40% compared to 15% for non-Indigenous peers; and the list goes on (Blackstock 2011; Macdonald and Wilson 2013; Starblanket et al. 2020); First Nations people are constantly reminded of these situations as they take on front-line tasks in engaging their communities in responding to environmental issues and protecting children, families, the land, and resources (Blackstock 2011; Sandefur and Deloria 2018). Yet, they are responsible for showing leadership for the tasks of rebuilding, reuniting, reshaping, and revitalizing their respective Nations while living with constant reminders of colonialism and residential schools (Restoule et al. 2013; Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski 2004).

Context is also shaped by recent events that people experience in their daily lives. These are the experiences, some positive and some not-so-positive, that shape our values or remind us of new opportunities or existing biases. For example, an individual's treatment by a colleague can reinforce old grievances, just as ill-chosen words might be considered offensive and a reminder of biases and prejudices. In the same way, reminders of festering issues, such as reports of the deaths and disappearances of Indigenous women and the disappointingly high number of Indigenous people in the prison system. Fundamentally, these everyday reminders in life and in the news affect the level of trust and perceived opportunities, just as employees who are angry about recent performance reviews might provide stories of managerial insensitivity and a lack of flexibility.

In the same way that context is an important element in any setting in providing a view of a situation's uniqueness or anomalies (Johns 2018), the context shaping Indigenous culture cannot be separated from the many practises and forms of knowledge. First Nations people are borne from their own systems, knowledge, and ways of being and doing. The resulting cultures cannot be separated from history as they were inherited from ancestors outside of colonial frameworks and provide many of the laws, governance systems, and protocols that exist today.

The context that Indigenous people experience gives special meaning to what they value and find meaningful and motivating. While there are a range of things to consider in understanding how context affects Indigenous culture, a key part of this relates to relationships in the community, relationships with others, and the propensity for collaborative approaches to workplace engagement.

2.2. Work Engagement

Understanding the context and culture and their influence on work outcomes for Indigenous people generates a unique perspective in organisational theory and work engagement theory (McPhee et al. 2017; Shuck and Reio 2011; Schram 2006; Wang et al. 2014). This view of Indigenous context and culture provides a person-centred approach to understanding engagement through the lens of lived experience, and a complete and focused appreciation for the thoughts, feelings, and actions of a human being at work (Amis et al. 2020; Weiss and Rupp 2011).

Engaged employees tend to perform better, have fewer accidents, and stay employed with an organization longer than disengaged employees (Adler 2012; Bakker et al. 2011; Shuck 2011). Theories on engagement illustrate that people experience work in a holistic, multidimensional way, and there are many intersections (Saks 2006). The multifaceted framework has also been applied by researchers who have added cultural and diversity variables to understanding work engagement (Garczynski et al. 2013; Schullery 2013; Shimazu et al. 2010).

The concept of employee engagement may be a significant factor in the analysis of employment and retention of Indigenous people, who are currently not employed in as

many jobs nor are they staying at jobs at as high a rate as non-Indigenous individuals in Canada. A link between Indigenous employment and employment retention and the theories behind employee engagement may be a helpful lens to explore Indigenous cultural approaches to work and the resulting success at work. These gaps in understanding reflect the need for future research to define and understand the unique cultural approaches to work and how these factors affect employment and retention for Indigenous people.

Supported by findings in work engagement theory, critical management theory, and the positive correlation between a worker's emotional connectedness with their job and their emotional connections, it is possible that First Nations workers might have closer connections to supervisors and peers (Meyer 2013; Reyes et al. 2012). In essence, work engagement encourages satisfaction relationships, which are linked to positive work outcomes and overall performance (Akingbola et al. 2023; Bakker et al. 2011; Meyer and Schneider 2021; Shuck 2011; Shuck and Reio 2011). The foundation of work engagement theory published by Kahn (1990) found that a person's degree of engagement was a result of the combined experience of three psychological circumstances: psychological meaningfulness, or the extent to which people derive meaning from their work; psychological safety, or the ability to express one's true self without fear of negative repercussion or consequence; and psychological availability, or the personal belief that one has the physical, emotional, and intellectual capabilities to perform their role competently (Gruman and Saks 2011). Hatcher (2012) speaks to the importance of building cultural bridges between Indigenous people and their coworkers. In Indigenous cultures, respectful relationships among all participants precede effective learning or work (Hatcher 2012). Based on this general view of engagement, the study sought to understand the unique situational interactions most significant for First Nations people, characterised by their relationships with others at work. Kahn's work provided the framework for understanding the engagement of Indigenous people in their work and relationships and, in Kahn's terms, what and how the important elements encourage an expression of one's true self at work and in relationships.

3. Research Methods

The next section describes what might be seen as a conventional summary of how the interviews were conducted. Yet, underlying this review is the fact that the research was carried out within general principles, acknowledging and respecting Indigenous research protocols and Indigenous experiences. The overarching goal of privileging and integrating Indigenous knowledge into the common discourse in HRM and employee engagement.

3.1. Research Design

The general research questions sought a better understanding of how or what First Nations cultural approaches to work influence employment and employee retention from a First Nations perspective. This study explored why, how, and where First Nations people experienced a lack of cultural understanding in employment settings and focused on activities that First Nations people participate in and subsequent interactions. The questions identified the cultural approaches at work typically demonstrated by First Nations people and how organisations could better structure work interactions, processes, or policies to accommodate diversity and the ability of First Nations people to engage in their work.

This study was designed to listen to the voices of First Nations workers through encouraging a series of conversations that sought to probe into experiences as interviewees added their descriptions of people, places, contexts, and behaviours to understand their interactions with others while at work and how culture affected their work. As an Indigenous researcher exploring the voices of Indigenous peoples and working with an anti-colonial framework, I draw on Indigenous methodologies in the research design and data collection approaches. Qualitative methods used open-ended interviews to allow people to provide a holistic worldview of what it means to be from a First Nations culture in a non-Indigenous organization (Creswell and Creswell 2018; Geertz 1973; LeCompte and Schensul 2010; Madison 2012; Moustakas 1994; Rubin and Rubin 2011). These methods are

most suitable for exploring the experiences of Indigenous workers, who may have unique cultural approaches or preferences when working in organisations (Chilisa and Tsheko 2014; Dawson et al. 2017; Lavallee 2009; Simpson 2017; Skille 2022; Watson 2011; Wilson 2008). These approaches allowed for the integration of previously marginalised Indigenous knowledge systems within dominant systems through a decolonization and indigenization research process (Chilisa and Tsheko 2014; Windchief and Pedro 2019).

3.2. Sample

This study examined the experiences of First Nations men and women from North America of various tribal identities who were of working age (over 18 and under 55) and who had worked in an organisation for a minimum of five years. Participants worked in many sectors, including banking, construction, health, education, retail sales, and government. Only those who worked for organisations that were non-Indigenous-controlled were included. Note that the study is designed around the voice of First Nations people as distinct from Metis and Inuit peoples in Canada, and while there are some similarities, these tribal groups have their own distinct worldviews and cultural preferences.

3.3. Interviewing Design

This study was designed to listen to the voices of First Nations people through a series of conversations rich in their descriptions of people, places, and behaviours to understand their experiences and unique cultural approaches to work. Within the method used, the researcher has interpreted the cultural practises at work and subsequent interactions experienced by First Nations people and has uncovered unspoken meanings, implicit biases, or cultural factors inherent in work processes. Data collection involved the collection of thick descriptions of the participant's experiences with the phenomenon being investigated by way of an interview between the researcher and the participant (Chilisa and Tsheko 2014; Geertz 1973; Lavallee 2009; Simpson 2014; Wilson 2008).

Semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity to collect data by asking specific yet open-ended questions. This structure supported the type of questions being asked and allowed the participants to respond to questions without the constraint of a predefined choice or outcome (Chilisa and Tsheko 2014; Connelly 2014; Simons 2009). The interview's tone was structured to feel like a conversation between friends, with a measure of spontaneity, free flow, and without any specific agenda (Hoey 2014; Simons 2009; Windchief and Pedro 2019). The researcher explored and explained in detail the views of Indigenous workers, the diversity of approaches contained within that group, and the experiences rooted in each of these perspectives (Dharamsi and Charles 2014; Rubin and Rubin 2011; Simpson 2000). Through a series of questions, this study explored why, how, and where Indigenous people experienced a lack of cultural understanding in employment settings and focused on situational interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Discussions opened with an opportunity for the participant to provide their history. This was followed by a question directed at a personal narration of their experience of the situation being examined, followed by several topical open-ended questions (Gibson and Brown 2009; Madison 2012; Rubin and Rubin 2011). An interview guide is included in Appendix A.

3.4. Analysis

After capturing the participants' voices, the information was transcribed and reviewed to eradicate transcription errors, make corrections, or add missing data. The data were initially coded into generic categories such as sites, places, individuals, and key issues or topics (Madison 2012; Simons 2009). Several sources, including the literature review, data words or expressions, and research queries, inspired the codes generated during data collection (Patton 2002). Once several overarching themes were extracted from the data, they were grouped to compare topics (Connelly 2014; Simons 2009).

Open coding was initially used to organise data; axial coding was used to classify data into common themes; and clustering was used to demonstrate relationships among common themes (Connelly 2014; Patton 2002). In addition to documenting similarities, the researcher will identify differences among the data and assess their significance (Gibson and Brown 2009). Analytical memos aid in constructing a plausible and verifiable explanation of the participants' experiences. Providing an accurate presentation and comparison of the data strengthens the credibility of the research (Gobo 2008; Ali and Yusof 2011). In addition, triangulation of the data collected from the focus group, interviews, and documents of relevant organisational policies or processes that participants may refer to in their discussions contributes to the study's credibility (Gibson and Brown 2009; Rubin and Rubin 2011; Shank 2006; Yin 2009). A cross-case analysis that draws on multiple sources improves the case methodology's reliability (Leedy and Ormrod 2012; Madison 2012; Merriam 2009; Stake 2010; Yin 2012).

3.5. Limitations

The data collection was limited to four months, leaving a shorter timeframe to secure participants and conduct interviews. Due to time and sample size, the study homogenised tribal affiliation to capture the views and stories of those who identify as First Nations; it did not break tribal affiliation into distinct groups, for example, Haida, Gitksan, or Coast Salish. It is noted that tribal groups across Canada have distinct customs, stories, governance practises, and other cultural practises that set them apart from one another; they are not heterogeneous. It also excludes Metis and Inuit people, as their cultures are significantly different from those of First Nations peoples. There are also challenges that add to the limitations when engaging in Indigenous research. The interface between the researcher, who is Indigenous, and the participants helped to establish trust with participants, but as the study was not collaborative in the inception of the research question and subsequent question design, Indigenous voice is limited to the findings and discussion.

4. Findings

As defined within conventional organisational research, Schein suggests that culture illustrates the shared assumptions learned by a group, which are identified at three levels: artefacts (visible), espoused beliefs and values (may appear through surveys), and basic underlying assumptions (unconscious, taken for granted beliefs and values: these are not visible). Beyond this, the Indigenous culture described by these individuals illustrates what people found valuable because it was culturally meaningful for them and because these experiences connected to their shared memory and world views, as illustrated through their visual and oral histories. The findings illustrate three areas: the underlying assumptions shaping Indigenous views of what a workplace culture would look like; the context defined by the unique connections to community; the special value of relationships in creating personal meaning; and the need for relationship-style interactions in encouraging engagement. Each area illustrates specific themes and comments based on the stories of the interviewees.

4.1. The Underlying Assumptions Shaping the Culture of Work for Indigenous People

Four themes emerged regarding work identity and engagement: impacting family and community through work, influencing decision-making, and influencing the person's choice of work. Relationships with family, community, and culture were viewed as equally important as relationships with and commitment to employment and employment pursuits. Decisions on work and career are often balanced with deep consideration and prioritisation of family and community ties. In some cases, the balance between work and family (including extended family) was recognised and supported by the organisation.

The most important details in this text are the lack of separation between personal identity as a First Nations individual and professional or employment identity. This lack of separation leads to increased pressure to serve family, extended family, and community

members outside of work and not make mistakes at work, and it is harder for a First Nations person to leave work behind at the end of the day. Personal connections and community connections help explain why the line between work and home is blurred. There are also important themes around conflict management and resolution: the importance of being recognised for one's Indigenous identity, history, and heritage; the perception of avoidance of conflict; the importance of accurate information about Indigenous people; and the importance of non-Aboriginal people having accurate information about Indigenous people. All these themes are important for First Nations people at work, as they can help their company better understand the needs or approaches of First Nations people.

The struggle to tell people about colonization is a difficult one, as it brings the weight of trauma and oppression to many First Nations people. Several participants felt that they were not only representing themselves as individuals at work but also representing their First Nations communities of origin. First Nations people have protocols around identity and representation that act to sustain and reinforce tribal affiliations. The responsibility to representing one's community causes increased pressure to serve community members outside of work and not make mistakes or disappoint their community. Organisations may be trying to create inclusivity through recognition, but simply recognising an employee for their cultural heritage without understanding it can create a negative perception for First Nations people.

4.2. The Indigenous Context Defined by Connections to the Community

If we ask Indigenous people about their work and what is important to them, a dominant answer seems to be relationships of various kinds with people generally, with supervisors, and with coworkers. They will also talk about their history and heritage, their connections to the community, and why those relationships matter. This section provides an overview of the Indigenous context, or the situational factors defining the relationships that are central to Indigenous people. Tables 1 and 2 illustrate some of the unique context or relational factors that are important in understanding Indigenous people and their relationship needs in the work environment. Four themes, which were responses to questions asking about "situational interactions," illustrate the situational or contextual historical elements defining an Indigenous context. Several themes highlight the relationships.

Table 1. The Indigenous context is important in defining the connections of Indigenous People.

THEMES	Comments from First Nations Participants
Connections in the community and relationship building in the community and in life. 5/12	- This opened a lot of doors and networking, just really meeting people and getting to know them and from them to understand where I was coming from has been a huge benefit. - Lots of people from the community watched me and supported me and encouraged me. . . in my relationship, I was sought out for jobs, I do not think of any of them as job searches. People sought me even before I was finished my degree. - It has been my experience that people kind of come to me and ask me what I am up to because they have heard about my work.
Connections to elders, community leaders and significant others (5/12)	- There is an openness for elders to teach us, guide us and support us - For me, it was about being able to be a guide to others, more than anything, because it was what I already do. - I started off in a lower-level position, but was given a mentorship role, and then I moved up, so for me, that was big, I could use my strengths. - There is this one piece about being a role model, a piece that is to support and guide other Indigenous people, I am working on that stuff constantly. Even if I was in a different job, I would still be doing that (mentoring) as part of my work.

Table 1. *Cont.*

THEMES	Comments from First Nations Participants
Connections to lack of separation between work and family. (4/12)	- I do not feel any separation between work, personal or family life, ... family commitments are part of my work. - I have deep relationship with family members ... for me, this included extended family, younger ones, elders. - I feel that my collective view of the family as a unit did cause conflict with supervisors and peers.
Connections to my history, heritage, and community (5/12)	- First Nations people are proud of their cultural heritage and because of the lack of separation between personal and work life feel comfortable when they can be their authentic self at work. - I have close ties with the community. - So important to build bridges with First Nations communities ... we need to build bridges with First Nations communities to build and understand what a diverse workforce means.
Connections to the future in being a teacher and guide to others. 5/12	- For me, it was about being able to be a mentor to others, more than anything, because it was what I already did. - I started off in a lower-level position, but was given a mentorship role, and then I moved up, so for me, that was big, I could use my strengths. - There is an openness for elders to teach us, guide us and support us - My organization is open to mentoring, nurturing, supporting, and letting me use my strengths and gifts and knowledge to do my job. - My organization is open to mentoring, nurturing, supporting, and letting me use my strengths and gifts and knowledge to do my job.

Table 2. The value of relationships in creating personal meaning in the workplace.

THEMES	Comments from First Nations Participants
My relationship with others at work (8/12)	- Relationships were personal and deep. - She is very personable ... it is all based on healthy communication,—and an innate need to belong and feel accepted and understand that your work is accepted and valued. - Everyone was very flexible and understanding, and that was a good foundation for me ... my direct supervisor recognised my strengths.
My Relationships with supervisors (8/12)	- My supervisor took an active role. - My leaders challenged me and trusted me, made me feel my work was valued. - My supervisor really challenged me and put me into roles where I had no experience ... - My boss really wanted us to be successful, ... he made us work and it was like friendly competition. - The individuals I worked for invested in me, when I first started out, maybe I wasn't the most suitable candidate, but they believed in me—my cultural background. - Relationships are important in how I work. ...
My relationship with coworkers (7/12)	- You find out who your allies are by getting to know people, and I have gotten to know some pretty good people, which is part of the fun and the benefit of working there. Collaborating and working with colleagues is a way of being on the job where I can be my authentic self. - My work relationships vary of being just a nice colleague to some deep friendships and those are not even in the area I work in—those are my touchstone relationships—they re-ground me, refocus me, get me going again.

In the interviews, Indigenous people spoke about the context that was illustrated in the connections they made. So, while relationships were important in work organisations, they

spoke about the importance of connections in their life experience, which seemed to provide a partial understanding of a unique point of view about why relationships were important. That is, they spoke of a context that illustrated different connections: to community and relationship building in the community, to elders and significant others, to family and its connection to work, to history and heritage, and to the future. The connections in Table 3 illustrate an Indigenous context that describes events, experiences, practises, and common happenings that provide a bit of a story that many Indigenous people experienced and that might provide a partial explanation for why relationships are so important.

Table 3. The value of collaborative approaches to leadership and engagement.

THEMES	Comments from First Nations Participants
Competitive conflict management styles and approaches to problem solving are negatively perceived. 5/12	This is the part I always struggle with, standing up and stating that this is wrong, and something needs to change, I do it in different ways and it is not direct in the way I do it. That is based on my teaching. Working in a non-Aboriginal environment where people are very confrontational and argumentative about things from the get-go—they are very comfortable doing that type of thing, and when I hold back and do not say anything they think I am not participating. I am very quiet because I am taking everything in, figuring it out, waiting for opportunities to seek solutions—which is not the usual way non-Aboriginal people work in the business environment. Someone at the organization who had been hugely instrumental in the work we had done had passed away, so I felt a sense of responsibility for how things and people and the family were supported. However, the actions that were taken by management were not conducive mostly in terms of how we respect people and families who have lost someone. There was no context or discussions about how the decision was made, or how we could get through it, management was just abrupt and not supportive, I was floored. So, after the funeral, I knew I wasn't going to go back. I avoid conflicts. . . .so we were doing a job and it wasn't going anywhere so I told X to do X right now, but he didn't listen to me. So instead of going to X about it I took over the job myself and ended up getting badly hurt." "I didn't feel like I could ask for help. I didn't appreciate the way they dealt with conflict, always head on. It felt aggressive, and only about the individual winning and this is not our way. - I spent a short time working at X. They hired me and trained me, but I decided I did not want to do that with my career because with that structure there was no support—it was a formal organization—there was no way in that system to even ask for more support (resources).
Approaches to conflict (6/12)	My new supervisor is very particular in terms of what needs to be done so my involvement in other projects is being frowned upon because to her it isn't part of my job, but it's never been stated in my job description. She has allot of personal bias in what I should be doing and resentment when I get asked by other managers to help out. She has one way of seeing things, doing things. There was a non-profit organization I used to work at, and when they had a change in leadership, I knew it wasn't going to be sustainable. The new leader was needy and was micromanaging but didn't even know how to micromanage—they were just being mean. I only lasted a year. - At the place I work at now there are a couple of people who will retire soon, are very unhappy who are not collaborative and do not want to do neat things, so it is sitting and waiting it through—and that's all you can do—just sit and wait. - I make the choices to where I will put my energy—I do not work well with impositions—that's not for me, I need to have say in it." - The boss's partner was very controlling and would yell and scream at us, even in front of people, and wouldn't admit her mistakes. I was appalled. There were never any conversations or and it went downhill from there. I left that job." - You have these strong connections with people you work

The first set of comments describes connections to the community, which for some people were important in recognizing how relationships were important to the commu-

nity, but they also opened many avenues for working with others, as is revealed in the following comment:

I think the success I have had at work and the recognition came from being really involved in the community and volunteering—this opened a lot of doors and networking—just really meeting people and getting to know them and from them to understand where I was coming from has been a huge benefit.

It is important to understand that for First Nations people, family or community includes immediate family and extended family, and these two are typically interchangeable (Grey and Patel 2015). The definition of community may include members belonging to hereditary systems as well as those descended from bloodlines. A First Nations person's community is defined by the connection to local lands and ecologies, the recognition of ancestors, the inclusion of immediate family, extended family, adopted family, hereditary ties, and tribal relationships, whether a person lives in a rural, reserve, or urban setting.

The relationships in the community described here were helpful in opening doors for people, as people in the community provided support, but they also helped in establishing relationships for jobs and other opportunities. Four of the participants stated that they had gained employment through the relationships they had built and the knowledge others had about the good work they did or the connections they had made. As one participant said, “coming into the organisation was based on a relationship outside of work, a family relationship, a cultural relationship.” The next cultural factor contributing to positive interactions in employment was also based on relationships and the resulting networks that were built. Participants reiterated that working in an Indigenous way is about the relationships they form that open doors that they may have never thought about regarding employment. This factor provides support for the next subtheme. The mention of networks is an important subtheme in that employers may not think about recruitment outside of their traditional or established associations, and making connections in new places may help to build their diversity networks. Of note, it is connections to others, local knowledge, or Indigenous knowledge that informs decision-making about fundamental aspects of life. From an Indigenous perspective, all these relationships or connections require respecting protocol or standards.

For these interviewees, connections to leaders, elders, and significant others in the community bore a special significance as they spoke to a nurturing role with significant others. As in these cases, individuals indicated an “openness to elders to teach us, guide us, and support us.” Others felt the need to be role models or guides for others and referred to a role that they felt they had to do for others, which is to “support and guide other Indigenous people.” For all respondents, it was important to be a role model for others.

The third theme is closely linked in describing a close connection between work and family, and this is clearly stated by one person who said: “I do not feel any separation between work, personal, or family life; family commitments are part of my work.” For some cultures, an individual's commitment to work and family is seen as separate, but for these First Nations individuals, the collective view of the family did not conflict with supervisors and peers. Due to the lack of separation, there is increased pressure to serve family, extended family, and community members outside of work and not to make mistakes at work or disappoint or embarrass one's community with actions at work. The lack of boundaries also means that it is harder for a First Nations person to leave work behind at the end of the day. For First Nations people, family or community includes immediate family and extended family, and these two are typically interchangeable (Grey and Patel 2015; Ward et al. 2023). The definition of community may include members belonging to hereditary systems as well as those descended from bloodlines. A First Nations person's community is defined by the inclusion of immediate family, extended family, adopted family, hereditary ties, and tribal relationships, whether a person lives in a rural or remote setting or in an urban setting.

As it is important to see a connection between work and family, the fourth theme links work and family to heritage and the community. These individuals felt a strong connection

to their heritage and their community. They commented about how First Nations people are proud of their heritage and the importance of building bridges with First Nations communities to understand what a diverse workforce means. They offered statements that illustrated deep feelings. People “felt positive about sharing their cultural heritage and experiences when building relationships at work but felt badly when their cultural sharing was used by others to gain access to a community.” This theme generally reviews how it is “important to build bridges with First Nations communities to build and understand what a diverse workforce means”.

The final theme illustrates connections to the future in being a teacher and guide to others.

“There is this one piece about being a role model, a piece that is to support and guide other Indigenous people, I am working on that stuff constantly. Even if I was in a different job, I would still be doing that (mentoring) as part of my work.”

4.3. The Indigenous Context Shaping the Importance of Relationships

Relationships with supervisors are the dominant theme defining the context in which our sample of interviewees interacted. There were three sets of comments in this theme area: the first one related to supervisorial relationships where “the boss appreciated me”, and in another case, “she was very personable and we struck up a relationship, and, because of this, I ended up coming to work here full time.” Interviewees indicated that supervisors were especially “accommodating and helpful in responding to individual needs and taking extra steps to be flexible” in solidifying a strong relationship. Another set of comments on the relationship with supervisors indicated that the supervisors took an active role “in challenging me and putting me in roles where I had no experience. She saw the best in me and allowed me to use my strengths. Participants characterised their relationships with supervisors as flexible, honest, trusting, collaborative, encouraging, empathic, supportive, feedback-rich, and nurturing.

Relationships with coworkers and peers were also a strong theme, highlighting the close bonds that existed at work and the relationships of trust and confidence that participants gained. Much of the relationship of trust seemed to grow from a work ethic grounded in the skills sets underlying Indigenous culture and knowledge. With peers, relationships that were characterised as “friendships” were common. These were described as collaborative, friendly, honest, and equal. Those who had subordinates characterised those relationships as mentorships or role models. As one person indicated, “my work relationships vary from being just a nice colleague to some deep friendships, and those are not even in the area I work in; those are my touchstone relationships; they re-ground me, refocus me, and get me going again.”

Another person reflected that “you find out who your allies are by getting to know people, and I have gotten to know some pretty good people, which is part of the fun and the benefit of working there.” They then added, “Collaborating and working with colleagues is a way of being on the job where I can be my authentic self.” These comments suggest that working with others who became close was impactful on a personal level and that when people worked together with good intentions, it was the intentional purpose of engaging with someone that established a strong connection. People would say, “You guys are so connected.” However, when people are serious about what they are doing, they get along really well, even though they may be very diverse in terms of lifestyles outside of work.”

4.4. The Context Defining the Importance of Relationships in Shaping Workplace Engagement

The context and culture of an organization typically drive behaviours and perceptions of engagement. With respect to how socio-cultural or interpersonal conflict is managed and how leadership styles are interpreted, First Nations participants described preferences stemming from or connected to Indigenous ways of being and doing.

There is a definite preference for collaborative approaches to conflict management and supervision, which is not surprising, but this preference is not simply because, in general,

people do not tend to enjoy conflict. The preference is grounded in reference to Indigenous cultural practises, wherein many conflicts are not direct or confrontational and are managed according to local tribal customs. When faced with direct confrontation, most reported their tendency to avoid the interaction or future interactions altogether. First Nations people tend towards a relationship-based type of conflict management style, which also supports the importance of relationships indicated earlier.

“This is the part I always struggle with, standing up and stating that this is wrong, and something needs to change, I do it in different ways and it is not direct in the way I do it. That is based on my teaching. Working in a non-Aboriginal environment where people are very confrontational and argumentative about things from the get-go—they are very comfortable doing that type of thing, and when I hold back and do not say anything they think I am not participating.” The participant added, “I am very quiet because I am taking everything in, figuring it out, waiting for opportunities to seek solutions—which is not the usual way non-Aboriginal people work in the business environment.”

“I didn’t appreciate the way they dealt with conflict, always head on. It felt aggressive, and only about the individual winning and this is not our way.”

Connected to a negative perception of direct approaches to conflict was the preference for leaders who were supportive, no matter what the organisational structure. Question five, revealed in Table 3 asked: What approaches to work best support Indigenous people in attaining the best possible experiences when working? As indicated in the participant’s responses to question one, the participants indicated that a positive work life and staying in a job are strongly related to positive relationships with supervisors and peers. Positive interactions were characterised as being collaborative, cooperative, emotionally supportive, trusting, and ethical. Negative interactions were characterised as autocratic, resulting in low levels of trust or respect and low levels of communication between supervisors and peers, which resulted in leaving a job. Positive interactions were found in hierarchical and flat organisations where leaders were genuinely relationship-oriented and had a sense of the importance of relationships with employees and the effects of this on motivation and engagement.

Given the answers to the previous questions that elaborate on the fact that relationships are a key factor in the perceptions of positive situational interactions at work for First Nations people, it is not surprising that there is a stated preference for working collaboratively with supervisors, peers, and subordinates. Even in organisations that are hierarchically organised and where less collaborative leadership and managerial styles are the norm, leaders can allow for more open, two-way communication. Autocratic leadership is the least preferred, and poor experiences with autocratic styles usually lead to First Nations people leaving the job. First Nations people prefer to develop relationships that typically result in higher levels of trust and involvement, or the perception of involvement, in decision-making with superiors, peers, and subordinates.

5. Discussion

This section interprets and describes the significance of the stories shared by First Nations people about their experiences at work and how culture and context are significant factors in determining positive or negative perceptions. While the general literature on work engagement and employee retention speaks to many aspects of North American workplace culture and work design that are expected to engage employees, this paper offers insights to organisations specifically interested in understanding how to engage and retain First Nations people in these organisations. These stories and experiences of First Nations people demonstrate how their worldviews, concepts, and values interface within contemporary Western work settings. The findings illustrate three areas: the underlying assumptions shaping Indigenous views of a workplace culture, the context defined by the

unique historical experience of colonization and reconciliation goals for society, and the special value of relationships.

5.1. Indigenous Worldviews Intersecting: Holism, Relationality, and Justice

The underlying assumptions shaping the culture of work for Indigenous people are contained in connected themes. The first is the identity of work as having an impact on the family and community, which is revealed in the comment about why many First Nations people choose the work they do. Relationships with family, community, and culture are viewed as equally important as relationships with and commitment to employment and employment pursuits. Decisions on work and career are often balanced with deep consideration and prioritisation of family and community ties. In some cases, the balance between work and family (including extended family) was recognised and supported by the organisation, which is viewed positively. Connections or interconnections are central to First Peoples, so an emphasis on relationships discussed by participants is not surprising. An Indigenous paradigmatic perspective of relationality reinforces that all things and everyone have a purpose; everything is connected to everything else. This relational worldview is taught and reinforced in creation stories, ceremonies, and cultural practises. As a result of this mindset, First Nations people are strongly connected to their families, communities, past and future generations, land, and non-human beings. A common phrase for Indigenous people is “all my relations”, which can be understood as “we are all related”. This phrase is also an expression of oneness and harmony with all forms of life (Steltenkamp 2011). This value is overlayed in the context of work.

Building on the theme of interconnectedness, participants revealed the lack of separation between personal identity as a First Nations individual and professional or employment identity. This blurring of private and personal lives aligns with an Indigenous holistic view of life in general and how connections with self, others, community, elders, and colleagues at work influence and support well-being. Nonetheless, a holistic mindset and lack of separation between personal and professional can lead to increased pressure to serve family, extended family, and community members outside of work. A lack of division between personal and professional can be a benefit or a liability. A benefit as the ease of moving between one and the other may create synergies or flexibility, but a detriment if issues in either space are not compartmentalised, leading to higher levels of burnout. If there is no emotional or cognitive break from responsibilities and these become overwhelming, stress and burnout are the results.

Strong preferences and Indigenous concepts of justice were detailed around conflict management and resolution. The preference for First Nations peoples typically leans towards a non-confrontational style, and they seek to resolve disputes or express their opinions without direct engagement with a perpetrator. Direct confrontation is in opposition to generally accepted Indigenous rules of behaviour where the preservation of harmony for the clan or community supersedes personal gain or satisfaction (Reade and McKenna 2013; Ross 1989). Conflict is a problem, but it is managed in different ways, and North American society does not necessarily understand this approach or rationale. A First Nations preference for indirect conflict management makes sense if you consider that the survival of a community requires people to work together harmoniously and cooperatively. Grievances were and still are handled in some communities through the observation of strict protocols and tribal governance practises. For individuals to survive, they needed to set interpersonal conflict aside and continue to cooperate. Conflict management preferences and conceptual understanding grew from the need for tribes, clans, families, and individuals to maintain harmony as survival was the primary objective (Brant 1990; Ross 1989). Organisations might consider this perspective as they develop rules and reward systems that are reflective of overall group satisfaction and harmony, as these factors contribute to positive engagement.

5.2. Workplace Inclusion and Reconciliation

Considerably discussed is the organisational willingness and acceptance of learning and understanding Indigenous history and the importance of non-Indigenous people having this information, which adds to the feeling of acceptance and inclusion at work. Most Canadian organisations are working to advance reconciliation agendas stemming from broad-ranging legislation such as the Canadian Human Rights Act and more specific calls to action specifically targeting Indigenous people like the TRC and UNDRIP; therefore, many have implemented formal training initiatives to combat discrimination and racism. These steps are formal mechanisms to create more engaging and inclusive work environments. Notwithstanding, the struggle of reiterating stories about colonization to those who do not know is a difficult one, and for First Nations people, this creates extra effort and pressure on performance. In the context of the workplace, “cultural load” refers to the invisible workload employers knowingly or unknowingly place on Indigenous employees to provide Indigenous knowledge and education to others (Schaufeli and Salanova 2008, 2012). In the workplace, most often tokenization takes place, and there is a silent and presumed expectation that Indigenous employees be the knowledge leaders. Roles are informally created without any formal reduction or adjustment of their job responsibilities. Organisations may be trying to create inclusivity through the recognition of Indigenous cultures, but simply recognising an employee for their cultural heritage without understanding is problematic. Involving First Nations people in the creation of policies, procedures, and awareness is an essential part of reconciliation, but inclusion must be built on reciprocity, as indicated earlier, and not create an additional burden for employees.

5.3. Relationships, Intergenerational Connections, and Collaboration

The discussion that follows includes my own take on the findings based on my background as a First Nations person and my perception of relationality, relationships, and connections as crucial elements in fusing work and life. According to my observations, Indigenous people value their relationships with family, friends, superiors, and coworkers, as well as their history, heritage, and local community. The results show how First Nations people discussed the context that was represented in the connections they established, which offered a partial justification for why relationships are so highly valued.

The most important details in this text are the belief that connections to the community were significant for opening many avenues for working with others. These relationships included immediate family, extended family, adopted family, hereditary ties, and tribal relationships. All these relationships have value and meaning, and they are all connected to one another. Relationships create connections and opportunities for First Nations people that are not necessarily available through existing organisational avenues. The existence of these special networks is something organisations might pay attention to as they seek to inform their workplace about supporting the emotional and spiritual wellness of First Nations people.

The deeply ingrained cultural value that prioritises respectful relationships contributes to positive interactions in employment and builds on employees’ engagement. First Nations interviewees expressed an openness to elders teaching, guiding, and supporting them throughout their lives. They felt that their elders were people who had earned the respect of others and who strived to lead honourably by living by example. The acknowledgement of the cultural role of elders and the role they play in First Nations lives is interesting, as participants voiced positive relationships with supervisors most often. The characteristics of these relationships mimic what one could expect to hear about an elder, as they were described as flexible, honest, trusting, collaborative, encouraging, empathic, supportive, feedback-rich, and nurturing. Not to minimise or trivialise the work and knowledge of Indigenous elders, supervisors, like elders, carry organisational knowledge and are expected to be reliable. Supervisors in their leadership roles in non-Indigenous organization might consider the importance of their relationships with those they supervise, as they are important and even sacred for some. For First Nations people, intergenerational

relationships are commonplace and meant to foster support, knowledge transfer, and historical connections to heritage (Pidgeon et al. 2014).

When it comes to preferences towards task accomplishment, First Nations people prefer to work collaboratively with supervisors, peers, and subordinates, and this is key to positive situational interactions. Many Indigenous people are sensitive to situations where it is perceived that non-Indigenous people have power and control over their destinies. This discomfort stems from intergenerational trauma and the historical consequences of colonization. Organisational interests such as recognition, rewards, performance, and task accomplishment are generally determined by the organisation. While this situation is present in every workplace, collaboration allows for Indigenous peoples' desire for self-determination to be addressed.

When First Nations employees perceive that their organisation can provide a challenging, supportive, collaborative, and relational environment, they are much more likely to perceive their work positively and invest time, energy, and psychological involvement (Bakker et al. 2011). Therefore, organisational cultures that support a relational climate and emphasise job resources may best serve First Nations employees' engagement needs (Bakker et al. 2011). Not all organisations will place an emphasis on collaboration and inclusion in decision-making and job completion and may not be able to, depending on the organization's structure and strategy. Yet, there may be opportunities to contain elements of collaboration at different stages of the organisational or work experience.

5.4. *Servant Leaders and Trust*

The leadership style with which First Nations people seem to identify best is one that supports empowering leadership and servant leadership. (Bakker et al. 2011; Dong et al. 2015; Fong and Snape 2015) Empowering leadership emphasises the significance of leaders encouraging and empowering followers to self-direct. Self-direction by children is a core value and is practised by many Indigenous parents in child rearing, so it is not surprising that these values are present in the workplace. Included among the leadership behaviours that encourage the empowerment of employees are leading by example, sharing information with subordinates, collaborative decision-making, demonstrating great concern for employees, and participation in coaching or mentoring activities (Elo et al. 2015; Dong et al. 2015; Fong and Snape 2015).

Through formal and informal mechanisms, organisational leaders who take steps to build trusting and supportive relationships with First Nations employees, their supervisors, peers, and subordinates enable First Nations people to feel comfortable working with those with whom they have established a personal foundation of trust. Trusting and supportive relationships with coworkers have been identified as a key factor in employee retention (Buttner et al. 2010; Jauhari and Singh 2013; Kim et al. 2015; Schaufeli and Bakker 2004; Schaufeli and Salanova 2012; Singh and Selvarajan 2013). The central concept here is trust. Consider the historical relationship between Canada and the First Nations, in which the assimilation agenda has eroded trust for centuries and continues to be challenged. This makes gaining trust difficult, as it takes time to develop. The depth and quality of relationships that First Nations employees have with peers is a critical component that affects how they perceive their work environment (Schaufeli and Bakker 2004; Schaufeli and Salanova 2012).

While organisations typically measure employee loyalty in terms of how much they value the organization, it is also essential to recognise that First Nations employees value one another. The study indicates that organisations looking to engage First Nations people will encourage relationships among coworkers to develop an environment where people feel they have someone they can trust and who shares common values or goals.

6. Conclusions

This study explored and expanded on how Indigenous culture, specifically First Nations cultures, influences employment and employee retention from an exclusively

Indigenous lens. Intersecting critical theory, anti-colonial theory, critical management studies, and Indigenous wholistic theory, the study provides practical insights on reducing inequality through empowering and promoting social, political, and economic inclusion for Indigenous Peoples by acknowledging, tailoring, and decolonizing organisational cultures and practises to enable inclusion. These theoretical frameworks and analytical tools support disrupting or rethinking the foundational colonial systems and ideologies to support engagement and make space for alternative worldviews and approaches in organisations.

The central question asks what problems First Nations people face at work, especially regarding how their culture influences their preferences, behaviours, and how they engage with others. The results offer a perspective on how First Nations culture and the context defining it influence outcomes and employment retention among First Nations people. Employing Indigenous research methods and drawing on the lived experiences of First Nations people, this research examines the perceptions of Indigenous people based on a sample of First Nations worldviews and the context in which it takes place. It informs business leaders, managers, human resource practitioners, and researchers about cultural differences that support positive morale, job satisfaction, and intrinsic investment in work.

Empirical studies have shown that competitive pay, collegial working environments, access to training, advancement opportunities, good relationships with managers and peers, and job security are critical motivational variables for many North American workers. According to First Nations people, organisations that can adapt to Indigenous cultural contexts are essential for their engagement and retention in addition to these other factors, as this study demonstrates.

First Nations people assert that they bring their whole selves to the workplace and do not leave their connections to culture and their unique context behind. Collegial working environments and good relationships with managers and peers are paramount to their engagement. Organisational leaders must implement strategies to build organisational loyalty among diverse populations, including intercultural competence, diversity management, inclusion, decolonization, and reconciliation practises (Buttner et al. 2010; Jauhari and Singh 2013; Kim et al. 2015; Singh and Selvarajan 2013). First Nations people report a tendency to avoid conflict or accommodate situational interactions surrounding conflict. Highly competitive conflict management styles and a low concern for others are negatively perceived, while avoidance or accommodating styles with a deep concern for others are typically more accepted. Understanding First Nations' interpretations of conflict and their cultural preference for managing conflict is essential for organisations to understand, as conflict mismanagement can lead to higher levels of conflict, absenteeism, discrimination, and lower engagement (Bezrukova et al. 2012). First Nations people prefer collaborative approaches to leadership and work with people at all organisational levels, embracing trust and promoting employee relationships. (Paraschivescu 2015; Wallace and Mello 2015). Support from organisations to help organise work and home life in ways that create synergies and support each endeavour would benefit First Nations employees.

The results of this study inform organisational leaders, managers, human resource practitioners, and researchers about First Nations cultural preferences that support positive morale, job satisfaction, and intrinsic investment in work. The study adds value to the aforementioned theoretical frameworks and lends weight to discussions and understandings around decolonization, reconciliation, and the recognition of Indigenous rights in Canadian workplaces. Future research in this area might explore the unique cultural contexts of other Indigenous groups in Canada, who also work in dominant euro-western organisational systems and carry their own historical, social, and cultural understandings. Additional methodological approaches that include quantitative analysis could strengthen and expand the understanding and acceptance of the rationale for recommended changes.

7. Appendixes

Definition of Key Terms

The history of relationships between Canadians and Indigenous peoples is complex and has historically damaged Indigenous people, communities, and cultures (Regan and Alfred 2013; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) 2012; Woods 2013). As a result, terms used to describe Indigenous peoples may represent complicated colonial histories and unbalanced power dynamics (Alfred 2009; IJIH n.d.; Regan and Alfred 2013). These terms have evolved over the past twenty years to be more inclusive and less offensive so that the relationships between Indigenous people and Canada might be improved. Before discussing the topics related to the experiences of Indigenous people and proposing the research questions, specific terms used throughout this paper to identify Indigenous people must be defined.

Aboriginal. In Canada, “Aboriginal” is a collective term used to refer to the first inhabitants, including First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. All three groups of Indigenous people have distinct cultures, languages, and histories. The term became commonly used in Canadian contexts after 1982, when Section 35 of the Canadian Constitution defined the term. According to the *Canadian Constitution Act of 1982*, “Aboriginal peoples of Canada” include Indians, Métis, and Inuit people of Canada (Constitution Act 1982). Aboriginal is also a common term used to refer to the Indigenous peoples of Australia. This term is not commonly used in the United States (Canadian Bar Association 2014; Constitution Act 1982).

First Nation. “First Nation” describes Indigenous peoples of Canada who are ancestrally not Métis or Inuit. This term became generally accepted in Canada in the 1980s and replaced the word “Indian,” as many people found this term offensive (University of British Columbia 2009). Unlike “Indian,” the term “First Nation” does not have a legal definition in Canada under the Indian Act. While “First Nations” refers to the ancestry of First Nations peoples, the term “First Nation” can also refer to a band, a reserve-based community, or a larger grouping of tribes (Canadian Bar Association 2014; University of British Columbia 2009). The Haida Nation (consisting of several Indian bands) and the T’Souke First Nation are examples of the application of the terms used.

Indian. The legal identity of a First Nations or Indigenous person who is registered under the *Indian Act in Canada* is “Indian” (Canadian Bar Association 2014). This term is used only when referring to a First Nations person with status under the *Indian Act* and only within its legal context. Section 2(1) of the *Indian Act 1985* defines the term “Indian” as “a person who, pursuant to this Act, is registered as an Indian or is entitled to be registered as an Indian” (Indian Act 1985). Aside from this precise legal context, the term “Indian” in Canada is considered by many Indigenous people to be objectionable due to its often-problematic colonial use in controlling identity through government legislation (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada 2007; University of British Columbia 2009). In the United States, the terms “American Indian” and “Native Indian” are both commonly used (IJIH n.d.; Vowel 2016).

Indigenous. “Indigenous” is an all-encompassing term that refers to Aboriginal or First Peoples of Canada and other countries (Constitution Act 1982; Weaver 2001). This term is meant to include all First Nations, Metis, and Inuit people. However, it is neither a legal definition under the Indian Act nor a term defined by the government to describe Aboriginal Indigenous people. Therefore, the words *Aboriginal* and *Indigenous* used in this paper will reflect these definitions and be used as an inclusive term to include all self-identifying as Indigenous to North America, whether Aboriginal, Indian, Métis, or Inuit, regardless of status or treaty.

Indigenous Paradigm. An Indigenous worldview is a paradigm or way of seeing the world that is rooted in identification with the land as opposed to one that stems from objectification and rationalism (Alfred 2009; Alfred and Corntassel 2005; Alfred and Tomkins 2010; Betasamosake Simpson 2000, 2017; Hart 2010; Kovach 2021; Rice 2005; Roy 2014; Simpson 2017; Wilson 2008). Indigenous peoples in Canada and worldwide

approach history through cosmology, narrative, place, and a close relationship with the land and environment (Betasamosake Simpson 2014, 2017). In contrast, other worldviews or constructs approach history and worldview primarily through a relationship of cause and effect, written records, and time sequence (Hart 2010; Indian and Northern Affairs Canada 2007; Roy 2014; Wilson 2008; Wilson et al. 2019). Therefore, it is essential to understand an Indigenous worldview as a person's worldview affects or influences belief systems, assumptions, methods of problem-solving, and decision-making (Alfred 2009; Betasamosake Simpson 2014; Hart 2010; Rice 2005; Simpson 2017; Wilson 2008).

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Data Availability Statement: Data is unavailable due to privacy or ethical restrictions respecting the rights of the Indigenous who shared their unique stories in this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Appendix A. Interview Guideline Questions

Name	First Nations Affiliation
Age	Date of Interview
Gender	Place of Interview

1. Please introduce yourself.
2. Tell me about your experiences with your employment?
 - a. History of your employment,
 - b. Your successes and your struggles with employment.
 - c. How did you end up in the job you did?
3. Tell me about the things you value most in your life.
 - a. How does this affect the choices you make with regard to employment
4. Describe your relationships at work.
 - a. How have these relationships affected your employment?
5. Describe your relationships outside of work
 - a. How have these relationships affected your employment?
6. Describe some of your biggest setbacks at work.
 - a. Did your relationships with peers or managers affect these setbacks
7. What do you consider to be your biggest accomplishments at work (or otherwise)?
 - a. Did your relationships with your coworkers or managers affect these accomplishments?
8. How are you supported to do your job?
 - a. How has this affected your success?
9. Over the course of your employment, what has changed for you?
 - a. Do you approach work differently than you did when you first started working?
 - b. What changes have you made to your approach to work?
 - c. Were these changes imposed by someone else or chosen by you?
10. What are the things that make you stay at or leave a job?
11. Is there anything else you would like to add?

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