

# *Dismantling Racial Injustice IS Imagining an Indigenous Holistic Well-Being Framework for the Next Seven Generations*

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, we present the Indigenous Corn Pollen Model as a holistic framework rooted in 13 years of research (Secatero, 2009) highlighting the epistemology of Navajo elders relating to spiritual, mental, physical, and social well-being. The sacred symbol of corn in Navajo cultural lifeways is inspiration for this holistic framework to promote success and well-being for Indigenous communities. We introduce the four quadrants and sixteen attributes of the Corn Pollen Model (Secatero, 2009, 2018, 2022), while also discussing how the model has been implemented to construct educational possibilities for Indigenous and minoritized communities, in the spirit of decoloniality.

**Keywords:** *Indigenous well-being, settler colonialism, white supremacy, decoloniality, TribalCrit, racial justice*

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## **Introduction**

For the purpose of this Community Voices article, we write from our experiences and perspectives as Indigenous and Black scholars within (and outside) of institutions founded to legitimize, normalize, and reproduce white settler supremacy on stolen land (Dumas, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2019). Though the struggles of our respective communities are unique, they are also intertwined and connected with Indigenous communities worldwide, seeking sovereignty and self-determination in the face of violence, erasure, and invisibilisation. We can learn from the totality of our collective struggles so that

we may refine our resistance while building solidarity and understanding. We will speak more to the importance of solidarity in our discussion, following the presentation of the Indigenous Corn Pollen Model.

While our intent here is to outline the Indigenous Corn Pollen Model as a holistic framework for well-being, we cannot do so without discussing the politics of well-being, in relation to the white supremacist and settler colonial contexts, we exist in and write from. It is essential to understand that notions of Indigenous and Black holistic well-being are revolutionary considering that the policies, systems, and structures of settler colonialism

and white supremacy were designed for the purpose of erasure, exploitation, and extermination of Indigenous and Black peoples, as well as other minoritized communities (Goldberg, 2009). Additionally, it is important to recognize that schooling, as it has been designed for our communities by the state and as it continues to this day, is designed to rearticulate these conditions. As such this is political work, but also the work of possibility, as the Indigenous Corn Pollen Model was developed despite these conditions, rooted in the knowledge of elders and expanded upon, layer by layer, by those whom have engaged it. We present the Corn Pollen Model as a model for holistic well-being, and a site of possibility and relationality, that allows us to learn from and relate to the past and present for the purpose of envisioning possible futures for the next seven generations, as the decisions we make today will impact them (Graham, 2009).

In what follows, we present the four quadrants of the Indigenous Corn Pollen Model and its sixteen attributes as a framework for holistic well-being, while also articulating how the model accounts for the legacy of settler colonial and white supremacist structures, policies, practices, and procedures. In presenting this model, we draw inspiration from TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005), as well the growing body of research that speaks to the endemic nature of settler colonialism and white supremacy (via coloniality and the modern manifestation of colonial relations). Further, this work is committed to abolition and dismantling settler colonial relations, particularly within the context of education (Marsh, et al., 2022). Moving forward, we present the Indigenous Corn Pollen Model as both a holistic framework for well-being, and as a site of decolonial possibility.

### **The Corn Pollen Model**

### **Ataa'didiin Ba' Hane': Pollenating a Call to Action for the Next Seven Generations**

#### **Stage One: Nitsahk'ees (Thinking)**

*“You are created as a seed which is rooted in our sacred mother earth to honor your purpose, mind, body, and relations. Expand your roots, grow your leaves of knowledge, stand strong as a cornstalk, and sprout your beautiful tassels to blossom for your people. Always remember who you are, where you are from, and where you are going in life. Create and continue your legacy by following the corn pollen path through education, well-being, and leadership.” (Secatero, 2018)*

The Indigenous Corn Pollen Model in holistic leadership and well-being (Secatero, 2009, 2018, 2022) highlights the valuable contributions of Canoncito Band of Navajo elders and their epistemology relating to spiritual, mental, physical, and social well-being attributes. The sacred symbol of corn in Navajo lifeways serves as inspiration for this holistic framework, promoting success for all youth in relation to their well-being. The Corn Pollen Model is composed of 16 well-being attributes derived from interviews, stories, leadership experiences, and survey results from 23 American Indian graduate and professional students, along with talking circles from international Indigenous scholars. A non-Native perspective was also included in the model, which includes western perspectives of well-being.

The Corn Model focuses on centering and offering the Navajo-based philosophy “Si’ah Naaghai Bik’eh Hozhoon” (SNBH) or the Beauty Way Path of Life, which focuses on the overall completion and celebration of success through the symbol of the corn/graduation

tassel, while also deeply embodying notions of possibility through action and holistic well-being.

The first stage of the Indigenous-based Corn Pollen Model emphasizes the Navajo-based concept of thinking, or Nitsahk'ees, that includes the main four main attributes:

### **SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING: (Purpose and Balance)**

The spiritual well-being quadrant, Hodiyingo' Ba' Hozho' in the Navajo language, is strongly tied to having purpose and balance in one's life which also connects to cultural well-being or identity, linguistic well-being or language, and artistic well-being or possessing one's gift in life. Furthermore, spiritual well-being involves ceremony, hope, self-acceptance, dreams, life/death, and achievement. Challenges of social well-being can include death, loss, lack of self-acceptance, and loss of purpose.

### **MENTAL WELL-BEING (Thinking and Planning)**

Mental well-being quadrant, Bini' Ba' Hozho' in the Navajo language, is connected to thinking or cognition skills, emotional well-being or heart, intellectual well-being or wisdom, and technical well-being or future skills needed to promote wellness. Examples of mental well-being include critical thinking, learning styles, learning how to conceptualize concepts, and mind stimulation. Challenges of mental well-being include mental and emotional abuse, self-defeating behavior, fear, self-doubt, and hate.

### **PHYSICAL WELL-BEING (Body and Health)**

Physical well-being quadrant, A'tiis' Ba' Hozho' in the Navajo language, is related to the body and includes attributes of

environmental well-being or sense of place, cyclical well-being or honoring time/change, and medicinal well-being which is needed for healing purposes. Examples of physical well-being include proper diet, exercise, health awareness, drug prevention, and nutrition. Physical well-being challenges include laziness, drug abuse, overworking, negative self-image, lack of health care, and limited resources.

### **SOCIAL WELL-BEING (Relationships and Community)**

Social well-being quadrant, K'e Ba' Hozho' in the Navajo language, correlates to honoring relations to embody professional well-being or goals, economic well-being or maintaining stability, and political well-being which connects leadership attributes to life-long learning. Examples of social well-being include family ties, collaboration, social etiquette, and effective communication. Challenges of social well-being include ignorance, bad influences, passivity, discrimination, and war.

### **Stage Two: Nahat'a (Planning)**

*“In our way of life, we are walking the beauty way path just like our ancestors. The beauty way path for us is to know who we are, where we are from, and where we are going in life. Education is the key to survival. We must balance both worlds and live in harmony. Our minds, our hands, and our hearts have given us strong wings. To ensure our survival, we must be eager to fly higher.” - Tohajiilee Navajo Elders*

In Navajo epistemology, the second planning stage is referred to as Na'hat'a. The contributors of the Corn Pollen Model involved a dissertation entitled, *Beneath Our Sacred*

*Minds, Hands and Hearts: Stories of Persistence and Success among American Indian Graduate and Professional Students* conducted by Dr. Shawn Secatero in 2009.

This study's methods involved an in-depth qualitative analysis of persistence and success factors with 23 American Indian graduate students who had recently attained their respective degrees. An electronic survey and short questionnaire were completed by participants representing 18 different tribal groups and 19 institutions. Participants had varying levels of graduate degree completion and majors. Electronic surveys were completed from March 2008 through October 2008 and were designed to acquire participant demographic information, graduate school preparation, financial aid, academics, tribal ways of knowledge, and shared words of wisdom. In addition, four participants submitted stories to provide an analysis of success and persistence factors. Participants identified the following salient issues: (a) Spiritual well-being as the most important success factors which focused on family, belief system, and giving back to the community; (b) mental well-being which included critical thinking, personal and career development, academic rigor, and leadership; (c) social well-being which was viewed as networking, mentorship, communication skills, and advanced literacy; and (d) physical well-being which incorporated hard work, endurance, and healthy lifestyle. Recommendations from this study included the development of a national American Indian mentorship program, institutional follow-up with graduate students, graduate school preparation institutes, the establishment of a graduate school guidebook for American Indian students, and the dissemination of personal histories as models for life. This pioneering study serves as a foundation in the development of an

Indigenous perspective as more research is needed to address the persistence and success factors of American Indian graduate and professional students. The study continued to grow from 2009-2014 as four more pillars were added that included the following:

### **CULTURAL WELL-BEING: (Identity and Background)**

As concisely outlined in the *Community Vitality Index Overview*, developed by scholars and community engaged in the FemNorthNet Project:

Cultural well-being is about having the freedom to practice your own culture, and to belong to a cultural group. Cultural well-being helps us be who we are as individuals. Cultural well-being comes from being valued for the differences that define us and our beliefs, our history, and our roots (Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, 2018, p. 7).

Culturally responsive leadership for social justice and equity are positive practices of cultural well-being which promotes the sense of belonging, diversity appreciation, knowledge of cultural norms, and pride. The challenges of cultural well-being include loss of culture, history, norms, confusion of identity, lack of maturity, racism, lack of cultural acceptance, and criticizing differences.

### **EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING (Heart and Love)**

The Navajo term for emotional well-being is Ba'ani ba' Hozho'. The symbol of the arrowhead is a sacred part of well-being which relates to your heart and love. Emotional well-being is recognizing and understanding the heart of wellness through emotions and

healthy lifestyles, anger/stress management, love, compassion, enthusiasm, optimism, and contentment. The challenges of emotional well-being include bad attitude, fear, powerlessness, victimization, jealousy, anger, blame, boredom, and revenge.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL WELL-BEING (Place and Nature)**

Environmental well-being is referred to as land or Keyah ba' Hozho' in the Navajo language. The sense of place, such as having a safe living environment or home, are very important. The symbol for environmental well-being is a hooghan or living quarters. Here, environmental well-being is honoring our environment by respecting all living beings, Mother Earth, and Father Sky. It also includes creating a safe home, school, work, and community environment for future generations. Examples of environmental well-being connect to land stewardship, planting, respecting all living beings, travelling, maintaining safe spaces, and creating safety zones. The challenges of environmental well-being include pollution, lack of safe spaces, destroying the environment, not respecting living things, and violence.

### **PROFESSIONAL WELL-BEING (Goals and Achievement)**

In the Navajo language professional well-being is Nanish'ishi ba' Hozho' which refers to setting goals in life and achievement. A common practice for honoring achievement is the eagle feather which is deemed sacred for professional well-being among many Native nations. Professional well-being is achieving wellness through the enrichment of life goals, education, career aspirations, purpose, and finding happiness. Examples of professional well-being include short and long-term goal planning, ethics, job skills, people skills,

growth, professionalism, organization, and effective evaluation. Challenges of professional well-being include authoritarian leadership, confusion, lack of planning, nepotism, favoritism, and other negative career hiring practices.

### **Stage Three: Iina' (Living) 2010-2012**

*“Without your healing songs, you are no longer a people” –Aboriginal Elder (Australia) 2016.*

The third stage of the Corn Pollen Model add a living of life component by combining both western ways of knowing and Indigenous education. The Corn Pollen Model continued its growth in the third stage that involves the concept of Life or Iina' in the Navajo language.

In the model are holistic education concepts identified such as Gardner's *Multiple intelligences: New horizons* (2006), Bloom's *taxonomy of educational objectives: A forty-year retrospective* (1994), and the critical elements of well-being outlined by Rath and Harter (2010). The concepts of technical well-being, cyclical well-being, economic well-being, and political well-being were added.

### **LINGUISTIC WELL-BEING (Voice and Expression)**

The drum serves as a heartbeat of language through sacred songs, and without these songs, an individual society can no longer exist. Linguistic well-being, or Saad Ba' Hozho, is a new term defined as patterns of thought and communication that are tied to behavior, belief systems, cultures, and our reality. It also includes honoring voice that preserves languages (Secatero, 2022). One example of leadership relating to linguistic well-being is

oratory leadership, which refers to a person who knows how to bring people together through voice, reasoning, and bilingualism. Establishing your inner and outer voice through reading, writing, speaking, listening, and leading are a few positive examples of linguistic well-being. The challenges of linguistic well-being include loss of Native language, criticism, being judgmental, negativity, and use of profanity.

### **INTELLECTUAL WELL-BEING (Wisdom and Character)**

Intellectual well-being translates as, Nitsahk'ees ba' Hozho' in the Navajo language. The practice of sharing wisdom involved the sacred use of tobacco among elders. Intellectual well-being can be defined as being open and responsive to new ideas, critical thinking, and learning from elders and knowledge keepers. It is also strongly tied to character development and building a positive reputation. Examples of intellectual well-being include respect, responsibility, rigor, insight, relevance, instinct, elder teachings, advisement, knowledge keeping. The challenges of intellectual well-being include being self-righteous, bad attitude, lack of respect including responsibility.

### **CYCLICAL WELL-BEING (Time and Change)**

Cyclical well-being is a new term in the Navajo language, Ninanihai ba' Hozho', which includes honoring time, change, seasons, and development. The sacred symbol for cyclical well-being is a calendar. Every society has a calendar to monitor time and change, which is also important in leadership that cultivates the planning process for community survival. Cyclical well-being is understanding the concepts of time and change through stages of development which includes learning patience,

and creating positive outcomes for a group of people, (Secatero, 2022). Examples of cyclical well-being include time management, rites of passage, human development, elder knowledge, responsiveness to change, and patience. The challenges of cyclical well-being include lack of patience, tardiness, lack of planning, and no vision.

### **ECONOMIC WELL-BEING (Stability and Capital)**

Economic well-being is defined as Baah haa Hasin ba' Hozho' in Navajo which means creating a stable life through socioeconomics and financial literacy. For example, livestock husbandry is an example of economic well-being, survival, and prosperity for many Native nations. Economic well-being is further defined and understood as creating a stable life through effective nation building, budgeting, resource allocation, fiscal monitoring, and accounting. Examples of economic well-being include financial literacy, resource development, capital, and understanding global trends. Challenges of economic well-being include greed, nepotism, favoritism, poverty, power and materialistic wealth.

### **Stage Four: Sihasin (Assuring) 2013-present**

The final stage of the Corn Pollen Model focuses on the Navajo concept of reassurance that my model was continuing its growth to survive in the research and traditional worlds. Dr. Secatero attended international conferences in New Zealand, Canada, and Australia to provide further guidance in developing the 16 pillars of the Corn Pollen Model. Artistic, linguistic, intellectual, and medicinal well-being were added.

### **ARTISTIC WELL-BEING: (Giftedness and Craft)**

Artistic well-being is defined as Na'ach'aah Ba' Hozho' in the Navajo language. The symbol of artistic well-being is connected to the sacred basket which honors the circle of giving and sharing among people. Secatero (2022) previously outlined artistic well-being as honoring the past, present culture. Examples of artistic well-being include giftedness, music, film development, media documentation, arts and crafts, dancing, traditions, pedagogy, and mastery learning. The challenges of artistic well-being include lack of skill building, giving up, lack of patience, and lack of interest in learning new things.

### **TECHNICAL WELL-BEING (Future and Planning)**

Technical well-being refers to Bee'nanish ba' Hozho' in the Navajo Language. Stars and celestial beings serve as symbols of technical well-being. They help guide critical thinking and into the future of the unknown. Examples of technical well-being include technology and planning, forecasting, science, math, computers, netiquette, and giving back to future generations. The challenges of technical well-being include being close-minded, fear of technology, negative outlook on community, lack of planning or initiative, and negative outlook on the future.

### **MEDICINAL WELL-BEING (Healing and Resiliency)**

Azee' ba' Hozho is the term referring to medicinal well-being in the Navajo language. The medicine bundle is the symbol for medicinal well-being. The concepts of healing can also include forgiveness, balance, and resiliency. Secatero (2022) positioned medicinal well-being as the ability to heal ourselves from life obstacles and challenges to restore our mind, body, and spirit. This includes restoration of self, restructuring our

life, reflection on good things, and reshaping our surroundings. Specific example of medicinal well-being include rest, relaxation, rejuvenation, counseling, talking circles, restoration, and counseling. The challenges of medicinal well-being include trauma, abuse, assault, drama, and destruction of living creatures, plants, sacred sites.

### **POLITICAL WELL-BEING (Leadership and Trust)**

Political well-being is defined as Binahat'a ba' Hozho' in the Navajo language. The symbol of political well-being refers to a spear-staff which is given to a leader. Political well-being is developing a stronger sustainable community through positive change, service, care, trust, and giving back to your people (Secatero, 2022). Prime examples of political well-being can include honesty, integrity, leadership, sovereignty, self-determination, advocacy, inspirational leadership, success. Challenges of political well-being include distrust, misuse of power, self-righteousness, and negative practices to bring down a community.

### **Relating and Building Alternative Possibilities for the Next Seven Generations**

As was emphasized in the call for this special issue, we conclude this Community Voices article in the spirit of solidarity and common purpose in recognizing the ongoing and shared struggle of the Palestinian people against the all-encompassing violence of settler colonial structures that continue to deny them of their dignity and humanity. As of March 25, 2025, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, in Gaza:

- 50,144 Palestinians have been killed and 55% of identified casualties have

been children (15,613), women (8,304), and the elderly (3,839).

- 113,704 Palestinians have been injured, and 1.9 million internally displaced, with 91% of the population (1.95 million) are experiencing food insecurity at 'crisis' levels.
- 88% of school building 'require either full reconstruction or major rehabilitation', and >658,000 students have no access to formal learning spaces (UN OCHA, 2025)

While we acknowledge the 1,607 Israeli lives lost in this conflict (UN OCHA, 2025), as well as the 59 civilians that remain in captivity with Hamas, we also acknowledge Israel's settler-colonial expansion in the occupied West Bank, which United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk has declared a war crime under international law. As noted by Ben-Youssef and Tamari (2018), in reference to the settler colonial projects of Israel of North America,

The parallel mechanisms employed by these regimes, and the shared experiences of the Native communities of Turtle Island (the term that Native communities use to refer to the land of North America) and Palestine, have long connected the indigenous movements for justice, sovereignty, and survival in both contexts. (p. 82)

We must learn from and struggle for one another, and one another's well-being. "Plumbing the depths," is a key descriptor in Robin D.G. Kelley's *A Poetics of Anticolonialism* (1999), in which he introduces Aimé Césaire's seminal work, *Discourse on Colonialism*. This notion of plumbing the depths is an important metaphor, as Kelley

notes that in presenting the poetics of anticolonialism Césaire's work:

Plumbs the depths of the unconscious so that we might comprehend colonialism through his entire being. It is full of flares, full of anger, full of humor. It is not a solution or a strategy or a manual or a little red book with pithy quotes. It is a dancing flame in a bonfire. (Kelley, 1999, p. x)

The notion of plumbing the depths of our unconsciousness as colonized people represents the leveraging of our indigenous ways of being as a powerful source of knowledge and revolt, [(and in the case of this work) leveraging all that is indigenous, "everything, every history, every future, every dream, every life form, from plant to animal, every creative impulse, plumbed from the depths of the unconscious" (Kelley, 1999, p. x).

While Césaire plumbs the depths with poetry, the Corn Pollen Model plumbs the depths through notions of holistic leadership and well-being, rooted in ancestral knowledge. It is also informed and revised by the lived experiences and realities of those who are committed to delinking from the colonial matrix of power, and pushing back against coloniality, or the reproduction of the structures (systems and institutions) and technologies of white supremacy and settler colonialism. These technologies include but are not limited to invisibilisation, erasure, deculturalization and assimilation.

### Concluding Thoughts

The Corn Pollen Model and its 16 attributes are centered in a holistic approach to our relations and relationality, *vincularidad*, or the connection between all things, as opposed to

racial capitalist relations (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Because the model centers relationality from a holistic perspective, it works to make space, and fractals of possibility for other communities seeking to organize and fight for well-being while simultaneously fighting systemic and structural violence and the technologies of white supremacy and settler colonialism. This is collective, and urgent work.

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