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Eyininiw mistatimwak: The role of the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony for First Nations youth mental wellness

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Abstract

First Nations youth across Canada face considerably higher risk to develop mental health issues compared to their non-First Nations counterparts. These disproportionate risks have arisen within the context of an extensive history of harmful treatment of First Nations peoples borne of political policies aimed at the destruction of First Nations cultures. Research has demonstrated the importance of culture for positive mental health outcomes among First Nations youth. Like other land-based initiatives, there has been growing interest regarding the importance of equine-assisted learning and therapy for First Nations youth mental wellness. However, there is limited scientific understanding of the mechanisms by which First Nations youth can heal with horses, and even less is known about how equine-assisted programs can be adapted for cultural relevance. The current paper addresses this gap in the literature by introducing the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony as a potential key player in First Nations youths' healing journeys. A culturally-responsive framework is offered that highlights the ways in which a mutual helping relationship can be built between First Nations youth and this critically endangered Indigenous horse.

Keywords: Equine-assisted learning, equine-assisted therapy, Indigenous horses, First Nations, youth, decolonising, culture, mental health, Lac La Croix, land-based.

Dedication. This article is dedicated to the four original mares and all their descendants, in the physical or spirit world: May your legacy live on *forever*.

Introduction

Equine-assisted learning (EAL) is a relatively new approach to knowledge acquisition that draws primarily on the tenets of experiential learning, that is, learning through hands-on experience with the horse (Dell, Chalmers, Dell, Sauve, & MacKinnon, 2008). In many EAL programs, participants engage in structured, facilitator-led sessions that provide opportunities to become involved in situations that require interactions with the horse, and to reflect on these experiences. The overall intent is "to create opportunities whereby participants, through direct experience with the horse, learn about self, internalize this awareness within the sessions, and

generalize it to other life situations" (Dell et al., 2008, p. 91). Although the core elements of EAL are quite similar, equine-assisted therapy (EAT) is considered a distinct approach in which the horse is viewed as "an integral part of the therapeutic process" (Masini, 2010, p. 30) and "central to the model in large part due to its ability to read and sense humans' feelings and emotions" (Gergely, 2012, p. 89). In EAT programs, the sessions often focus solely on groundwork with horses (Lee, Dakin, & McLure, 2016). Regardless of the specific modality, EAT incorporates horses experientially for emotional growth by facilitating a collaborative effort between a mental health professional and a horse specialist to address clients' specific treatment goals (EAGALA, 2009). Despite the growing interest in both EAL and EAT programs, there remains "a serious absence of theoretical models and frameworks within both the broad area of animal-assisted and more specifically equine-assisted interventions" (Dell et al., 2008, p. 99). Kruger and Serpell (2006) acknowledge this significant gap in the literature by specifying that "[t]he field of animal-assisted interventions currently lacks a unified, widely accepted, or empirically supported theoretical framework for explaining how and why relationships between humans and animals are potentially therapeutic" (p. 27).

Despite the unequivocal links to other land-based programs (Wildcat, McDonald, Irlabacher-Fox, Coulthard, 2014), EAL and EAT have only recently been identified as a culturally-relevant strategy to facilitate learning and promote healing among First Nations[1] youth (Dell et al., 2011). Both types of programs are a particularly promising for use with First Nations youth because they utilise an experiential approach to learning that fits with Indigenous *ways of knowing* and *being* which regards a relationship with the land and all its cohabitants as a priority (Greenwood, de Leeuw, Lindsay, & Reading, 2015). There are, however, only a few known programs that have been specifically created for and used with First Nations youth (e.g., *Shonga Ska: Sacred Horse Society* with Omaha youth and *Seven Directions Equine-Assisted Therapy Program* with Lakota youth; Whitbeck & Parsells, 2015). While these attempts have shed some light on the usefulness of these programs for First Nations youth, there is still little understanding about what components are essential for positive outcomes, and even less is known about how to modify these components for cultural relevance (Whitbeck & Parsells, 2015).

Although the horse is an undisputedly fundamental element in EAL and EAT, there has been little to no attention paid to questioning whether the horse is indeed a neutral, objective party in the healing process. The current manuscript utilises a social justice and decolonising lens to challenge (and dismantle) this dominant proposition by introducing the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony and its role for First Nations youth mental wellness through a comprehensive review of the literature (i.e., research studies, academic publications, books, news reports, and radio interviews, as well as the authors' personal communications through traditional Elder consultations and horse dance ceremony), with special consideration given to the voices of the Indigenous peoples from Bois Forte Band of Chippewa and Lac La Croix First Nation. Based on the review of the literature, we offer the *Four Blankets of Indigenous Horse-Based Healing* and discuss how each component of the framework must be integrated into equine-assisted programs to promote optimal wellness outcomes for First Nations youth, where the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony is positioned as the most pertinent and central agent of the healing process due to its long-standing relationship with First Nations peoples and shared history of colonisation. Our findings support the much-needed paradigm shift away from a Western viewpoint of "horses as mere *objects*" in therapy and towards an Indigenous perspective that considers the ethical implications for the care and agency of these horses (Matamonasa-Bennett, 2015, p. 35).

[1] The term First Nations refers to the descendants of the original inhabitants of Canada who lived here for many thousands of years prior to European contact. The term Ojibwe refers to a specific group of First Nations peoples. The term Indigenous refers to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples of Canada collectively.

Decolonising the History of the Horse

> [H]orses were not introduced, necessarily, by the Spaniards; these are Indigenous horses that originated here. And, I know the Spaniards introduced horses to the Plains Indians and so forth, but we had Indigenous ponies here, and the Lac La Croix Ponies, that are Indigenous to his land – Larry Aiken. (Kleffman, 2013)

Despite numerous claims from traditional Elders and knowledge keepers that horses were vital to First Nations ways of life prior to European contact (Black Elk & Neihardt, 1932; Collin, 2014; Lawrence, 1998), First Nations peoples' oral history of the horse is not treated as "historical fact" from the views of dominant society (Collin, 2013). As such, the Indigenous horse[2] remains scientifically invalidated and thus non-existent. The basis for presumption appears to be rooted in the context of an extensive history of aversive treatment of First Nations peoples; along with the arrival of the Europeans came their belief that anything that was *civilised* or advanced originated from their homeland. In the 1500-1700s, one of the marks of civilisation was one's possession of the horse and mastery of horsemanship skills. Because the horse was used for travel, buying, selling, and trading, the number of horses an individual owned was viewed as a large measure of one's wealth. Despite numerous recorded sightings of wild horses in the Americas, these accounts were either ignored or twisted. Any herds of horses that *were* discovered shortly after European contact were denied as being Indigenous and, therefore, property to be claimed by newcomers (see Collin, 2014 for examples of these circumstances). Taken together, these European assertions conveniently supported the predominant view that the Americans and its inhabitants were *not human* and thus justified "the theft" of Indigenous land and its contents, which included the horse and any other valuable commodity (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2012).

As archaeological technology becomes more sophisticated, however, the colonial history of the horse is being increasingly challenged. Contrary to what the dominant society continues to believe today, the oldest known fossil remains of the horse have been reportedly located not in Europe or Asia, but in North America (Collin, 2014). Furthermore, Henderson (1991) contends that there is no reason why the horse could not have survived the Pleistocene era (commonly known as the *Ice Age*) along with the deer, bison, and elk, while larger species such as the woolly mammoth perished. Henderson (1991) presents evidence related to ancient artifacts, petroglyphs, and oral history to support these claims. According to an article in Canadian Geographic Magazine (Singer, 2005), "there is clear evidence of horses until 12,000 years ago, with isolated finds indicating there may have been horses closer to 3000-1000 years ago." That means there could have been horses in Canada as late as AD 1000, about 500 years before the arrival of Europeans and well after the presumed extinction, and those horses would have numbered in the millions.

Scientific evidence is building that supports the *alternative* (i.e., decolonised) story that horses were *re*-introduced with European contact, a counter-narrative that was likely strategically oppressed by those holding power and privilege to justify and reinforce aggressive assimilative policies aimed at the destruction of First Nations cultures. The process of decolonising the history of the horse may be viewed by many First Nations peoples as an overt act of resistance by reframing, renaming, and reclaiming the horse as their own. Such counter-narratives serve to validate and support Indigenous histories and land rights, which reflect the larger movement towards Indigenous self-determination. While there are different types of Indigenous horses with their own historical and social origins, there is one particular breed that retains an intrinsic

[2] There are reportedly a number of horse breeds that are considered Indigenous based on their historical significance to Native American peoples of the United States (see Collin, 2014 for more details). For the purposes of this article, we will focus specifically on the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony and its Indigenous origins to Canada.

foundation with the Ojibwe Nation in Canada: the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony.

On the Brink of Extinction

The Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony breed was originally located at Nett Lake and Lake Vermilion in Northern Minnesota, and the Lac La Croix First Nations reserve in Northwestern Ontario. The ponies had been reportedly living with the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa since before the 1800's. The Bois Forte traditional Elders and knowledge keepers recall a time there were thousands of ponies (Chosa, 2013; Lynghaug, 2009). These narratives are supported by Larry Aiken, historian for the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, as he explains how birchbark scrolls (typically used for sacred lodge teachings[3]) document the initial contact between the Northern Ojibwe peoples (and later the Cree peoples) and the Lac La Croix Indigenous ponies (Kleffman, 2013). He affirms that the ponies' history,

> goes back to the Algonquian migration, back in the late 1400s and early 1500s, [when] we [Ojibwe peoples] migrated from the Atlantic seacoast. As we neared the tip of Lake Superior, some of the Ojibwe tribes split-off and went into Canada, and they are the ones that came into contact with some of the Lac La Croix [Indigenous] Ponies. (Kleffman, 2013)

Aiken continues to explain that the Lac La Croix Indigenous Ponies were included in the lodge teachings when the Northern and Southern Ojibwe would gather together for ceremony. Thus, at the time of Western contact, he states that "horses [were] not new to us... They are Canadian, Indigenous" (Kleffman, 2013). While the Dakota peoples, for example, encountered horses after European contact on the plains (during a spiritual journey) and subsequently used them to hunt buffalo[4], the Lac La Croix Indigenous Ponies stayed in the Minnesota-Ontario region. Unlike the Dakota peoples' horses, the ponies were not rode but rather used by the Ojibwe peoples for work-related activities (Chosa, 2013; Kleffman, 2013; Lynghaug, 2009; see Figure 1).

In an interview with community members from Lac La Croix First Nation (Doyle, 1987), it was evident that the Lac La Croix Indigenous Ponies were an integral part of reserve life prior to 1927, as they were reportedly used to transport food into Lac La Croix First Nation from Flanders, Ontario, which is an estimated 150km round trip that would take at least two days to complete if travelling by horse.

Figure 1. Tom Ottertail of Lac La Croix First Nation (1934) using a Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony to haul large blocks of ice (Chosa, 2013[5]).

The ponies themselves were also sold as commodity. One community member asserted that, "they were the only Indian ponies that they could get so they bought them from here to take them down to the [United] States" (Doyle, 1987, p. 48). Furthermore, the Lac La Croix Indigenous Ponies played an important social role in First Nations community and were involved in community gatherings and conversations (see Figure 2). Another community member reminisced on a time when the ponies were considered members of the community:

> We always had stories and our Elders always talked about the horses that they had. And, if fact, my mother-in-law, her family was the one that kept that last herd of [Lac La Croix Indigenous] ponies that they had. Her grandmother would tell her stories. And she could remember one time, her grandmother walked about of the house late at night and one of the ponies was laying down in

[3] The referenced birch bark scrolls are considered sacred and thus are not available to the public, but rather are held in trust by the Midewiwin peoples and can only be accessed by members of the Grand Medicine Lodge.

[4] The Dakota peoples are known for their specialised horse-riding skills, as a result of their reliance on the horse for hunting buffalo and thus their survival.

[5] Photo compliments of Debbie Atatise and the community members of Lac La Croix First Nation.

> front of the doorway and she fell over the pony. And everyone thought it was hilarious! And there were other stories, like, my wife's father (my father-in-law) said when they were younger, they would dare each other to jump on the ponies' backs and go for a ride. So they would ride them bareback. And there are other stories too. (LeGarde & Woods, 2014)

Figure 2. Wally Olson, Fred Isham, Randy Olson (1977) at Lac La Croix First Nation in front of John and Marie Ottertail's residence[6].

One community member highlighted the ponies' sense of belonging to the First Nations peoples by emphasising that "they were a special breed... they were original breed Indian ponies" (Doyle, 1987, p. 48).

According to Donald Chosa Jr., Cultural Coordinator at Bois Forte Indian Reservation, the breed became endangered when the missionaries came to the reservation in the 1940s and saw no use for the ponies. Furthermore, they felt that it was inappropriate for First Nations children to witness the ponies breeding. As a result, the majority of the breed was destroyed (LeGarde & Woods, 2014) regardless of the discernible social and historical importance of the ponies to their original caretakers. Despite the devastating losses the breed suffered, a small herd managed to survive and was kept on the Lac La Croix First Nation reserve (LeGarde & Woods, 2014). Before spring, the ponies were herded over the ice by Lac La Croix peoples onto an island called Pony Island. The ponies lived on the island during the summer, foaling and breeding and foraging for food. When winter returned, they were herded back to be used for hauling, logging, running trap lines, and other work until spring, and the cycle began again (Chosa, 2013; Lynghaug, 2009). This migration cycle, particularly the isolation and refuge of Pony Island, appears to have acted as a significant protective factor during a time when the pony numbers were rapidly decreasing.

By the 1960's, the ponies had been allowed to wander free, living and foraging in the woods (Doyle, 1987). However, the future of the breed became further threatened when a researcher and writer named Lester Bower accidently shot a young male pony, apparently mistaking it for a moose. This left a population of only seven ponies, including an old stallion that could no longer breed. In 1977, there were only four mares left on Lac La Croix First Nation (Chosa, 2013; Lynghaug, 2009; see Figure 3).

Figure 3. The four remaining Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony mares (1976) in a field by the east side of Lac La Croix First Nation the summer before leaving for Minnesota, United States (Chosa, 2013[7]*).*

Furthermore, Canada's Health Department officials reportedly viewed the ponies as unwanted pets and deemed the ponies a *health* threat and plans were underway to have the remainder of the ponies destroyed (Chosa, 2013; Lynghaug, 2009). Aware of the ponies imminent demise, five men – namely, Fred Isham (originally from Lac La Croix First Nation but lived on Bois Forte Indian Reservation), Wally Olson, Walter Saatela, Bob Walker, and Omar Hilde – decided to rescue the ponies in February of that year. The men were able to capture and load the four mares on a trailer to travel across the frozen lake to Minnesota. The ponies were all in good health, but none of them were bred. At that time, the Lac La Croix Indigenous Ponies were believed to be descendants of the Spanish Mustang and Canadian Horse, a hypothesis that would (unbeknownst to these men) be later contested.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

But it was not until the ponies settled into their new home in Minnesota that they were bred to a Spanish Mustang stallion, named Smokey, since no Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony stallions remained. With the introduction of a male line, the breed survived.

Return of the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony

Once thought to be a cross between the Canadian Horse and Spanish Mustang, the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony ancestry hypothesis has not been fully supported by empirical studies. Based on a mitochondrial DNA data (Prystupa, Hind, Cothran & Plante, 2012) with a sample of Lac La Croix Indigenous Ponies, the breed was found to share a maternal lineage with the Canadian Horse which supports the historical records suggesting that these breeds could have both been influenced by Spanish equine populations. Interestingly, no counter-hypothesis that the Canadian Horse may actually be a descendent of the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony was offered (which is quite reasonable given the reported Canadian origins of the latter). However, when Prystupa, Juras, Cothran, Buchanan, and Plante (2012) conducted analyses using microsatellite DNA data, there was a lack of evidence for a relationship between the Canadian Horse and the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony. As the literature suggests, these inconsistent findings may be due to the genetic bottleneck of the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony and fairly recent (i.e., 1977) introgression of Spanish Mustang lineage to preserve the breed when the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony was reduced to only four breeding mares (Prystupa, Hind, Cothran & Plante, 2012). The authors concluded that it may be difficult to get a fully comprehensive picture of all the breeds that influenced the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony (if any), but there is definite evidence to support a Spanish origin, a finding which was already affirmed by the aforementioned oral narratives by First Nations traditional Elders and knowledge keepers who also contend that the ponies are Indigenous to Canada. In addition, Prystupa, Hind, Cothran, and Plante (2012) indicated that the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony was "among the top breeds recommended for a conservation strategy" (p. 387). With more research studies, the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony breed may receive the empirical support it requires to justify its Indigenous origins and obtain funding for a sustainable conservation plan in Canada and beyond. Meanwhile, the inclusion of the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony in the critically endangered list by Rare Breeds Canada (2015) and the breed's appearance in a number of horse breed encyclopedias has proved to be beneficial in raising public awareness of the breed and its lingering threat of extinction.

Today, the Lac la Croix Indigenous Pony still displays its characteristic physical features, some of which have undoubtedly contributed to the breed's survival. Though somewhat smaller than other horse breeds (typically ranging from 12.2 to 14.2 hands), the ponies are nevertheless described as "strong, versatile, athletic" with "extremely durable feet and legs with amazing stamina" and are known to be "disease resistance and hardier than any current domestic breed" (Lynghaug, 2009, p. 94). While being slower to mature, they tend to produce more off-spring with a more extended lifespan compared to most breeds. These ponies are extremely tolerant of Canadian terrain and environment, as they "can get into and out of dense bush more easily than a draft horse and do not balk being asked to push their way through trees, breaking off branches as they go and make their own paths" (Lynghaug, 2009, p. 94). The ponies also possess nose flaps and thick, lion-like forelock and mane, and profusely-haired ears needed to sustain harsh winter climates and repel insects during the hot summer months. The Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony is also distinguishable by its *primitive* markings such as the dorsal stripe (that runs from their thick neck, across their low withers and straight back, to their sloping croup and low-set tail; Lynghaug, 2009), leg-striping (i.e., dark horizontal bars on the legs, also called *zebra-bars*) and lighter guard hairs along the edges of a dark mane and tail. The Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony is astoundingly similar to First Nations peoples' depiction of pre-columbian horses in Henderson's (1991) paper entitled, *The Aboriginal North American Horse*: "According to Elders, the aboriginal pony had the following characteristics: it was small, about 13 hands, it had a 'strait' [sic] back necessitating a different saddle from that used on European horses, wider nostrils, larger lungs so that its endurance was proverbial" (p. 3).

Aside from their desirable physical traits that make them the "perfect all-around horse," Lac La Croix Indigenous Ponies are extremely intelligent thinkers and tolerant of human ineptitude, making them particularly suitable for beginner handlers (Lynghaug, 2009, p. 94). In fact, they have been described as being stable and trustworthy enough for EAL programs with disabled individuals (Lynghaug, 2009). According to Lynghaug (2009) they,

> possess a common sense that is unequalled in the modern horse world. This characteristic is perhaps the most difficult one to show people or describe, but for anybody who has worked with a Lac La Croix [Indigenous] Pony, this will be the first trait he or she will mention about the ponies. These personality traits alone make them invaluable and worthy of saving regardless of their historical significant or abilities. (p. 94)

With some individual breeding programs in place across Canada[8], the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony population is slowly growing. According to the 1994 World Watch List (Patterson, 2000; Scherf, 1995), the breed consisted of approximately 350 ponies, but in 2013, there were only about 110 known ponies owned by individuals in scattered areas, with only 27 males and 49 females that could be used for breeding (Chosa, 2013). Today, there is still only an estimated 175 to 200 ponies in North America, a number that will retain them in the *critically endangered* category of the Rare Breeds Canada conservation list for many years. With an incomplete breed registry, the denial of their Indigenous origins, and the lack of a nation-wide conservation strategy, the future of the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony breed is still at risk of extinction due to the low numbers and small gene pool (Prystupa, Hind, Cothran, & Plante, 2012).

The Four Blankets of Indigenous Horse-Based Healing

The key to developing a much-needed culturally-adapted EAL and EAT framework for First Nations youth may lie not in decolonising the therapeutic approach per se, but rather in the therapeutic *tool* itself (i.e., the horse). By placing the horse at the *centre* of the therapeutic process (rather than at the periphery as an *assistant* called upon only when needed), we create the space necessary to decolonise equine-assisted approaches for First Nations youth. Termed Indigenous Horse-Based Healing (*eyininiw mistatimwak* in Cree), the horse becomes the teacher and healer rather than an assistant or helper (Matamonasa-Bennett, 2015); in this way, the reciprocal and equitable horse-human relationship is formed that provides a basis for healing process that is grounded in a *shared* Indigenous view of the world (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. A depiction of horse-human relationships (both physical and metaphysical) from an Indigenous epistemology (adapted from Farrell, 2008).

Using Gray Smith's (2012) *blanket* metaphor for Indigenous youth resiliency[9], the following four blankets will be offered as new principles of our Indigenous Horse-Based Healing framework, though they are equally effective when applied as

[8] The Red Pony Stands Ojibwe Horse Sanctuary is a Canadian-based not-for-profit corporation aimed specifically at the protection, promotion, and preservation of the critically endangered Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony (visit www.theredponystands.com for more information).

[9] Gray Smith's (2012) four blankets of youth resiliency are (1) self, (2) family, (3) community, and (4) culture. Sandra de Blois has applied Gray Smith's (2012) four blankets of youth resiliency framework to equine-assisted therapy (see http://equine-ati.com/aboriginal.html for more information).

foundational principles for other decolonised psychotherapies with First Nations clients as well as Indigenous research methodologies: (1) trauma-informed, (2) strengths-based, (3) community-specific, and (4) spiritually-grounded. The blanket metaphor is a particularly suitable one to use for this framework because it (a) fits with the four levels of an Indigenous worldview (i.e., the horse-human relationship and its shared connection to community, the land and natural world, and the spirit world, as shown in Figure 4), and (b) it is equally relevant to horses as to humans. The blanket is a culturally-relevant concept. Blankets are used for healing purposes. Blankets are also considered gifts in many First Nations cultures. In both instances, they symbolise that an important relationship exists between giver and receiver. A blanket serves the same purpose for a horse as it does for a human; no dichotomy exists in its value.

The Storytelling Blanket: Taking a Trauma-Informed Perspective

First Nations youth in many communities throughout Canada experience a number of systemic barriers to mental wellness (Goodman & Gorski, 2015). These inequities have arisen within the context of an extensive history of aversive treatment of First Nations peoples borne of political policies specifically aimed at the destruction of First Nations cultures (Kirmayer, Tait, & Simpson, 2009). As such, a trauma-informed perspective in any programming tailored for First Nations youth is required to take into account the intergenerational impact of colonisation and its associated negative mental health impacts, and must be integrated into all aspects of programming. Before First Nations youth can work towards reclaiming their wellness with horses, they must become informed about what aspects of their culture has been taken from them (e.g., loss of land, language, and spiritual ways; loss of family and family ties; loss of people through early death; loss of self-respect; loss of trust; loss of respect for traditional Elders and traditional ways; Whitbeck, Chen, Hoyt, & Adams, 2004).

The Lac La Croix Indigenous Ponies have sustained an aggressive process of colonisation that is eerily reminiscent to that of their Ojibwe relatives that includes decimation at the hands of missionaries, removal from their home land, denial of existence, and (for those that managed to survive) assimilation into modern society. Such colonial practices were never questioned nor challenged by those in decision-making positions who lacked an understanding of First Nations *ways of knowing* and *being* and thus have nearly extinguished an entire breed of horse that belong to the Ojibwe Nation. While the survival of the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony is undoubtedly a testament of their strength and resilience as a breed, it comes as no surprise that these ponies have suffered spiritual injury through the process. Remarkably, then, the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony might need their peoples as much as First Nations peoples need their ponies.

Today, traditional horse culture, that is, a way of life that involved, integrated, and revolved around horses as *equal* beings to humans, is all but lost for many First Nations peoples. Many people who work with horses tend to adopt the colonialist *cowboy mentality* of *breaking* (i.e., training) a horse using behaviour modification techniques, that is, punishment for challenges towards human dominance and rewards for horse submission. The premise behind this method is that the horse in its natural (wild) state displays undesirable and uncivilised behaviours that require immediate human correction. From a traditional horse culture perspective, however, this method is inherently colonial; human superiority is prioritised and *instinctual* horse behaviours are trivialised (despite their contribution to survival) and thus repressed using power and control mechanisms. Such training techniques are counter-intuitive to the development of an equitable and reciprocal horse-human relationship. Instead, traditional horse practices utilise kindness, gentle voice commands and behaviours, and traditional song in order to nurture the horse's spirit (as opposed to *breaking* it). Those who continue to practice traditional horse culture understand that horse behaviours are functionally patterned in the same way as human intellect and spirituality; some horses are kind and affectionate, some are mischievous, while others are obstinate and indifferent. The latter are most often those who have not been treated well by the human being. Mistreated horses will behave very much like an abused or traumatised human and require

ingenuous psychological care in order to recover the spirit from damaging human relationships. There are also many anecdotes of the horse grieving the loss through death of their human companion or fellow family members and acknowledge death behaviourally in various ways such as running along a fence line when a funeral procession passes the pasture in which they are fenced and neighing excitedly. Given the parallels between human and horse cognition, it is likely that that these post-traumatic effects would be, in some cases, transmitted from generation to generation. Fortunately, traditional horse culture suggests that the horse spirit is so kind that it will over compensate the human's ineptitude with loyalty irrespective of the technique.

Traditional horse culture needs to be revitalised to help both the Lac La Croix Indigenous Ponies and their traditional caretakers heal from generations of oppressive and aversive human treatment. Lester Drift, traditional Elder from Bois Forte Indian Reservation, remembers the removal of the ponies from the community as a youth by explaining the following:

> When I grew up around Bois Forte in 1940s and middle 1950s until 1963 (I got married in 1963), I can remember back then, that there were nine to about 12 horses running around. The house that I lived in, we rarely had to mow the lawn because they would be around eating that grass in that big field we had, and around the house, around the back of the house. And after about 1969-70, I never saw them anymore. (LeGarde & Woods, 2014)

Donald Chosa Jr. shared his feelings about when he first learned about the ponies' plight when he added the following:

> At first I felt sad or regret, that no one knew. It was part of our culture that had been completely lost. None of our band members even knew they were their own breed of horse. And so, that was something that I felt was completely robbed from us. (LeGarde & Woods, 2014)

Not only is the near extinction of the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony one example of cultural loss for Ojibwe peoples, the ponies themselves have experienced a great deal of loss (i.e., annihilation, relocation, negation) due to colonial processes that may resonate with many First Nations youth, their families, and their communities. However, educating First Nations youth about the cultural losses they have and continue to suffer often comes at a cost; negative emotional responses such as feelings of sadness and depression, anger, anxiety, shame, loss of concentration have all been shown to be associated with thoughts of cultural loss among First Nations youth (i.e., Whitbeck, McMorris, Hoyt, Stubben, & LaFromboise, 2002). Because the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony and First Nations youth have a shared colonial history, horse-based healing programs with Lac La Croix Indigenous Ponies provide a culturally safe context for First Nations youth to explore these losses alongside of a culturally-specific protective factor (i.e., the ponies)[10]. When First Nations youth learn about the ponies' plight and situate themselves in the larger context of colonialism, these understandings will serve to unite human and horse in a culturally-specific way that is unparalleled to any other EAL or EAT program (see the innermost layer of Figure 4).

The Nurturing Blanket: Using a Strengths-Based Approach

While education on the impact of colonisation has made some inroads on the healing journey for First Nations youth, these pedagogical approaches used to do so are overwhelmingly driven by a deficit-based model (e.g., substance use or suicide prevention). A strengths-based approach to mental wellness programs for First Nations youth is both welcomed and needed because it shifts the perceived deficits away from the individual and places mental health issues into the appropriate context (i.e., systemic colonisation). This process allows First Nations youth to understand the strength and resilience they have demonstrated in the face of adversity while challenging ongoing forms of colonisation. In this way, *problem behaviours* are reframed as attempts to cope with abusive experiences, and mental health symptoms become adaptations. Such an approach does not mean ignoring the historical and social realities facing the current generation of First Nations youth and the

[10] Connection to culture has been shown to directly compete with the negative forces of cultural loss (Whitbeck, et al., 2004).

associated negative outcomes to focus only on the positives; rather, strengths-based health promotion programs facilitate wellness by capitalising on the pathways to resilience (e.g., cultural connectedness) among First Nations youth (Snowshoe, Crooks, Tremblay, Craig, & Hinson, 2015; Snowshoe, Crooks, Tremblay, & Hinson, 2016).

The Lac La Croix Indigenous Ponies' demonstration of resilience in their fight against extinction is a prime and powerful example for First Nations youth. Through these narratives, First Nations youth can learn about the ponies' unique characteristics and how they contributed to the ponies' survival thus far. For example, the ponies' refuge on Pony Island and instinctual migration across the frozen lake of the Canadian-United States border appears to have served as a significant protective factor at a time when the ponies were the targets of extermination policies. One community member from Lac La Croix First Nation recalls the time when:

> A young pony – she was only about three months old – that little pony was born on that island and they stayed there for about three months that summer on that island, and the mother died on that island. And that pony [swam] across [to Lac La Croix First Nation] and that's about 15 miles. (Doyle, 1987, p. 48)

Another community member added, "That little pony was never here before but she was able to find her way without ever being here" (Doyle, 1987, p. 48). These stories not only can be used as precursors for First Nations youth to learn about the resilience and aptness demonstrated by residential school survivors, but they reiterate the inherent sense of connection to community for First Nations youth (see the second layer from the centre of Figure 4). Furthermore, stories of the ponies also tend to emphasise the importance of connection to the land for First Nations peoples. One community member indicated that she remembers the "trails off in the bush where they used to go. I remember going on trails out on the bush where they used to walk" (Doyle, 1987, p. 48). For horse-based healing to take place, there must be opportunities for First Nations youth to strengthen their connection to the land with and through the ponies in their natural surroundings, as this is integral to Indigenous *ways of knowing* and *being* (see third layer from the centre of Figure 4).

The Teaching Blanket: Meeting Community-Specific Needs

For First Nations peoples, healing at the community level from the effects of colonialism is essential in order for individual healing to take place. Chandler and Lalonde (1998) emphasise the importance not only self-continuity (i.e., the ability for an individual to situate his or her *self* in both the present and future) for the mental wellness of First Nations youth, but continuity at a community level as well (i.e., the ability for the community as a whole to understand who they are as a peoples and to resist the forfeiture their collective identity and self-governance through contemporary colonisation processes). For horse-based healing to occur, a reclaiming of Indigenous horses (such as the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony) must come from the larger community to which First Nations youth belong. Support at a community level is not only critical for logistical reasons (i.e., adequate physical spaces, horse care, and funding) to support the sustainability of horse-based healing programs, but required for a reintegration of horses into Indigenous *ways of knowing* and *being*. No one person can initiate large-scale changes on their own; it requires community level ratification. Donald Chosa Jr. shares a story told to him by his father that reifies the need for community-level engagement in traditional horse culture during times of change:

> A long time ago, they had a chief in Vermillion. And his name was Chief John Goodday. He also had an Indian name, an *Anishinaabe* name. In the past, in 1936, they adopted this new constitution with the new government that the U.S. government put in place at Bois Forte. At that time then, my dad said, the people would stop listening to Chief John Goodday. Chief John Goodday would walk around the village there leading his horse, a Lac La Croix [Indigenous] Pony. And my dad said that horse was all black with a diamond on its forehead. And he said, he always had that picture in his head of Chief John Goodday after 1936 after they adopted the new constitution and how sad it seemed that he would just wander around and no one would listen to him anymore. (LeGarde & Woods, 2014)

There is a strong commitment by many First Nations communities across Canada to reclaim their connections to their cultural *ways of knowing* and *being*. Some communities have lost much of their tradition, and feel, with a sense of urgency, that they must reclaim all they can from the past as they confront the problems of the present. Each community is unique and has different strategies that they use to combat colonialism and the cultural losses it brings. Community members must be consulted on its approaches to reclaiming mental wellness for their youth and how it is implemented in their communities. For communities that recognise the value in horse-based healing for their First Nations youth mental wellness, members from all ages (traditional Elder to youth) and levels of government (Band Council to students) must be integrated into horse-based healing programs with Lac La Croix Indigenous Ponies for meaningful changes to take place.

Many First Nations communities are also attempting to restore wellness among their members through the re-establishment of their traditional value systems and languages. For Ojibwe communities specifically, there are a number of health promotion programs that apply the Seven Sacred Teachings (*niizhwaaswi aanike'iniwendiwin;* Bouchard & Martin, 2009), namely, Humility (*dibaadendizowin*), Honesty (*gwayakowaadiziwin*), Respect (*manaaji'iwewin*), Courage (*zoongide'ewin*), Wisdom (*nibwaakaawin*), Trust (*debwewin*), and Love (*zaagi'idiwin*). These community-based teachings must be learned through a subjective, experiential process during the life course, often with the guidance of a traditional Elder. Because the Lac La Croix Indigenous Ponies are Ojibwe horses[11], they are inherently equipped to facilitate these culturally-specific understandings through their interactions with First Nations youth. From an Indigenous perspective, the Lac La Croix Indigenous Ponies, as a non-human relative, would have acquired these traditional teachings as a result of living with the peoples of Bois Forte Band of Chippewa and Lac La Croix First Nation for thousands of years. Consequently, the ponies are in a particularly competent position to co-construct these traditional understandings of the world with First Nations youth due to their culturally-infused experiences and long-established relationships with First Nations peoples (Wolfe, 2008; Wright et al., 2012).

Whitbeck and Parsells (2015) provide some examples of structured activities from the *Shonga Ska: Sacred Horse Society* and *Seven Directions Equine-Assisted Therapy* curriculums to demonstrate the ability of horses to facilitate community-based teachings, such as Courage:

> Three adolescents are put in the pen with their three horses and told to halter their horse and lead it to the gate. No further instructions are given. The horses are likely to be playful, uncooperative, and to bunch and run all around the corral. Such large animals running about may be intimidating for the adolescents. The group discussion after the activity focuses on thoughts and feelings about the experience, other situations in which the adolescents may have been afraid, their definitions of courage, and how courage is important in their lives. (Whitbeck & Parsells, 2015, p. 12)

While these activities may be initially viewed as culturally-appropriate, the healing process of the human is clearly prioritised over that of the horse. In order for a reciprocal healing process to take place, teachings must be equally relevant and beneficial to human *and* horse. In addition, the horse is often removed from its natural environment during these constructed activities. On the contrary, healing may increase exponentially among First Nations youth when the objective of these interactions is exclusively the human-horse relationship; traditional teachings (e.g., Respect and Trust) will naturally flow from the relationship building process since First Nations worldviews are inherently relational. Since interactions between Lac La Croix Indigenous Ponies and humans have tended to be negative following colonisation, First Nations youth must learn to listen to the horse and earn the right to be invited into the horse's world through genuine acts of kindness. Like traditional storytelling (Archibald, 2008), the teachings derived from the interaction will be co-constructed by the individual youth and horse,

[11] All Lac La Croix Indigenous Ponies have Ojibwe or Cree names (e.g., *Maanomin* [Wild Rice], *Wanuskewin* [Being at Peace with Oneself]), which serves to further support language revitalisation through their interactions with First Nations youth.

rather than dictated a priori and generalised across circumstances. Specifically, First Nations youth should be provided with the opportunity to learn about their community's traditional value system and subsequently decide which teaching the horse offered to them and what they gave back to the horse during their relationship-building process.

The Seeing Blanket: Being Spiritually-Grounded

Perhaps the most missing element of any culturally-adapted equine-assisted program for First Nations youth (and any health promotion program for that matter) is the most fundamental one of all, that is, a connection to the spirit world (see the outermost layer from the centre of Figure 4). Historically, the horse was understood by many First Nations peoples to be "a gift from the Creator that served as a spiritual companion and an amplifier for powerful healing energy" (Collin, 2014, p. 5; Lawrence, 1998). According to Hallowell's (2002) work with the Northern Ojibwe, horses would fall into the category of more-than-human "persons" which is "not only applie[s] to human persons but to spiritual beings who are persons of a category other than human... without any distinction between human persons and those of an other-than-human class" and thus are "functionally and terminologically equivalent in certain respects" (Hallowell, 2002, p. 21). Hallowell (2002) exemplified the importance of more-than-human "persons" by explaining that they "are sources of power to humans through the 'blessings' they bestow, i.e., a sharing of their power which enhances the 'power' of human beings" (p. 21).

The potential for horses to assume healing properties exists only under special circumstances. Traditional Elders and knowledge keepers who understand the sacredness of the horse-human relationship, and have been given the proper protocols, have the ability to abet such circumstances using a variety of ceremonial methods that including horse song and horse medicine. For example, the horse dance ceremony embodies the spiritual capacities of the horse and the foundation of First Nations spirituality, more generally. Today, there are only a handful of Nations (comprising of mostly Cree and some Nakota communities) who conduct horse dance ceremony in the Great Plains of Canada (Lawrence, 1998). There are a number of sacred rituals and songs that *speak* to the spirit of the horse surrounding the horse dance ceremony[12]. The horse is said to carry *medicine* (i.e., more-than-human *person* healing properties) on its four legs and the trail on which the horse ridden around the constructed lodge during the horse dance ceremony is referred to the *medicine trail*. People attending the ceremony bring ribbons as offerings requesting prayer for loved ones who are ill or require spiritual assistance, which are hung on a tree (a sacred symbol of life for human beings) in front of the lodge. During the ceremonial proceedings, each horse receives a song on a traditional drum. During the *honour beat* of the song (a particular point in the song when a spiritual entity is being honoured), the horses are stopped and their riders dismount to dance and tell out to the Creator. Often, the horses who are most spiritual attuned will dance to the beat. Once every horse has received a song, the ceremony helpers hand out the ribbons to the people who then walk on the medicine trail with their ribbons while engaging in prayer to the Creator.

Ceremonies involving horses are ways in which understandings of the self and our relation to the world (especially the spirit world) can occur. In addition, the horse spirit may be invited into non-horse-based ceremonies in situations where this is required and appropriate for healing, as indicated by a traditional Elder. For example, the sweat lodge ceremony, the naming ceremony, fasting and vision quests, and dreams involving the horse are ways in which an Indigenous person can closely connect with the spirit world and learn from what they experience and discover. For example, Ojibwe peoples are dream-conscious people; there is no discrimination between the experiences of the *self* when awake and when dreaming because both experiences are equally self-related (Hallowell, 2002). This self-

[12] Only information regarding the horse dance ceremony deemed culturally-appropriate by a traditional Elder will be discussed here in order to protect the sacredness of this information.

related experience of the most personal kind includes what is seen, heard, and felt in dreams. Such experiences are often considered of more vital importance than events in daily waking life because it is in dreams that the individual comes into direct communication with the powerful *persons* of the other-than-human kind (Hallowell, 2002). These *dream visitors* interact with the dreamer much as human persons do. It is in the context of these *face-to-face* interactions of the self and more-than-human persons that one receives important revelations that are a source of guidance and healing in daily life and *gifts* that enable the individual to exercise exceptional abilities of various kinds (Hallowell, 2002). With the knowledge, protocol and preparation, and guidance from a traditional Elder, a direct channel of social interaction (often referred to as *doorways*) can occur between humans and horses. These experiences are considered to be more vital than any other personal experience encountered in one's life because it is through ceremonies and encounters with the spirit world (that parallels the physical world) that one is able to connect not only with the spiritual *self*, but all aspects of the self and its relations to all else (refer to Figure 4).

First Nations youth are in a particularly important position to help the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony in their reconnection to the spirit world. In turn, the ponies will do the same for First Nations youth. The Lac La Croix Indigenous Ponies are particularly adept for healing work because they have a long-standing historical relationship with (a) Ojibwe peoples, and (b) other *other-than-human persons* (e.g., the Creator). As such, these ponies are in a unique position to act as messengers between the physical and spirit worlds. Larry Aiken acknowledged this spiritual relationship with the Lac La Croix Indigenous Ponies when he regressed from his interview to explain, "I put tobacco down for all conversations and all our spiritual connections with these ponies" (Kleffman, 2013). Furthermore, like all First Nations peoples, each Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony has its own *gift* or special ability to connect the physical world with the spirit world. Donald Chosa Jr. shared a spiritual experience that he witnessed between one of the Lac La Croix Indigenous Ponies and a First Nations youth during a social interaction between physical and spirit worlds:

> My nephew was one of the youth who came here, one of the teens, who came to meet the horses. He said his name was *Misko-gaabo.* And he said, in the dream when he was given his name by one of our Elders, that they dreamt something about a red pony. While he was telling us this... just at that moment, a red [Lac La Croix Indigenous] pony ran out of the barn. And that was the pony that they couldn't think of a name for, and it was a red pony just like my nephew's name. (LeGarde & Woods, 2014)

Such horse-based spiritual experiences and ceremonies need to be accessible to First Nations youth as a cultural revitalising healing opportunity. Though all horses are considered sacred beings, the Lac La Croix Indigenous Ponies are particularly suitable to engage in ceremony with First Nations youth due to their *untamed* spiritual connection that has resulted in their relative isolation from colonialist society.

Summary and Implications

Utilising the Four Blankets of Indigenous Horse-Based Healing framework, a culturally-responsive, mutual healing relationship can be *re*-established between First Nation youth and the critically endangered Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony. For the peoples of Bois Forte Band of Chippewa and Lac La Croix First Nation specifically, the protection, promotion, and preservation of the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony "marks a reclaiming of what was once the way of their grandparents and great-grandparents" (LeGarde & Woods, 2014). Though the future of the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony breed is still in danger, their original caretakers have made it clear that they will continue to fight for this important piece of their culture. Speaking on behalf of his community, Donald Chosa Jr. reiterated, "Hopefully, at some point, we can find some funding and repatriate our horses, our ponies, because they belong with us. And I think there is a spiritual connection there" (LeGarde & Woods, 2014).

Without the survival of the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony, the Indigenous Horse-Based Healing framework will also cease to exist. As such, there is urgency for the development and prioritisation of sustainable conservation strategy for the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony to prevent

the further erosion of the genetic pool and extinction of the breed. Environmental sustainability and natural resource management programs must identify the diversity and productivity of the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony as a priority. Special attention must be given to the impact to Indigenous peoples and their land-based relationships, a perspective that requires a paradigm shift that moves from power-based hierarchies with "humans on top" (Castricano, 2008, p. 17) towards an *"authentic shared space"* built upon a reciprocal, relational ontology and ethical stewardship between humans and the natural world (Fox & McLean, 2008, p. 158; Matamonasa-Bennett, 2015).

In addition to species conservation, the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony and the Four Blankets of Indigenous Horse-Based Healing framework aligns with need for cultural preservation initiatives as outlined by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (2015) calls to action. Both education and mental health systems must change to recognise the value of Indigenous land-based learning and healing practices and to use them in service delivery approaches for Indigenous peoples in collaboration with traditional Elders and communities. Specifically, the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony must be viewed as a *living artifact* of First Nations culture and thus supported and integrated into learning and healing methods (e.g., land-based curricula, animal-assisted therapies, and horse dance ceremony) for First Nations youth, their families, and their communities to increase cultural connectedness and its associated positive mental health outcomes (Snowshoe et al., 2015; Snowshoe et al., 2016). Funding must be made available to engage in ongoing consultation with community members and to build capacity and infrastructure to support these initiatives indefinitely.

The Four Blankets of Indigenous Horse-Based Healing is humbly offered to communities as an orienting framework for which equine-assisted programs for First Nations youth with the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony can be developed and evaluated. All four blankets must be *woven* together or layered to allow the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony to promote the optimal wellness outcomes for First Nations youth; the more blankets that are applied, the deeper of healing can take place. Each blanket should serve as a guide and must be tailored to align with the unique histories, strengths, needs, and worldviews of the communities of interest from the perspective of the communities themselves. By positioning the Lac La Croix Indigenous Pony as a foundational component of the Indigenous Horse-Based Healing process, existing and new equine-assisted programs can be decolonised and adapted for cultural relevance. We hope that this framework will be viewed as the first step in helping reconnect the relationship between First Nations youth their Lac La Croix Indigenous Ponies so that they may join forces and work together as equal partners in reframing, reclaiming, and renaming their shared First Nations culture for generations to come.

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