"Reframing the way you think and work": Indigenous youth workers converse about ethical responsibility[1]

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Abstract

This commentary brings together young Indigenous professionals working with youth in communities across Quebec to reflect on the significance of providing culturally sensitive and decolonizing services as outlined in the revised Standards for practice of North American Child and Youth Care Professionals. We discuss ethical responsibility as involving relationality, active listening, and engaging with youth in a myriad of ways that are culturally relevant, while advocating for systemic change. This process involves Indigenous youth workers navigating unique ethical challenges, such as balancing cultural sensitivity with intervention practices, building trust within communities affected by historical trauma, and managing the distinctive

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demands of confidentiality. The drawing of a heart surrounded by ripples illustrates the many layers of intervention, relationships, and cultural care that are central to an Indigenous youth worker's role. Advice for future youth workers who want to work ethically and in a "good way" with Indigenous youth involves being open, to demonstrating genuine commitment, and both being challenged by and challenging a system that has historically failed to support Indigenous young people and their ways of being.

Introduction

The revised *Standards for Practice of North American Child and Youth Care Professionals* (ACYCP, 2023) opens with the statement: "Now more than ever before, child and youth care practice have an ethical responsibility to engage in anti-oppressive practice and undertake advocacy that promotes a better world for all." Amongst the guiding principles is to "Ensure services are culturally sensitive, decolonizing and non-discriminatory" (II. d). These foundational principles raise an important question: in practice, what does this mean when working with Indigenous youth, families and communities?

This commentary brings together young Indigenous professionals working with youth in communities across Quebec. Given their positionality and own work in Indigenous-led organizations, we discuss the significance and implications of ethical responsibility, while reflecting on some of the challenges—such as navigating across systems, worldviews, and priorities that often clash.

To explore these critical issues, we turn to the insights and experiences of our contributors, whose deep understanding of the complexities involved in child and youth care practice offers valuable perspectives:

- Christine: I am an Inuk and Quebecer from Salluit, currently studying in the individualized doctoral program at Concordia University. My professional experience includes working with Inuit youth in Kuujjuaraapik and supporting Inuit youth in the foster care system in Montreal.

- Kawennaroroks: I am Kanien'keha'ka from Kahnawake. I graduated from the Concordia youth work program and have a specialization in Criminology and a Graduate diploma in public administration and governance. For six years, I worked as a youth protection and youth criminal justice caseworker in my community. Since 2023, I have been a Clinical supervisor for intake and afterhours response services.

- Juliet: I am Eenou and a member of the Cree Nation of Mistissini, currently pursuing studies in the Graduate youth work program at Concordia University. I have worked in Mistissini's Uschiniichisuu (Youth) department as a community worker, as well as regionally as a Human relations officer for the Wiichihiiwauwin Helpline under the Cree Board of Health and Social Services of James Bay.

- Véronique: I am a Wendat and a member of the community of Wendake. With a background working within Indigenous community organizations, I am currently coordinator of the Youth Network Chair (YNC) and a PhD candidate at Concordia University with a focus on research embedded in community knowledge and relationality.

- Carole: I am Innu and member of the Matimekush-Lac-John community. I am an artist and cultural facilitator. With the Youth Research Chair, I have been able to develop my skills in graphic recording and visual communication by cocreating content that promotes research findings.

- Natasha: I am an aspiring ally having worked in community-engaged research for the past 25 years and professor in the Youth Work program at Concordia and co-chair of the Youth Network Chair C).[2]

To inform this paper, we—the three members of the YNC—first facilitated individual conversations, followed by a group discussion. Each participant contributed to the narrative, reviewing and revising the text to ensure that our collective perspectives were accurately represented.

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[2] Henceforth, we refer to the contributors by their first initial. Because we have two Cs, *C* will represent Christine and *Ca* will represent Carole.

Framing Our Discussion

At the outset, we believe that strengthening cultural identities and connections are central to all work with Indigenous children, families, and communities (Fast & Collin-Vézina, 2019; Ullrich, 2019). The enduring and painful history of colonialism, which aimed at assimilation and the erasure of Indigenous identities, has led to violence, intergenerational trauma, and significant harm (Richardson et al., 2022). While the impacts of colonialism are widespread, they manifest differently across nations, influenced by specific histories, territories, and policies. These varied realities illustrate that colonial policies have not only resulted in similar traumas but have also created distinct challenges that require different approaches to healing. The legacy of displacement and disruption continues, as evidenced by overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the child welfare system across Canada (James, 2023).

However, in recent years, new initiatives have emerged that focus on healing and restoration, actively reconnecting youth to their Nations' ways of being and doing (Fast & Lefebvre, 2021). By addressing the unique contexts and experiences of Indigenous youth, we can foster systemic changes that are grounded in ethical responsibility. Indeed, the organizations with which C, K, and J collaborate are, to varying degrees, part of a movement to implement Indigenous practices and principles. In our work at the YRC alongside the advisory committee, we are also examining how young people interpret and experience different concepts, including care. In discussions with youth from our advisory committee, they have emphasized that community care is a foundational aspect of well-being, offering a sense of belonging and collective support (Boivin and al., 2023). They have described it as encompassing a broad definition that includes love, kindness, and active listening, which fosters diverse forms of connection. This dynamic framework meets the needs of Indigenous youth, empowering them to engage with their communities and assert their agency in defining their own visions of well-being.

In the context of the renewal of the ACYCP Standards for Practice (2023), we were interested in discussing how these values and perspectives of respecting relationships, identities, and experiences inform ethical practice.

"Being There": Considerations for Ethical Responsibility

The revised Standards of Practice (ACYCP, 2023) have added principles and included terms such as "culturally sensitive, decolonizing, and non-discriminatory." Our conversations were initiated with an exploration of these terms, but early on, we realized we were limiting ourselves by not introducing other terms to our discussions.

As K. shared, "The word decolonizing is more about reframing how we work and meet the needs of our community. It's just a term that I don't really like to use. Decolonization doesn't sound motivating for me as an Indigenous person. For me, it's courage, resilience, and how to make sure that my people get from step A to step B. It's always going to be my approach, to give them the choices and not tell them what to do."

In broadening our conversation, we identified three key considerations related to ethical responsibility practices that we wanted to discuss: (a) the significance of working from a relational perspective; (b) the commitment to an empowering viewpoint that includes advocacy; and (c) the appreciation of diverse intervention styles to privilege different approaches. In the final section, we present an artistic creation (Figure 1) that embodies a vision for approaching ethical responsibility with a focus on care that considers the ripple effect on next generations.

"They Are Also My Community Members": Relational

At the centre of our conversations was a deep commitment to relationality. The youth workers emphasized that the well-being of Indigenous youth is closely intertwined with the strength of the family and community. As they, too, are part of the communities they work with, these relationships are not just professional—they are also personal. Shared histories and values translate into a deep care and sense of responsibility to the collective well-being as explained by our youth worker co-authors.

K: I want the health of my people. ... My ethical responsibility is to make sure that the children are safe but also that my community is safe. … I always spoke and collaborated with my clients because they are also my community members. I want to make a positive impact and not be this authoritative person.

J: As an Indigenous community worker, you love your people and your Nation, you want to help them, and you are there for them. I always have the intention to create a safe space for those I work with, that they feel they

are being heard, understood, and in Cree we say ehyatchiistuud, meaning you advocate and take necessary steps to help them for what they are coming to you for in that moment in their life.

K: Also, you get their collaboration, and you get their trust, and you build your relationships with them. Because once that relationship is built, then you can start doing the work together. ... I think it's also about being genuine. We are in this field for a reason and wanting to help. For example, what I realized is that youth don't like eye contact, so we would go for rides and listen to the music they liked, [and] I would ask their favourite colour, their favourite food, and get a sense of who they are, building a relationship with them.

In many regards, working within one's own community often magnifies one's ethical responsibilities. This means not only upholding but actively modeling responsible behaviours, as one's actions and decisions directly impact how they are perceived and trusted within the community. Consistently demonstrating integrity is crucial.

K: You have to build your credibility. It was important for me to reframe and adapt my own life, to feel comfortable to operate in my role and be more at ease. I really felt like my responsibility was to look at my own morals and values and build a healthier lifestyle for myself.

Navigating this dual role is complex. It requires a constant process of reflection, re-positioning, and a deep awareness of the delicate balance between building strong, supportive relationships and maintaining boundaries.

J: Our community is small. What I noticed is when you have a good relationship with a youth, their friends would know, and they would all come around. If you had a disagreement, it would also have repercussions on their friends. In a small community, the word goes around fast and actions speak loudly. You are always observed, and your behavior shapes relationships with youth. For them, your actions build the trust they place in you.

K: Well, it's about creating healthy boundaries, right? I think that is the most important thing, to be able to create those boundaries with your clients. I mean, it's one thing to live and work in your community. So, it's about being able to establish that line.

C: Working in another community from where my family lives has allowed for a smoother process of setting boundaries when working with youth. My rapport with them has been easier. There are less complex and delicate family dynamics between theirs and my own, and I could more easily navigate setting limits. In this way, I could uphold my ethical responsibilities as a youth worker while honouring my relationships with youth and community members.

Youth workers who are also part of their community must navigate the complexities of balancing personal relations and professional responsibilities. These roles demand a thoughtful negotiation, acknowledging the complexity of community life, while striving to be effective in supporting and guiding others. While this can be challenging, it ultimately reinforces their commitment to the community.

"Giving Choice Goes a Long Way": Empowering and Advocacy

Another key element that emerged from the conversations is a strong focus on empowerment and advocacy when working with Indigenous youth. Central to the youth workers approach is a strength-based model that prioritizes recognizing and building upon the inherent strengths and resilience of young people. This approach greatly contrasts with dominant, punitive systems which often place blame on youth, making them feel responsible for their difficulties or circumstances, whether they be in care or facing legal issues. Instead of judgement, the emphasis is on care, understanding, and support—creating a space where youth can feel valued, seen, and heard.

K: I come from a strength-based approach, [for youth] to reach their goals, figuring out where they are at, to incorporate what they need, also incorporating culture, being equitable with everyone. And I think that's so important, to empower our youth and families as much as possible.

C: Upon working with many youth in foster care, I have come to learn how certain educators emphasize a punitive approach to behavioural turmoil on the part of certain youth who experience challenging life circumstances. The system sometimes doesn't emphasize how the youth are being affected by social issues brought by historical and ongoing colonization, and places the onus on them, instead of [on] the overarching structural violence that intimately shapes how they are considered and perceived within their communities or environments. Certain youth rightfully react to tumultuous events at home or in their communities, are considered "at-risk," [then] uprooted and unilaterally sent away to new homes or communities, branded as delinquents who are somehow responsible for being sent away from their kinship and support systems. We must be empathetic, supportive, and hold the space for them when needed to help strengthen their sense of self, to feel balanced and

self-sufficient. Inevitably, we will build stronger rapport with certain youth than with others. Not all of them will choose us as their trusted counselor. But for those who do, I think it is just a matter of being present and [giving them] that safe space to experience and process their emotions, however heightened. Showing up and being available while offering activities/programming that will allow for their development and to hone their skills through discussions or cultural activities allows us workers to let go of rigidity and to operate on a basis of mutual trust and respect.

J: It is so important to respect the pace of the young person you are working with. At work, we have used the analogy of two people paddling a canoe, the person at the back steering the canoe, and the person in the front being steered. … It's the person at the back who is guiding them, while the young person is advancing and making strides at their own pace. I like that analogy because, as interveners, we're there to help and guide them while respecting their pace.

K: For me, being in a role that had so much authority, I never wanted to use that power to tell them what to do. It was about always meeting them where they were at. Giving someone a choice goes a long way. I had a lot of clients who had a lot of substance abuse issues. I remember one youth who had run away from a group home— they got drunk/high and got caught. Later when we met, she expected me to yell at her or be mad, but that was never my approach. I asked her about her well-being, how to improve her situation, what she felt like she needed to improve her overall well-being. She was completely shocked that I was not mad at her. The goal was to return her to her family, to find solutions. She did age-out of care, but she was always in control of the decisions that were made. We collaborated, and now she is flourishing as an adult.

J: We need to be aware of what we share with the youth we support, as they seek our help, not our stories. I thought sharing my experiences would make them feel understood, but I learned this focus was not necessarily ethical. This reflection made me change the way I converse with youth and make the space about them, [as I realized] that even my story may influence them in a certain way. I want them to make choices for their own well-being and not necessarily to follow the steps I took on my journey to miyupimatsiiwin.

Part of empowerment involves advocacy which, in this context, goes beyond helping youth find their voice; it also involves youth workers advocating on their behalf within broader systems, ensuring that their needs are met and their realities better understood. This can mean standing up for them and their families in meetings, helping them navigate complex administrative systems, and amplifying their voices when they are not being heard, as discussed here by C and K:

C: I think youth work is 100% advocacy! Either you are advocating for what the youth want, or advocating for them in the system or for yourself to do things differently. … People who consider working in community must be cognizant of the historical and ongoing process of colonization in Indigenous communities, as well as its manifold effects. … You have to be a caretaker by proxy and not an enforcer of the rules of the system.

K: Youth have so many losses of relations in their lives and you can be "that someone" who advocates and cares about them. ... I had their collaboration, and so I fought tooth-and-nail for them ... [though] it's a lot of trial and error to learn how to advocate for our clients, especially when [they are] Indigenous youth.

In focusing on empowerment and advocating for rights, youth workers create opportunities for youth to not only navigate their current challenges but also envision and shape their own future.

"Let's Think Outside the Box": Different Forms of Intervention

Another crucial aspect of ethical responsibility that emerged during our conversations is the importance of recognizing and implementing diverse forms and styles of intervention. A hierarchical or one-size-fits-all approach does not align with the values of respect, cultural sensitivity, and personalized care that are central to this work. Instead, providing care requires a dynamic, evolving approach that adapts to the unique needs, preferences, and circumstances of each youth, family, and community. They explained that building trust is key as it helps youth feel respected and ensures intervention plans are relevant and supportive. By being flexible—whether in the space, methods, or structure of interventions—youth workers meet youth where they are at, empowering them with a sense of control over their own care. This is an approach that is often hands-on and values cultural activities.

J: For me and my role when I was working with youth, I hated the fact that we were in an office sitting behind a desk. I didn't like the evaluation forms, [so] I set those things aside and had conversations. What were they going through, what were their goals? I shared a little bit of what I went through—I did not want to have a

power imbalance—and once we were finished talking, that's when I would take notes. I did not want to make that space feel like they were being evaluated or assessed.

K: I would say let's be creative, let's think outside of the box, how can we help them? I really tried to find out about their strengths and get their collaboration because otherwise, what is the point? Small impacts are important, in conjunction with support and guidance.

J: Some of the practices that I have heard colleagues doing were beading or snowshoe weaving. It helps our minds concentrate on one thing and takes away many anxious thoughts. We want the end results to look nice, so it helps to focus the mind on a task. One effective intervention method was sitting and beading together, having a conversation, being in a space together and addressing the things they are going through.

C: To me, decolonizing could mean promoting recruitment and training for Indigenous people to acquire the skills and credentials needed to achieve higher positions of power, especially within Indigenous-serving organizations. The system is built on hierarchies, and until Indigenous people dominate these spaces, there will be no opportunities for non-hierarchical models to be implemented and developed. With more representation across the board, culturally relevant programming will reflect Indigenous needs and will decrease pan-Indigenization, especially in cities. Positionality informs organizational decisions and programming. Something as simple as pushing for on-the-land activities and increasing representation can increase the benefits for the populations that organizations serve.

K: A lot of the time I would refer clients to community services like land-based programs where they would learn how to cook, go on a moose hunting trip, learn to fish and skin animals, but only if they were interested in wanting to learn that. Others are very creative. I had a youth who was charged with assault and asked him to draw me his representation of violence.

Our youth worker co-authors highlighted that a flexible, culturally sensitive approach to intervention—one that respects individuality and emphasizes empathy—creates meaningful opportunities for youth to heal, grow, and make decisions for themselves.

"The Heart and Ripples of Intervention": Learnings and Advice

We decided that communicating the meaning of our conversations could go beyond the written word and that an illustration, because of the power of metaphor, had the potential to enhance understanding of our position on youth work and ethical responsibility. Ca. created the drawing shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

The Heart of Intervention
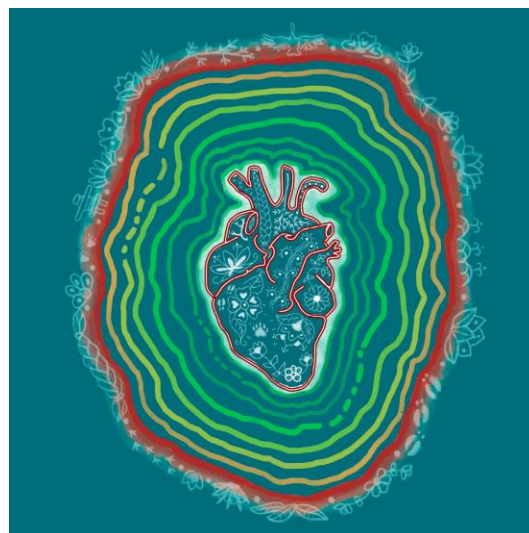
Note: Visual representation of the conversations by Carole.

At the centre is a heart. Each beat sends ripples outward, much like a small stone thrown into water. But these ripples resemble also the rings of a tree, denoting growth and the passage of time. The ripples surrounding the heart also symbolize different stages of intervention, while the lines themselves can be seen as relationships—sometimes simple and direct, and at other times, jagged or even broken, but intersecting and reconnecting over time. Each ring also reflects the various community circles, from those that are closest to the heart as well as those that are more distant but still impactful. The bark surrounding the tree represents the community and the outside world, as well as the shared ties that unite us, mirroring the patterns shown in the heart. These natural and artistic elements are found in the art of different Indigenous cultures in Quebec. These drawings serve to emphasize the simplicity and universality of these concepts.

The visual was shared and then reflected on in our conversation.

K: I really like the design. The heart is protected by resources or components in place. It makes me think about the five pillars of youth work[3] and how there are different systems to support youth and how they all contribute to this one person. ...This image reminds me of cultural competence, the differences and similarities. It has different imagery, [and] it's very inclusive. The heart is precious—it is something that we need to take care of. We need all these protections around our heart so we can live.

J: Our heart is connected through relationships. That is the first perception that I had with the system and the heart being connected to relationships. The exterior is flowers and the land. As I looked at it more, it reminded me of a mine, like layers that go deeper and deeper. [It] reminded me of a resource extraction site—you see the heart being where the resource is. We were talking in a training about residential school and trauma, and it reminds me of the youth being disconnected from the land, but the visual at the centre, the heart, even though there is a disconnection, the heart and identity are at the centre. Our role is to reconnect through relationship, community, and the land.

In terms of advice for future youth workers who want to work ethically and in a "good way" with Indigenous youth, we honed in on the importance of openness, but also genuine commitment, and the necessity of both being challenged and challenging a system that has historically not supported Indigenous young people and their ways of being. C said self-questioning would be important: "Ask yourself why you want to do this work? To be ethical is to be informed, to know what you're getting into, to be trauma-informed and open to learning." The child and youth care system itself poses particular challenges for those working with Indigenous youth.

K: It's also about being kind to yourself, when wanting to work in youth work, social work. It's going into a punitive and westernized system, and as much as you want to make changes, it's a lot more difficult than you think. Doing your best, being compassionate and trying your best at the end of the day. ... Ensure that you are aware of different information, and that you approach each situation in a non-judgmental way. Being respectful, because intersectionality is so complex, and it grows, making sure that you are checking your boxes and understand it, but it's not about making an opinion on it, it's about being respectful.

J: What is your motive for working with youth? Are you going to be there, taking that extra step? Another thing that's important to address is acknowledging personal biases about Indigenous cultures, such as, they're all alcoholics, all those preconceived notions that you carry unknowingly. Are you aware that you have those? Be open to learning an Indigenous language and culture. Cultural humility is very important to have—learning about different cultures is an ongoing journey, and taking one course on cultural safety does not make you an expert.

Concluding Thoughts

Our conversations highlight the complexity of providing services that are "culturally sensitive, decolonizing and non-discriminatory" as outlined in the revised Standards for Practice (ACYCP, 2023) and the depth of thinking that must be integrated into professional practice. This approach aligns with Mann-Feder's (2022) notion of "doing" ethics, in which there is ongoing self-reflection and a commitment to advancing social justice and empowerment. In working with Indigenous youth, the ethical responsibility takes on a unique meaning. As Johnston-Goodstar (2020) described, it is a process of interruption that fosters revelation, recovery, revitalization, and a collective re-engagement with youth.

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[3] These are a developmental perspective, an ecosystemic approach, the collaborative relationship, a rights-based approach and the need for ethics and reflexivity (see Ranahan et al., 2015).

A central aspect of the ethical responsibility is relationality, a notion reflected in the small but growing literature on Indigenous youth work. Relationality highlights the importance of how individual actions and interventions are deeply interconnected with broader social and cultural contexts. This approach encourages continuous reflection and comprehensive understanding of each person and situation, recognizing the interconnectedness of practices and relationships. Relationality says we are responsible not only to externally established norms but also to relationships. Such an approach aligns with decolonial and anti-oppressive frameworks, emphasizing ethical practices rooted in relational responsibilities (Tilsen, 2018). Thus, the idea of "we are our relations" (Wilson, 2008) becomes foundational to understanding youth work and its impact in a broader sense, or "heart-to-heart practice" (James, 2023, p. 256) which entails holistic engagement involving ourselves as well as youth.

The notion of "being there," repeated throughout our discussions, reflects the importance of actively listening, maintaining an open mind, being non-judgmental, and fostering cultural understanding. Empowerment and trust are essential in building an environment where healing and growth can occur as we move away from a punitive system. This process involves Indigenous youth workers navigating unique ethical challenges, such as balancing cultural sensitivity with intervention practices, building trust within communities affected by historical trauma, and managing the distinctive demands of confidentiality. Ultimately, the interconnectedness of these ethical practices introduces multiple layers of complexity as youth workers strive to maintain an anti-oppressive, decolonized, and culturally competent care, while advocating for systemic change. Such responsibilities do however raise further questions around the feasibility and support required for fulfilling these roles in the current context.

Also significant is engaging with youth in a myriad of ways that are culturally relevant. As shown in a growing literature, land-based pedagogies (de Finney et al., 2020) are a powerful medium for Indigenous youth, leading toward healing and (re)connecting with their culture in safe and accessible spaces. The creation and offering of such spaces is an illustration of decolonizing, as was mentioned in our conversations.

The role of an Indigenous youth worker, much like that of a guide steering a canoe through challenging waters or leading a group on a snowshoe journey, requires a willingness to bear deep responsibility towards the people and communities they work with. The drawing of the heart, shown in Figure 1, illustrates this approach, where the ripples/rings symbolize the many layers of intervention, relationships, and cultural connections that are central to a youth worker's role. Just as these ripple out from the heart, the youth worker's influence ripples out, moving from personal connections with clients to having an impact on the broader community.

Adhering to the ethics of the Standards for Practice (ACYCP, 2023) for Indigenous youth workers involves thinking outside the box. Just as guides must be mindful of their surroundings, sensitive to an individual's needs, and adaptable to changing conditions, Indigenous youth workers must navigate a range of complexities. Their work is not only about supporting youth in the present but also about navigating through generational trauma, advocating for systemic change, and creating pathways to healing and empowerment for future generations.

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