

PERSPECTIVES

Empowerment and the ecological determinants of health: three critical capacities for practitioners

Lewis Williams^{1,2,*}

¹Centre for Global Studies, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada, and ²School of Public Health, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK, Canada

*Corresponding author. E-mail: lewis.williams@usask.ca

Summary

Human agency or the expression of intentionality towards some form of betterment has long occupied human imagination and creativity. The ways in which we express such aspirations are fundamentally informed by our beliefs about the nature of reality, meanings of human well-being and progress, and the ways in which our social locations shape our interests. Within Western health-promoting discourse and practice, such processes have largely been expressed through the construct of empowerment. To date, like health, much empowerment practice has been implicitly rooted in Cartesianism, has tended towards anthropocentrism and in cases where it has engaged with environmental issues, has mirrored environmentalism's focus on externalities and objectivity. These tendencies coupled with the increasing complexity of global, ecological, human well-being issues call empowerment practitioners to integrate new kinds of capacities more suited to addressing the ecological determinants of health. Drawing in part on the author's empowerment research over more than a decade, this article distinguishes between a range of epistemological perspectives underlying contemporary empowerment practices while fore-grounding the concepts of place-based agency and social-ecological resilience. These constructs in turn form the basis for three capacities considered critical for practitioners addressing human-ecological well-being.

Key words: empowerment, place-based agency, social-ecological resilience, epistemology, Indigenous

INTRODUCTION

In these times of rapid and escalating social, political and environmental shifts in which human-driven activity is critically harming the planet's ecosystems, we are collectively faced with deep and urgent questions concerning how we will live within the earth's carrying capacity. Arguably a new epoch, the Anthropocene—a time in which human beings represent an independent geo-physical force impacting upon the planet—is primarily driven by the ongoing dominance of Western, reductionist science and its subordination to

market expansion imperatives that have little regard for limited planetary resources. Rates of natural resource-extraction, consumerism and waste emission continue to escalate, pushing the planet and life as we know it into dangerous and uncharted territory (ISSC and UNESCO, 2013; Hird, 2014). If allowed to continue, eventually such changes will certainly lead to social decline and compromised experiences of health and human potential in most of the world's regions (Hancock *et al.*, 2015), and may in time also lead to the extinction of the human species (ISSC and UNESCO, 2013).

Despite the dire implications of eco-system collapse for human well-being, the health sector has been slow to respond (Hancock, 2011; WHO and SCB, 2015). The emergence of eco-health, the impact of changing ecosystems on human health, as a distinct area of research and practice is a promising sign that the deeply habituated human–environmental divide within Western consciousness and related health-promoting practice may be diminishing. Recent scholarship [e.g. (Poland *et al.*, 2011; Kjærgård *et al.*, 2014)] points out the need for meaningful conceptual engagement between health promotion and sustainability discourse; Parkes and Horwitz [(Parkes and Horwitz, 2009), p. 94] argue for an ‘explicit re-integration of ecosystems within the healthy settings approach’; while a recently released report by the Canadian Public Health Association (Hancock *et al.*, 2015) advocates for the ‘ecological determinants of health’ to occupy at least (or more) primacy within Public Health discourse in coming years as the ‘social determinants of health’ has over the past two decades. Among other things, the report identifies that key to this transition will be ‘integrat[ing] new theories of place into health promoting practices’ [(Hancock *et al.*, 2015), p. 67]. Such processes involve mobilizing large disciplinary and cultural shifts which Poland *et al.* (Poland *et al.*, 2011) argue are a key aspect of health promotion practice. They call for a robust theorization of sustainable development that explicitly bridges health promotion and environmental justice and centralizes engagement with Indigenous and other dis-enfranchised groups and related knowledge systems in the process.

Human agency, participation and equitable access to health determinants (for example, traditional lands, cultural practices, language, housing, healthy and sustainable foods) remain central to these calls. Health-promoting discourse has most often encapsulated these concepts under the rubric of ‘empowerment’ (Rissel, 1994; Labonte and Laverack, 2001; Wallerstein, 2006; Cyril *et al.*, 2015). However, for a variety of reasons, e.g. the emphasis placed on individualistic notions of empowerment in the wake of public health funding cutbacks or the concept’s almost exclusive focus on human relationships and associated anthropocentric tendencies [(Arihienhua 1993 in MacDonal, 1998), p. 40; Williams *et al.*, 2012], empowerment practice has become alienated from its ‘original roots as a radical social movement’ [(Woodall *et al.*, 2012), p. 742]. Accordingly, the transformative potential of these health-promoting practices in securing supportive environments, and healthy human-ecosystem relations—central tenets of the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, 1986)—is now somewhat diminished.

Health promotion’s impotency in tackling environmental issues undoubtedly in part lies in the epistemic

rift between Western and Indigenous approaches. Given the health disparities experienced by Indigenous communities throughout the world (Matheson *et al.*, 2015), related histories of assimilationist policy-practice and forms of ‘cognitive imperialism’ [(Stewart-Harawira, 2013), p. 47] commonly operationalized in relation to Indigenous knowledge, ‘separatist’ approaches to Western-originated disciplines such as health promotion may well be desirable and necessary. Yet, there is also recognition that the holistic frameworks adopted towards health promotion by Indigenous communities (Panelli and Tipa, 2007; Parkes and Horwitz, 2009) are important for our shared planetary future. Paralleling these developments, and in the face of the increasing urgency of human-ecological issues, Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars alike are drawing attention to the importance of collective action across sectors and cultural groupings. Such approaches need to take account of the nuanced and pluralistic understandings of human-ecological issues (Callison, 2014) and the importance of constructing ‘new knowledges that are neither binary nor oppositional’ [(Arabena, 2006), p. 43].

This article is a modest attempt to respond to some of these developments and challenges. Accordingly, its focus is on two key dimensions of empowerment practice considered critical to facilitating health promotion’s necessary transition to a focus on the ecological determinants of health:

1. the potential of place-based conceptualizations of agency and the importance of epistemological critique more generally in identifying and making explicit the worldviews underlying various empowerment practices; and,
2. the contribution of socio-ecological resilience as an organizing concept for working across diverse cultural collectives in addressing issues of human–environmental well-being.

The first dimension focuses primarily on the issue of epistemology, while emphasizing the need for empowerment practitioners to come to understand how ‘place-based agency’ differs significantly from human-centric notions of agency and empowerment. Familiarity with this dimension is therefore important to developing the first and second empowerment capacities emphasized in this article—epistemological differentiation or critique of various theoretical approaches to agency and empowerment, and therefore the ability to discerningly engage with the various epistemological positions underlying sustainability approaches. The second dimension—the contribution of social–ecological resilience as an organizing concept—applies the first capacity, epistemological differentiation, to the development of the third capacity, appreciation of

the respective strengths and interrelationships between various culturally informed worldviews. It achieves this through providing a framework to consider culturally informed human-ecological perspectives while anchoring these in the dynamics of social-economic interests (political economy).

Empowerment-related research projects, undertaken by the author over a decade or so with Indigenous and racialized international migrant communities in Aotearoa/New Zealand and Canada, underlie some of the ideas presented in this article. These discrete but interrelated research projects, were simultaneously a product of, and catalysts for, the author's shifting epistemological perspectives during this time. Of Indigenous descent and professionally educated in the Western-based disciplines of Public Health and Health Promotion, her own personal and professional journey, which has involved the integration of Indigenous onto-epistemologies (documented elsewhere—for example, Williams *et al.*, 2012; Williams, 2013) recognizes that systems of knowledge and identities are entangled, in flux and evolving; can and often do change over the course of a practitioner's life-time (Kovach, 2009).

Theoretically, these research projects reflect varying emphases on Critical Postmodernist (Williams *et al.*, 2003; Williams and Meadows, 2016) and Indigenous framing of human and other than human agency (Williams *et al.*, 2012), and a third perspective on empowerment which aligns (not integrates) Participatory, Indigenous and Critical Postmodern perspectives (Williams and Hall, 2014; Williams, 2015). This latter approach provides a means for not only identifying the various epistemological frameworks underlying conceptualizations of agency, but also considering the ways different worldviews and relative positioning of communities within contemporary social structures may be linked to different agency imperatives for these groups (Political Ecology).

Several premises inform this article. First, inevitably, our actions as human beings are shaped by our beliefs about reality and our relationship to other life forms. Systematic and rigorous engagement with underlying premises of ontology and epistemology is crucial therefore in coming to know how we think we know, and developing critical perspectives of human agency. Secondly, the emergence of Participatory worldviews which have increasingly come to view all matter as being alive, with varying degrees of consciousness and agency (Fessenden, 2007), and the re-assertion of Indigenous place-based epistemologies (Stewart-Harawira, 2005; Kovach, 2009) are important to human-ecological well-being. Formed over 1000s of years in place, the latter group of knowledge-

bases are equivalent to the 'epistemological bedrock' of place and therefore an invaluable source for restoring harmony between human and other than human life. Through their cross-cultural relevance, Participatory worldviews offer non-Indigenous groups the potential of an authentic connection to place in ways which are culturally situated and relevant. Thirdly, given the primacy of epistemology to our shared ecological future, empowerment theory must transcend previous constructivist and critical post-modern conceptualizations, which are often closely interwoven with identity politics and primarily concerned with equitable access to the social, cultural and economic determinants of health (Hankivsky and Christoffersen, 2008; Williams *et al.*, 2003). Accordingly, this article argues that practice should be inclusive of socio-cultural histories, while emphasizing and making explicit the underlying epistemologies of various communities and subsequent potential for collective action aimed at addressing the ecological determinants of health.

WESTERN EPISTEMOLOGIES OF EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment theory and practice has largely been shaped within neo-colonial contexts that have privileged Western identities and knowledge systems over others; most often positioning humans as discrete entities, part of, but separate from the 'natural' environment. Early research for example constructs empowerment as 'control over' or 'mastery' over the social environment, often emphasizing its psychological components (Kieffer, 1984; Rappaport, 1987). Later scholarship conceives empowerment as a multi-levelled and dynamic construct involving intrapersonal, interpersonal and socio-political elements (Rissel, 1994; Labonte and Laverack, 2001; Wallerstein, 2006); aptly captured in Wallerstein's conceptualization of empowerment as a process progressing along a dynamic continuum of action from individual and small group development, to community organization, partnerships and advocacy/political action (Wallerstein, 2006).

More recent developments have witnessed the application of post-structural, feminist, post-modern and critical post-modern theory to empowerment practice. These have been illuminative of the ways in which multiple social identities such as gender, ethnicity and class interact with forms of power in shaping empowerment processes (Campbell and MacPhail, 2002; Hankivsky and Christoffersen, 2008; Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008). In Williams' articulation of empowerment (Williams and Meadows, 2016), power-culture dynamics are articulated as shifting and unstable at micro-power levels, and more deterministic at macro, institutional power levels; contingent on context,

cultural identities (e.g. ethnicity, gender, age, ability, sexuality) and players' access to power. Other health literature (Hankivsky and Christoffersen, 2008; Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008) names these dynamics as 'intersectionality' articulating the links between multiple marginal identities and health status; a phenomenon which is empirically linked to perceived and actual levels of power/powerlessness (CSDH, 2008).

Overall, as a practice that is closely concerned with the experiences, opinions and knowledge of people approaches to empowerment have largely been underpinned by constructivist and critical/transformational paradigms (Rissel, 1994; Labonte, 2000; Woodall *et al.*, 2012) which tend to overlook the agency of other life forms, non-discursive forms of inter-subjectivity and experiential ways of knowing so evident in Indigenous and Participatory paradigms. Rather they tend to emphasize human discursive forms of inter-subjectivity often based upon particular issues and/or rooted in narratives of identity and culture (Williams *et al.*, 2003), wherein experiences of power relations and well-being are grounded in human subjectivity, social structures and material power relations.

In more recent times, ecological approaches to health and empowerment have begun to occasionally appear within health and empowerment-related literature [e.g. (Lee, 2000; Thursdon and Vissandjee, 2005)] commonly referring to the social ecology that humans inhabit, i.e. the social, lived and built environment. Norton's concept of 'ecological empowerment' [(Norton, 2009), p. 5]—the mutual empowerment of people and the natural world—is a noteworthy exception, although theoretically embryonic. Bentley (Bentley, 2014) provides one of the more radical Western perspectives found within the ecological public health literature in his discussion of human and 'other than human agency', i.e. that trees, birds, insects and other life forms possess very significant forms of active agency. Bentley likens these mutually impacting energies to the core ecological public health concept of conviviality. In summary, the ecological conceptualizations of empowerment beginning to emanate from Western health-related empowerment literature are in early stages of development.

UNDERSTANDING PLACE-BASED AGENCY AND EMPOWERMENT

For Indigenous peoples, empowerment is closely tied to the re-assertion of Indigenous epistemologies which are in turn closely linked to Indigenous decolonization and resurgence—the restoration of cultural practices and the re-generation of one's relational place-based existence (Cornthassel, 2012). While Indigenous worldviews are particular to place and peoples, they share some similar

epistemological roots and principals. Stewart-Harawira (Stewart-Harawira, 2005) has summed these up as: the interconnectedness of all of life; that every element or life form has its own life-force; that matter is imbued with spirit; and the inherent reciprocity between life forms.

Paradigms of Indigenous Resurgence differentiate themselves from non-Indigenous sustainability efforts through their grounding in three political themes (Political Ecology) or agency imperatives—*Resurgence*—the resurgence of place-based consciousness and culture, *Responsibilities*—guardianship and responsibility towards all living things which are fundamentally different from human rights discourses derived from state-centric forums premised on capitalist and Eurocentric norms of the precedence of humanity over nature, and *Relationships*—other than human forms of life are not resources in the way of the free-market economy, but rather part of the web of life (Cornthassel, 2012). To varying degrees, these agency imperatives (reasons for acting) differ significantly from other cultural communities who while may be equally concerned about human and environmental well-being and subscribe to epistemologies which while similarly aligned, are however, differently positioned within contemporary forms of globalization and neo-colonialism.

Aninshnabe and Haudenosaunee scholar Watts (Watts, 2013) similarly captures this perspective through her observation that in contrast to Euro-Western understandings, for Indigenous communities, society is constituted not just by human to human relationships, but from the interactions between the entities within the Indigenous Life-World, i.e. the interrelations between humans, other animals, plant, mineral and spirit worlds. She articulates this consciousness as 'Place-thought', a distinctive space which recognizes the interconnectedness between thoughts and place, 'based upon the premise that the land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts' [(Watts, 2013), p. 21]. Sometime referred to as Indigenous Life-World (Fixico, 2003; BPR), the mutuality inherent in this notion of agency (human and other than human agency) and well-being is captured well in Maori scholar Huhana Smith's research (Smith, 2007) detailing 5 years of iwi (tribal), land-based, community healing work wherein the restoration of fragmented ecological systems [is] interdependently related to the healing of a community and reconnection with their natural and cultural landscape. Exercise of kaitiaki (guardianship) appreciates the mutuality of human and more than human agency as related to Smith by a tribal elder:

When the world was created everything was given full wairua (spirit) and mana (power). . . . so everything is its own master. . . . If people want to exercise kaitiaki (guardianship) they will first need to understand the value

of all things, and the wairua of all things. . . . For us this does not mean being in charge. . . you don't go and tell the pipi how to live, you allow it to have the opportunity to live in the way that it knows best. . . and that is kaitiaki is. It is about knowing the place of things in the world including your place in the world. When you get to that place you realize that the thinking of all things is the same [(Smith, 2007), p. 1].

Indigenous perspectives of whom and what contributes to societal structures are quite different from post Enlightenment Euro-Western thought in which the agency of other than human life is subjugated to the desires, needs and agency of humans. 'From an Indigenous point of view', Watt's continues 'habitats or ecosystems are better understood as societies; they have ethical structures, interspecies treaties and agreements, and further their ability to interpret, understand and implement' (2013, p. 21). Within Indigenous communities in Canada and globally, these contracts between humans and place have existed and been nourished in the form of sacred guardianship agreements between particular tribes and places.

The evolution of Participatory worldviews emanating from Western scholarship reflects a progression from earlier focuses on the pre-reflective ground of embodied human perception to an emphasis on social constructionism and human inter-subjectivity and flourishing to later genres which position all matter as alive and with varying degrees of consciousness and view knowledge as resulting through the interplay between matter and mind, human and other than human life (Fessenden, 2007). Participatory Worldviews, however, differ from Indigenous Paradigms in so far as the latter are always specific to place and peoples. Participatory scholarship more represents a generic set of principles born of out of re-engagement with place by individuals and communities seeking to recapture the indigenous relationship to the earth community enjoyed by their ancestors—it offers an important means of engaging with place, but it is less so uniquely born from continuous, place-based existence. While Participatory paradigms are political in that they are seeking life-giving ways forward beyond the bounds of Western modernist development, these differ significantly from Indigenous Resurgence political imperatives.

Notwithstanding the devastating impacts of colonization for Indigenous communities, those who have maintained some connection to traditional lands are more often 'of a place' with respect to thought, language and culture—i.e. reflect the consciousness of place—than those who have a broken relationship with place. As is evident in research summarized later in this article, Indigenous peoples with access to land may through acts of resurgence experience the economic and political

dimensions of their lives differently from international migrant communities (also affected by issues of forced migration and cultural dislocation) who are literally disconnected from their ancestral lands and perhaps more active participants in the 'consumer construct of citizenship' (Walsh, 2008). This latter example demonstrates the value of applying a critical post-modern approach within empowerment practice, (even if primarily grounded in one of these latter paradigms) regarding analysis of dynamics that occur at the level of political ecology or the socio-political levels of empowerment.

ENGAGING HEALTH WITH SUSTAINABILITY

Historically, disciplines primarily associated with sustainability studies and practices have been primarily rooted in the same modernist paradigm which has driven global economic, cultural, technological and political developments. Recent epistemological critique of sustainability approaches differentiates between shallow technologically driven forms of sustainability and deep sustainability which involve shifts in human perception and consciousness (Esbjorn-Hargens and Zimmerman, 2009a; Borden, 2011; Lange, 2012; BPR). Despite increasing awareness of the futility of the human-environmental epistemological divide among Western scholars, the literature continues to perpetuate overt or at best nascent dominant Western values; through for example, references to other than human life as 'eco-system goods and services' (Resilience Alliance, 2009; Olsson and Galaz, 2012; Hancock *et al.*, 2015). Indigenous societies, however, reject such references outright, emphasizing 'society' to include human and other than human life (Fixico, 2003; Watts, 2013).

Practices associated with the concept 'social-ecological resilience' (Resilience Alliance, 2009) potentially offer a means of surfacing these kinds of inherent and often covert epistemological differences which are inevitably closely entwined with various cultural systems underlying health-related programming, practice and policy. The concept has the potential to serve as a bridging mechanism between diverse human groupings as its application involves addressing the interplay and fit between social and ecological systems by relating management (policy and programming) practices based on ecological understanding to the social/cultural mechanisms behind these practices in a variety of geographical settings, cultures and ecosystems (Berkes *et al.*, 2003). In providing a way of thinking about resilience as a state of an entire social-ecological system (e.g. a community which encompasses both human and other than human entities), social-ecological resilience therefore offers a meeting place for diverse cultural perspectives of people in place, and importantly a

means of re-connecting Western, modernist subjectivities to the environment.

The epistemological critique necessary for trans-disciplinary and intercultural approaches to participatory forms of socio-ecological resilience is potentially illuminated by Esbjorn-Hargens and Zimmerman's model of Integral Ecology (Esbjorn-Hargens and Zimmerman, 2009a). Their organizing approach is the AQAL model—all quadrants, all levels, all lines, all states and all types—referring to 'the intrinsic perspectives that occur at all scales and in all contexts' [(Esbjorn-Hargens and Zimmerman, 2009a), p. 50]. Shown in Figure 1. AQAL is underpinned by three spheres of reality: (1) the empirical sensory world pertaining to the interior and exterior aspects of the biosphere as perceived by the five senses, feelings and somatic experiences (upper left and upper right quadrants); (2) the exterior levels of physio-sphere, biosphere and noosphere as perceived through the senses and studies within the physical and social sciences (upper right and lower right quadrants); and (3) the entire Cosmos (Life-World) in all its dimensions, interiors and exteriors (upper right, upper left, lower right and lower left quadrants). In this context, interiors refer to the unseen dimensions of the Life-World such as energy, consciousness and spirit, while exteriors refer to the visible, material, and therefore more easily observable, so-called objective dimensions of the Life-World. The AQAL model views inter-subjectivity as occurring at all levels, becoming simpler but not absent as one travels down the Life-World (Cosmos) scale. Esbjorn-Hargens and Zimmerman assert that equal ontological or epistemological priority be accorded to all four quadrants as these perspectives co-arise in the seamless fabric of reality. Ecology's next vital step they argue is not to deny modernity, but to transcend it, enfolding it into a more encompassing ecology that integrates interiors and inter-subjectivity with exteriors and inter-objectivity.

Environmental studies have generally privileged the upper right and lower right quadrants (objectivity and inter-objectivity), i.e. that which can be physically perceived within natural and social systems, individually and relationally. Likewise health promotion, with its historical roots in Western bio-medicine, has also tended to privilege externalities (individual objective states, upper right), and to a lesser extent forms of individual subjectivity; (upper left) which have been shown to be linked to states of physical health. There is a body of empowerment-related literature for example devoted to demonstrating the links between relative deprivation or states of powerlessness and physiological impacts such as increased cortisol levels leading to increased blood pressure and heart disease

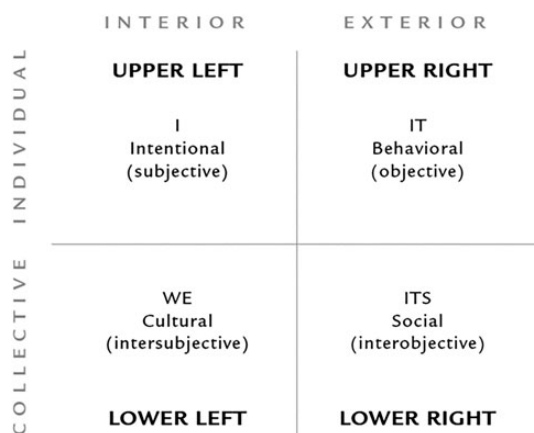


Fig. 1: The four quadrants (Esbjorn-Hargens and Zimmerman, 2009b).

(CSDH, 2008). While Western-orientated empowerment practices emphasizing 'control over' the social determinants of health have also integrated inter-objectivity (lower right), far less developed is the upper left quadrant with respect to the subjectivities of other than human forms of life; and the lower left quadrant of inter-subjectivity. Participatory and Indigenous Worldviews on the other hand, extend constructivist and critical post-modern approaches to empowerment in that they accord equal ontological priority to all four spheres of being and agency. They correspond to an eco-centric definition of empowerment which might conceivably approximate: 'the ability to understand, respond to, and work towards what is in the best interests of and will benefit all human beings and life on the planet' [(Spariosu, 2005), p. 6].

SOCIAL ECOLOGICAL RESILIENCE AND EMPOWERMENT PRACTICE

The Ecology of Wellbeing Project (EWBP) (Williams and Hall, 2014; Williams, 2015) provides an example of an approach towards mental health which potentially situates human well-being within a broader relational ethic that encompasses place. The long-term goal of the project is to address psycho-spiritual or mental well-being with women affected by forced migration and cultural dislocation from Indigenous and international migrant communities in Canada and Aotearoa/New Zealand. The epistemological framing for this study (Williams and Hall, 2014; Williams, 2015) encompasses Participatory and Indigenous Life-World perspectives both with respect to theoretical understandings of well-being, migration and non-human relationality, and worldviews held by

participants, while also recognizing that most of these women were also schooled within Western education systems and will also have modernist understandings of human and environmental well-being.

Through a partnership with a number of not-for-profit organizations, this participatory research project engaged a total of 38 Indigenous, migrant and refugee women. While the methodology differed slightly in each country, according to organizational needs and contexts, essentially participants initially met in person during 2011 and 2012 to discuss the project and its methodological approach, participating in semi-structured individual interviews and one half day and an all-day group dialogue aimed at re-surfacing traditional land-based knowledge (individual empowerment) and building critical alliances across these seemingly disparate communities (group empowerment). In 2015, participants from each country met and exchanged perspectives on this project as part of an international summit on social–ecological resilience in Canada (see <http://www.eldersvoicessummit.com>). Future activities will possibly consist of programming and policy social–ecological innovations.

Statistically, (Williams and Hall, 2014) the study populations experience significant mental health disparities relative to other groups. While underlying causes are more often social and ecological, and despite increasing evidence of the links between place and psycho-spiritual well-being [e.g. the therapeutic Landscapes literature—(Gastaldo *et al.*, 2004; Chalquist, 2007)], these populations are predominantly treated within Western biomedical frameworks which consist of therapeutic drug-regimes or at best individual and family counselling. However, presenting issues are often symptomatic of rupture from culture and place (Williams, 2014). Through its analysis of the human-cultural systems underlying health-promoting practices, and its inter-linking of human, social and environmental systems, the application of a social–ecological resilience framework to mental well-being potentially illuminates the cultural and epistemological limitations of such Western reductionist approaches solely focused on the human side of the well-being equation.

In each country, the Indigenous inhabitants are flanked by sizeable immigrant populations, corresponding with the globalization of capital and an increased emphasis on economic rather than humanitarian aspects of domestic social or international migrant and refugee policy. Increasingly, ‘differences in customs and origins are overlooked so long as one reflects the ideals of homo-economicus or the rational actor who adopts and is well versed in the logic and idioms of the market’

[(Walsh, 2008), p. 808]. These contextual issues give rise to two significant differences between these populations. First, while ethnic and immigrant minorities are often looking to settle down and fit within existing social and political frameworks, Indigenous Peoples are forcibly incorporated nations who often want to ‘get out’ of the imposed nation state. Secondly, while for Indigenous communities, citizenship often includes rights and responsibilities that include the natural world, international migrants tend to be more immediately focused on their human rights as citizens (Fleras and Maka, 2010). However, the same struggle to belong and be included exists for both.

For many of the EWBP participants, emotional well-being is connected to place, in terms of both personal identification and the mutual sentience shared with the land; a construct which is also articulated within the literature pertaining to Indigenous meanings of resilience and emotional well-being (Kirmayer *et al.*, 2011; Williams *et al.*, 2012) and relational consciousness inherent in Participatory Worldviews (Chalquist, 2007; Fessenden, 2007; Williams *et al.*, 2012). The project has drawn on the Indigenous (Maori) concept of *Turangawaewae* (standing place) as an important means of facilitating land-based, holistic conceptualizations of resilience and well-being. Often conceived as a place of belonging in terms of land, it also refers to a place of power—the place where one is powerful, and as such is closely aligned to Canadian Indigenous perspectives of resilience (Kirmayer *et al.*, 2011). Through bringing these communities together for conversations around *Turangawaewae* and wellness, submerged Indigenous and other traditional knowledges are re-surfaced and applied to conceptualizations of human–environmental well-being. Narratives of globalization and colonization (of land, spirituality, knowledge systems) are important connecting points as are these convergences in belief systems.

While significant overlaps in experiences and ontologies between the study populations have emerged from dialogue circles, two important differences are evident. First, because some of the Indigenous participants are still connected to their traditional lands, their experience of *turangawaewae* is qualitatively different from that of immigrants whose sense of *turangawaewae* is perhaps more orientated towards human social systems. Emerging research results (Williams and Hall, 2014; Williams, 2015) also demonstrate not only the traditional knowledge of women who maintain a connection to place to be stronger, but also that these same connections afford acts of resurgence such as place-based tribal management plans and the adoption of more critical

perspectives of ‘State-waste management regimes’ (Hird, 2014) supporting traditional economic development based on increasing rates of extraction, consumerism and waste management resulting in ecological degradation. International migrant women without connection to land, living in urban environments may be under more direct scrutiny for their economic contribution as prospective citizens and perhaps therefore, more likely to be forcibly incorporated into such status quo models of citizenship associated with Walsh’s (Walsh, 2008) earlier notion of homo-economicus.

As currently articulated in the health promotion literature, an ecological model of health takes into account individual, social and ecological determinants of well-being for these communities such as individual therapy, social support, social and environmental determinants such as housing, or safe drinking water, but certainly not approaches which link emotional and social well-being with place-based thought and the wellness of place. Participatory and Indigenous worldviews resituate experiences of psycho-spiritual well-being within the broader ethic of caring for place. These philosophical and epistemological framings potentially have a lot to offer in re-centring ‘place’ in our considerations of the interrelationships between living systems and human well-being. Through the application of the social-ecological resilience concept, emergent findings demonstrate the ways in which place-based thought and agency are mediated by the political ecology of place, and associated dynamics of culture and power. While international migrant and refugee women may subscribe to Participatory Worldviews of place-based agency and well-being, they are possibly less well-positioned to articulate these than women who are Indigenous to place and arguably less reliant on state-centric forums of citizenship. Re-visiting empowerment as a multi-level construct (Wallserstein, 2006) highlights the relevance of all three empowerment paradigms (Critical Postmodern, Participatory and Indigenous). Indigenous and Participatory worldviews are vital to empowerment practice which re-cursively embeds human being and consciousness within the larger ecology or Life-World (linking human social and ecological systems). Critical Postmodernism on the other hand remains vital to illuminating the interplay of power-culture dynamics which influence whose cultural systems are inevitably transmitted in public health policy and programming outcomes in a variety of geographic settings, cultures and ecosystems; i.e. it illuminates dynamics at play across the social-ecological resilience equation.

Table 1 contrasts Positivist, Transformative/Critical Postmodern, Participatory and Indigenous approaches to

empowerment and the social-ecological basis of health. The paradigms in the three right-hand columns are conceptualized as transcending and including positivism, which continues to play a significant role within the biological and physical sciences and related technological innovations, which are rooted in the epistemological divide between human and other living beings. These tendencies are similarly reflected in individualistic approaches to health which are philosophically rooted in State-centric discourses of development and human progress which closely align citizenship and economic productivity. It is these neo-liberal and corporate interests which in more recent years have captured empowerment practice. Participatory and Indigenous paradigms are conceptualized as including an emphasis on the transformation of human-social structures towards the goal of social-ecological balance, wherein nature is conceived as part of the society.

The agency imperatives of Indigenous and Participatory paradigms are framed within a reciprocal participatory exchange which situates human rights and well-being within the earth’s carrying capacity, i.e. the mutual flourishing of all life forms. The socio-political levels of empowerment, articulated earlier in terms of citizenship conceptualizations, rights and responsibilities embedded in State-based policy frameworks tend to differentially shape the agency imperatives of Indigenous and immigrant communities. While at the epistemological level, both groups may subscribe to attributing equal ontological priority to all for quadrants of Esbjorn-Hargens and Zimmerman’s AQAL model, in reality the agency imperatives of these groups regarding human-ecological well-being, may well diverge because of the ways they are differently positioned within the wider political ecology.

Social-ecological resilience prioritizes the resilience of the whole human-ecological system (rather than just human resilience), while illuminating the various agency imperatives of different cultural groups and associated power-culture dynamics. Within the EWBP, Indigenous and Participatory Paradigms were focused on through activities which cultivated epistemologies of interconnectedness such as ceremony, story-telling and deliberately holding activities in Indigenous spaces. For example, one all day dialogue was held in a Whare Tupuna (Maori ancestral meeting house). In such spaces, carvings traditionally incorporate human and non-human ancestors, powerfully evoking the interconnectedness of life. The Transformative/Critical Postmodern Paradigm was more drawn upon in activities requiring the analysis of the ways in which structural forms of power are operationalized, within and between participating communities as well as in relation to dominant discourses and social structures.

Table 1: Four empowerment paradigms and the social–ecological basis for health

	Positivism	Transformatist/critical post-modern	Participatory	Indigenous
Ontology	Absolute reality Universal truths	Reality constructed Power-knowledge and power-material interests. Some historical realism—virtual reality shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender values	Subjective–objective reality, co-created by mind and given cosmos	Physical reality is inter-penetrated by meta-physical (spiritual) reality All life has an essence that is in perpetual movement. Multiple Experiences of realities shaped by multiple connections humans have with the environment, cosmos, living and non-living
Epistemology	Objective, measurable, materialist, reality consists of only that which is able to be physically observed	How we see and know the world is an outcome of the above—formal knowledge the result of vested interests	Critical subjectivity in participatory transaction with cosmos; extended epistemology of experiential, propositional and practical knowing and co-created findings	Place-based epistemologies, often developed over years in continuous relationship with land, waters, spirits and ancestors of a place
Sphere of focus	Material, UR, LR	Discursive and material, UR, LR, UL	Empathic, discursive, material, UR, LR, UL, LL	Empathic, discursive, material, UR, LR, UL, LL
Political ecology; cultural alignment	Western, neo-liberalist, State-Corporate forums of development, human-centric, Citizenship linked with economic productivity	Identity politics—ethnic minority, women, GLBT	Deep ecologists, environmental ethicists, Eastern philosophers; varying degrees of state alignment	Indigenous Communities, separatist and state-based forms of political alignment
View of human agency/being	Rational, unified actor, self-responsibility, utilitarianism Anthropocentric; agency and consciousness limited to humans; human life valued over other life	Transformation of socio-political structures critical to agency multi-levelled process. Begins to break down agency-structure dialectic. Social structures—external and within constitute people and constituted by people. Anthropocentric	Reciprocal agency within Life-World system of human and other than human life. Agency is subtle (energy, consciousness) and gross (social structures, material)	Reciprocal agency within the Life-World system of human and other than human life. Human agency results from place-based thought and is related to human and other than human agreements. Co-intelligence
Life/agency imperative	Human centric, materialist growth paradigm, emphasis on technological solutions to sustainability issues that do not disturb late capitalism as the governing system	Human centric, focus on transforming society to enable a more equitable distribution of power among marginalized communities relative to culturally and economically dominant groups	Well-being, human flourishing and the flourishing of all life forms	Self-determination; Indigenous resurgence; reconstruction of knowledge promoting political transformation. Decolonization, guardianship of traditional territories and the earth community

Adapted from Chilisa [(Chilisa, 2012), p. 40] 'Beliefs Associated with the Four Paradigms'.

CONCLUSION

Working effectively with the social–ecological basis for health requires critical framings of empowerment practice regarding its underlying epistemological assumptions. Place-based agency as articulated within Indigenous and Participatory paradigms plays a key role, not only in the conceptualization of empowerment, but also in terms of reconceptualizing ecosystems not as resources for human consumption but as relational participants within the social–ecological equation. Critical capacities for empowerment practitioners working with the ecological determinants of health include: (1) the ability to distinguish between different epistemologies and interests which underlie various empowerment approaches; (2) the discerning engagement of empowerment practices with sustainability approaches (such as Esbjorn-Hargens and Zimmerman’s AQAL model); and (3) understanding the respective relevance of Indigenous, Participatory Worldviews and Critical post-modernist approaches to empowerment practices. Analysis of the epistemologies and cultural perspectives which underlie social systems, in ways that dig underneath discursive identities of diverse communities is critical to working with communities to develop the social–ecological resilience necessary for human-ecological well-being. In essence, the ability to operationalize capacities of this nature requires empowerment practitioners to make an epistemological shift to viewing themselves as an implicit part of bio-diversity, while understanding the nuanced power-culture dynamics operating at discursive and structural levels that shape community and socio-political aspects of social–ecological resilience.

FUNDING

This research was funded by a grant from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Canada (Grant # 149037).

REFERENCES

- Arabena K. (2006) The universal citizen: an Indigenous citizenship framework for the twenty-first century. *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 2, 36–46.
- Bentley M. (2014) An ecological public health approach to understanding the relationships between sustainable urban environments, public health and social equity. *Health Promotion International*, 29, 528–537.
- Berkes F., Colding J., Folke C. (eds) (2003) *Navigating Socio-Ecological Systems: Building Resilience for Complexity and Change*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Borden R. (2011) The future of human ecology. *Human Ecology: Journal of the Commonwealth Human Ecology Council*, 23, 47–49.
- Callison C. (2014) *How Climate Changes Comes to Matter: The Communal Life of Facts*. Duke University Press, Durham, NC, USA.
- Campbell C., MacPhail C. (2002) Peer education, gender and the development of critical consciousness: participatory HIV prevention by South African youth. *Social Science and Medicine*, 55, 331–345.
- Chalquist C. (2007) *Terrapsychology: Reengaging the Soul of Place*. Spring Journal Books, New Orleans.
- Chilisa B. (2012) *Indigenous Research Methodologies*. Sage, Los Angeles.
- Corntassel J. (2012) Re-envisioning resurgence: Indigenous pathways to decolonization and sustainable self-determination. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society*, 1, 86–101.
- CSDH. (2008) Closing the Gap in a Generation: Health Equity through Action on the Social Determinants of Health. Final Report of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health. World Health Organization, Geneva.
- Cyril S., Smith B., Renzaho A. (2015) Systematic review of empowerment measures in health promotion. *Health Promotion International*. doi:10.1093/healthpro/dav/059.
- Esbjorn-Hargens S., Zimmerman M. (2009a) *Integral Ecology. Uniting Multiple Perspectives on the Natural World*. Integral Books, London.
- Esbjorn-Hargens S., Zimmerman M. (2009b) An Overview of Integral Ecology. A Comprehensive Approach to Today’s Complex Planetary Issues. Integral Institute, Resource Paper, No. 2, 1–14. <http://nextstepintegral.org/wp-content/uploads/> (19 January 2016, date last accessed).
- Fleras A., Maka R. (2010) Indigeneity-grounded analysis (IGA) as policy(-making) lens: New Zealand Models, Canadian Realities. *The International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 1. <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/lipj/vol1/iss1/> (19 August 2015, date last accessed).
- Fessenden L. (2007) Towards a participatory worldview. *The Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism and Practice*, 3. <http://www.lesley.edu/journal-pedagogy-pluralism-practice/lily-fessenden/participatory-worldview> (21 August 2014, date last accessed).
- Fixico D. (2003) *The American Indian Mind in A Linear World*. Routledge, New York.
- Gastaldo D., Andrews G., Khanlou N. (2004) Therapeutic landscapes of the mind: theorizing some intersections between health geography, health promotion and immigration studies’. *Critical Public Health*, 14, 157–176.
- Hancock T. (2011) It’s the environment stupid! Declining ecosystem health is THE threat to health in the 21st century. *Health Promotion International*, 26, ii168–ii172.
- Hancock T., Spady D., Soskolne C. (eds) (2015) *Global Change and Public Health: Addressing the Ecological Determinants of Health*. The Report in Brief. Working Group on the Ecological Determinants of Health. <http://www.cpha.ca/uploads/policy/edh-brief.pdf> (21 August 2015, date last accessed).
- Hankivsky O., Christoffersen A. (2008) Intersectionality and the determinants of health. *Critical Public Health*, 18, 271–283.

- Hird M. (2014) Making waste management public (or falling back to sleep). *Social Studies of Science*, **44**, 441–465.
- ISSC and UNESCO (2013) World Social Science Report 2013. Changing Global Environments, OECD Publishing and UNESCO Publishing, Paris. <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Library/Documents/world-social-science-report-2013-changing-global-environments-education-2013-en.pdf> (5 January 2016, date last accessed).
- Kieffer C. (1984) Citizen empowerment: a developmental perspective. *Prevention in Human Services*, **3**, 9–35.
- Kirmayer L., Dandeneau S., Marshall E., Phillips M., Kahentoni M. A., Williamson K. J. (2011) Rethinking resilience from Indigenous perspectives. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, **56**, 84–91.
- Kjærgård B., Land B., Pedersen K. B. (2014) Health and sustainability. *Health Promotion International*, **29**, 558–568.
- Kovach M. (2009) *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations and Contexts*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto.
- Labonte R. (2000) A planning framework for community empowerment goals within health promotion. *Health Policy and Planning*, **15**, 255–262.
- Labonte R., Laverack G. (2001) Capacity building in health promotion, Part 1: for whom? and for what purpose? *Critical Public Health*, **11**, 111–127.
- Lange E. (2012) Transforming transformative learning through sustainability and the new science. In Taylor E. W., Cranston P. and Associates (eds), *The Handbook of Transformative Learning*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, pp. 195–211.
- Lee J. (2000) *The Empowerment Approach to Social Work Practice*, 2nd edition. Columbia University Press, New York.
- MacDonald T. H. (1998) *Re-thinking Health Promotion*. A Global Approach. Routledge, London.
- Matheson A., Page R., Rubin D., Stoner L., Stoner K., Turrant M. (2015) The Indigenous health gap: raising awareness and changing attitudes. *Perspectives in Public Health*, **135**, 68–70.
- Norton C. (2009) *Eco-psychology and social work: creating an interdisciplinary framework for redefining person in environment*. *Ecopsychology*, **Spring**, 138–145.
- Olsson P., Galaz V. (2012) Sociological innovation and transformation. In Nicholls A., Murdock A. (eds), *Social Innovation: Blurring the Boundaries to Reconfigure Markets*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, pp. 223–247.
- Panelli R., Tipa G. (2007) Placing well-being: a Maori case-study of cultural and environmental specificity. *Eco-health*, **4**, 445–460.
- Parkes M., Horwitz P. (2009) Water, ecology and health: ecosystems a settings for promoting health and sustainability. *Health Promotion International*, **24**, 94–102.
- Poland B., Dooris M., Haluza-Delay R. (2011) Securing ‘supportive environments’ for health in the face of eco-system collapse: meeting the triple threat with a sociology of creative transformation. *Health Promotion International*, **26**(S2), ii202–ii215.
- Purdie-Vaughns V., Eibach R. (2008) Inter-sectional invisibility: the distinctive advantages and disadvantages of multiple subordinate group-identities. *Sex Roles*, **59**, 377–391.
- Rappaport J. (1987) Terms of empowerment/exemplars of prevention: towards a theory for community psychology. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, **15**, 121–148.
- [RA] The Resilience Alliance. (2009) ‘Key Concepts’. Retrieved on 14 September 2009. <http://www.resalliance.org/564.php>.
- Rissel C. (1994) Empowerment: the holy grail of health promotion? *Health Promotion International*, **9**, 39–47.
- Smith S. (2007) Hei Whenua Ora: Hapu and iwi approaches for reinstating valued ecosystems within cultural landscape. PhD Thesis, Massey University, Palmerston North, Aotearoa, New Zealand.
- Spariosu M. (2005) *Global Intelligence and Human Development: Towards an Ecology of Global Learning*. MIT Press, Cambridge.
- Stewart-Harawira M. (2005) *The New Imperial Order: Indigenous Responses to Globalization*. Zed Books, London, England.
- Stewart-Harawira M. (2013) Unspeakable things: Indigenous research and social science. *Socio*, **2**, 121–134.
- Thursdon W., Visandjee B. (2005) An ecological model for understanding culture as a determinant of women’s health. *Critical Public Health*, **15**, 229–242.
- Walsh J. (2008) Navigating globalization: immigration policy in Canada and Australia, 1945–2007. *Sociological Forum*, **23**, 786–813.
- Wallserstein N. (2006) What is the Evidence on Effectiveness of Empowerment to Improve Health? WHO Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen. Health Evidence Network Report, <http://www.euro.who.int/Document/E88086.pdf> (16 July 2015, date last accessed).
- Watts V. (2013) Indigenous place-thought and agency amongst humans and non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European world tour!). *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society*, **2**, 21.
- Williams L., Labonte R., O’Brien M. (2003) Empowering social action through narratives of identity and culture. *Health Promotion International*, **18**, 33–40.
- Williams L., Roberts R., McIntosh A. (2012) Human Ecology: A pedagogy of hope? Introduction. In Williams L., Roberts R., McIntosh A. (eds), *Radical Human Ecology: Intercultural and Indigenous Approaches*, Ashgate Publishing Group, Farnham, pp.1–11.
- Williams L. (2013) Deepening ecological relationality through critical onto-epistemological inquiry: Where transformative learning meets sustainable science. *Journal of Transformative Education*, **11**, 95–113.
- Williams L., Hall L. (2014) Women, migration and well-being: Building epistemological resilience through ontologies of wholeness and relationship. *Global Change, Peace and Security*, **26**, 1–11.
- Williams L. (2015) Human Ecology, bio-ethics and human rights in the Anthropocene: How and why place-based agency matters. *Studia Bio-ethica*, **8**, 25–35. Available online at: <http://www.uprait.org/sb/index.php/bioethica/article/view/1016/786> (21 August 2015, date last accessed).
- Williams L., Meadows L. (2016) Developing Personal Skills: Building Capacity for Individual, Collective and Socio-Political Empowerment. In Vollman A., Anderson E.,

- McFarlane J. (eds), *Canadian Community as Partner: Theory and Multi-disciplinary Practice*. 4th edition, Chapter 10. Lipincott, Williams and Wilkins, London. In press.
- WHO. (1986) *Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion*. WHO, Geneva. <http://www.who.int/healthpromotion/conferences/previous/ottawa/en/> (21 August 2015, date last accessed).
- WHO and SCB (2015) *Connecting Global Priorities: Bio-Diversity and Human Health. A State of the Knowledge Review*. World Health Organization and Secretariat of the Convention on Bio-logical Diversity, Geneva.
- Woodall J., Warrick-Booth L., Cross R. (2012) Has empowerment lost its power? *Health Education Research*, 27, 742–745.