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Article

Indigenous Theories and Frameworks of Human Development: A Scoping Review and Integrative Synthesis

Short Title: Indigenous Theories and Frameworks of Human Development

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Abstract

Theories guide scientific inquiry by describing, explaining, and predicting human behavior and development across the lifespan. However, the social sciences have been largely shaped by theories rooted in Western philosophy, with Indigenous theories notably underrepresented. This scoping review identified Indigenous theories of human development and examined how they conceptualize development across the lifespan. Searches across four databases yielded 18 articles and 21 theories. Across theories, three developmental domains were prioritized (identity, relationships, and spirituality) embedded within four life stages: prenatal/childhood, youthhood, adulthood, and elderhood. Indigenous theories overwhelmingly centered community wellbeing and interconnectedness at each life stage. Last, rather than a linear, age-related progression, Indigenous theories reflected relational, cyclical, and narrative developmental trajectories- each with shared expectations for how development unfolds across the lifespan. These findings elevate Indigenous frameworks within developmental science and offer a foundation for theoretical and empirical innovation.

Keywords: Indigenous; American Indian/Alaska Native; theory; human development; developmental psychology

“Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect.” - Chief Seattle

Introduction

Humans have always been theorists. Theories help us organize the world around us, understand our relationships with other people and the environment, and serve as the foundation for scientific inquiry by providing frameworks that describe, explain, and predict human behavior and development across the lifespan (Kerlinger, 1973; Wong, 2021). Within the fields of human development and developmental psychology, theories structure our understanding of individuals' physical, cognitive, socio-emotional, and relational development in context and over time. However, the study of human development has been primarily dominated by theories and frameworks rooted in Western philosophical traditions. Foundational theories including behaviorism (Skinner, 1945; Watson, 1913), Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), Piaget's cognitive stages (Piaget, 1952), and Erickson's psychosocial theory (Erikson, 1980) have been highly generative, but they do not fully capture the diverse ways human development is conceptualized across cultures.

In particular, developmental science has often treated Indigenous knowledge as contextual culture to be added into existing frameworks, rather than as a source of theory that can define what development is, what it is for, and how it unfolds over time.

Indigenous¹ knowledge is communicated in many forms including oral traditions, non-academic texts, ceremony, and community-held teachings, which are not always recognized as valid sources of information in mainstream academia. As a result, Indigenous scientists are frequently encouraged to ground their work in peer-reviewed Western theories even when Indigenous theories more directly reflect community priorities and lifeways. As American Indian and Alaska Native researchers, we echo Indigenous leaders as well as recent U.S. federal mandates that encourage research grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing (Executive Office of the President, 2022). The purpose of this scoping review is not to dismiss the substantial contributions of Western developmental theories, but to elevate Indigenous developmental theories as equally valid and necessary for a holistic understanding of diverse human experiences. Our review synthesizes published Indigenous developmental theories, elucidating how these theories and frameworks describe, explain, and predict human development across the lifespan to build a knowledge base for future theory-building, research, policy, and practice in the social sciences.

Western Theories of Human Development

Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle contributed to the birth of Western philosophy and intellectualism which provided the foundation for Western theories of human development and developmental psychology (Overton, 2015). In the 17th century, stimulated by the enlightenment, the scientific revolution, and the thoughts and writings of Renee Descartes, a “Cartesian Split” occurred, resulting in two broad metatheoretical (ontological and epistemological) perspectives on human development: the mechanistic (or “split”) worldview, and the relational worldview (Overton, 2015). The mechanistic view is also known as reductionism or empiricism. According to this viewpoint, systems can be examined and analyzed as a compilation of separable, observable components. Developmental changes are thus understood to be variational in nature, a series of additive and often linear changes (Overton, 2015). Well-known theories associated with this worldview are behaviorism (Skinner, 1945; Watson, 1913) and information processing theories (Klahr & Wallace, 1976). In simplified terms, these theories assert that humans learn through stimulus-response conditioning, encoding and processing information similar to the input-output of machine learning (Moore, 2011). Within a strict mechanistic framework, a phenomenon like the emergence of human language represents the result of hundreds of smaller instances of classical and operant conditioning in which a child receives rewards from their caregiver for expressing progressively complex forms of language. Mechanistic theories also frequently utilize analytic strategies that seek to quantify the relative contributions of nature and nurture (biology and the environment), as evidenced by modern efforts to measure the proportion of variance in human behavior attributable to DNA through behavioral genetics (e.g., Plomin et al., 2016).

Alternatively, the relational worldview places a heavy emphasis on bidirectional and dynamic relationships between individuals, communities, and their environment. Relational theories posit that nature and nurture represent distinguishable but inseparable, interdependent entities (Overton, 2015; Wong, 2021). Similar to a Mobius strip, relational theorists argue that it is not fully possible to determine where one construct (biology, genetics) ends and another (the environment) begins. At the same time, principles such as relative plasticity acknowledge that there are specific windows in development in which our biology is more susceptible to environmental influence (Lerner, 1996). Relational theories affirm the idea that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, thus developmental change is seen as transformational or qualitative in nature (Overton, 2006). In other words, under a relational framework, one might argue that the emergence of human language represents an altogether novel developmental phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a series of stimulus-response conditions, while acknowledging humans are primed to best learn language within specific age-defined windows. Examples of relational theories include Erickson’s psychosocial

stages (Erikson, 1980), Attachment Theory (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991), Life Course Theory (Elder, 1998), and Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A common concern among all Western theories, both mechanistic and relational, is how they consider culture.

Expanding our Understanding of Indigenous Theories of Human Development

Many Western theories of human development acknowledge culture as an important context and contributor of human development. For example, culture is a vital component of the macrosystem in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, shaping one's values, customs, and beliefs (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Ainsworth and Bowlby's attachment theory (1991) and Bandura's theory of social learning (Bandura, 1969) recognize cultural variations in parenting practices and socialization strategies. However, culture is often portrayed by Western theory as a part of the social environment, a "thing" to be studied by theory, rather than something that might shape one's conception of theory itself. Indigenous worldviews differ from Western perspectives at a philosophical level (Cameron et al., 2014). While we acknowledge that Indigenous communities are vastly diverse, there are many shared ways of knowing that comprise a common philosophical foundation. These include beliefs about the meaning of existence, reality, and perceptions of time (i.e., ontology), beliefs about sources of knowledge and how it is shared (i.e., epistemology), and differences in values and how we define success and thriving (i.e., axiology).

First, Indigenous perspectives of ontology (reality, being) acknowledge the existence of a spiritual realm (Cameron et al., 2014; Wilson, 2008, pp. 32-42). Consequently, human development from an Indigenous perspective may not be limited to one's lifespan, but will likely include one's ancestors and future generations (Indigenous Developmental Science Bundlers, under review). Additionally, many Indigenous peoples hold a perspective of time as circular rather than linear, with clear implications for differing developmental trajectories (Denzin et al., 2008, pp. 499-503; Smith, 2012, pp. 111-126). Second, Indigenous views of epistemology (knowledge) differ from Western views. Western research methods uphold objectivity and empirical observation and as the utmost source of knowledge; while Indigenous groups may value authority, tradition, or spiritual intuition as equally valid (Simonds & Christopher, 2013; Williams & Shipley, 2023). Third, Indigenous axiology (value systems) differ from Western perspectives. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) demonstrates what many Western theories emphasize, which is the individual as the central focus of development. As the opening quote of this paper demonstrates, for Indigenous communities, humans are but one strand in "the web of life." Thus, success or thriving may be defined in terms of connection, communal thriving, or thriving for the earth or land (O'Keefe et al., 2022; Wilson, 2008, pp. 80-96). It is logical to assume these philosophical differences would result in a cascade of unique Indigenous theories regarding human development. Yet, these theories are largely absent from published academic literature, primarily because this knowledge has been suppressed by Western science, lost through colonization, or held privately as sacred teachings. In this scoping review, we aim to review published Indigenous theories of human development and synthesize their core concepts to elevate these perspectives in the broader scientific community.

Present Study

The current study sought to systematically identify and synthesize core concepts across published Indigenous theories and frameworks of human development. Our first research aim was to identify existing Indigenous developmental theories, noting relevant study characteristics such as Indigenous tribe or community of origin, academic discipline, developmental domain(s) of focus, and life stage(s) covered by each theory. Aligned with foundational definitions of developmental theory (Baltes et al., 1980; Kerlinger, 1973; Overton, 2015), and with thoughtful anticipation of philosophical differences in worldview in mind, our second research aim was to integrate core concepts across theories to illuminate how Indigenous communities describe, explain, and predict human development across the lifespan. The "describe" category captured the main organizing

tenets of each theory, noting important contexts and contributors of human development. The “explain” category expanded upon what “successful” development looks like according to each theory, and any embedded goals for development- in general or at specified life stage(s). The “predict” category outlined the expected or implied pattern or trajectory of development according to each theory (e.g., linear, stage-like).

Methods

Author Positionality

Consistent with Indigenous methodologies and an ongoing commitment to engaging in self-reflexive praxis, we acknowledge our identities and experiences as they relate to the present study (Mataira & Silan, 2020; Smith, 2021). Author AM (she/her) is a member of the Aleut (Unangax) tribe raised in urban contexts. Her work emphasizes cultural socialization as a key contributor of early childhood cognitive and behavioral development, and explores culturally grounded conceptualizations of risk, resilience, and developmental outcomes in the social sciences. MR (she/her) is a citizen of the Haliwa-Saponi Tribe and of Indo-Fijian descent. Her work centers Indigenous value systems, rooting in relationship with reservation-based and urban Indigenous communities to support culturally grounded and community based public health promotion and prevention strategies as they relate to behavioral health, developmental trajectories, socio-ecological contexts, traditional healing modalities, and kinship informed systems of care. VQS (all pronouns) is Yo’eme (Yaqui) and was raised within the diasporic Yo’eme community in California’s Central Valley. They are a trained social worker with clinical experience supporting Indigenous children and families in the foster care system. Their work promotes culturally grounded understandings of healing, as informed by Indigenous Knowledge Systems and by the Yo’eme teaching of “en tui hiapsimake” meaning to act with good heart.

Sources and Search Terms

The scoping review protocol was guided by established approaches and is reported in accordance with Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis extension for Scoping Reviews guidelines (PRISMA; Welch et al., 2012). This scoping review protocol was not registered, however details surrounding the protocol are outlined in the current manuscript with specificity. The literature search was conducted between January and February 2025 across ProQuest, SCOPUS, Academic Search Premier, and Google Scholar (first ten pages of results). The search protocol was developed in consultation with a university librarian specializing in Psychology and Social Sciences. The protocol involved all combinations of our population terms, desired article focus, and content terms into search strings (Table 1) using Boolean “AND” and “OR” operators. All records were converted to Research Information Systems (RIS) text files and then uploaded into COVIDENCE, a systematic review management software (COVIDENCE, 2024).

Table 1. *Scoping Review Search Terms.*

Population	Article Focus/ Type	Content
Indigenous	Theory/ Theories	Human Development
American Indian	Framework(s)	Child Development
Alaska Native	Perspective(s)	Development
American Indian/ Alaska	Worldview(s)	Ontology
Aboriginal	Model(s)	Being
Māori	Traditional Knowledge	Thriving
First Nations	Ways of Knowing	Wellness
Metis	Understanding(s)	Wellbeing
Native Hawaiian	Methodology/ Methodologies	Life
Native American		Lifespan
Pacific Islander		Life Course

Lifeways
Psychology
Personhood

Study Selection

Each article was coded for eligibility based on predefined criteria (see Table 2 for full inclusion and exclusion criteria). Inclusion criteria required that articles: (a) be published in a scholarly peer-reviewed journal, (b) be written in English, (c) include full text; (d) represent Indigenous populations; and (e) present or integrate theories, frameworks, or models of human development. Additionally, inclusion was limited to theories authored by Indigenous authors, or otherwise developed in collaboration with Indigenous communities, as consistent with Indigenous research principles concerning accountability and epistemic authority. Duplicates were identified and removed automatically by the COVIDENCE software, with additional duplicates manually identified and removed during the abstract screening process. Authors AM and MR engaged in title and abstract screening, with VQS consulted to resolve any conflicts. All three authors engaged in the full-text screening. Study selection was not limited to publication year. Because full-text inclusion emphasized conceptual and theoretical contributions rather than empirical outcomes, screening decisions required interpretive judgement and domain expertise. In alignment with reflexive methodological guidance in conducting scoping reviews (Mak & Thomas, 2022), we prioritized iterative and collaborative consensus throughout each filtration phase, rather than utilizing inter-rater reliability statistics.

Table 2. *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria.*

	Include	Exclude
Population	Indigenous, American Indian, Alaska Native, Native American Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander Aboriginal, Māori (Australia, New Zealand) First Nations/ Metis (Canada) All ages and developmental stages	Non-Indigenous populations (or those outside the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Pacific Islands) "Asian/Pacific Islander" or AAPI" Non-human studies (cells, animals, climate, law)
Article Focus/ Study Design	Papers proposing or describing Indigenous theories, frameworks, models, or worldviews	Empirical studies without a theoretical focus Meta-analyses or review papers Randomized control trials
Content	Must include either: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · A focus on human <i>development</i> or <i>change</i> over time, OR · A focus on development at a <i>specified life stage</i> Theories may encompass both: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Broad lifespan or metatheories · Narrower, topical theories: (e.g., personality, attachment) 	Primary focus is unrelated to human development or developmental psychology (e.g., smoking cessation, suicide prevention) Indigenous Research Methods papers Papers that discuss ways of knowing, wellbeing, or culture too broadly without a focus on development

	Peer reviewed	Not peer reviewed
	English	Language other than English
	Any publication year	Grey Literature (websites, books); Dissertations/Theses
Study Characteristics	Fields of study may encompass: Social Sciences, Public Health, Education, Psychology, Human Development, Indigenous Studies, Social Work, or related fields	Fields unrelated to social sciences (e.g., politics, microbiology) Articles where no listed author or contributor is Indigenous, and/or they did not engage Indigenous community

Data Extraction & Analysis

Data were extracted independently by AM and MR using a structured extraction template (Appendix A, Table A1). The extracted fields included: Indigenous community or tribe of origin; the field of study (academic discipline); life stage(s) covered by the theory; and the developmental domain(s) of focus (e.g., cognitive, social-emotional development). Academic discipline or field of study was extrapolated from the first author's academic department and/or the content area of the journal in which the article was published. Multiple selections were permitted for each field to reflect the multidimensional nature of many theories. Additionally, the theory, rather than the article, served as the primary unit of analysis, as several articles posited multiple distinct frameworks. VQS conducted a consensus review by carefully reading each article and synthesizing the extracted data across reviewers. Conflicts were resolved via scheduled conferencing with all three authors.

To address the second research aim, reviewers extracted qualitative data using open-ended responses to capture how each theory *describes, explains, and predicts* human development (responses summarized in Appendix A, Table A2). A qualitative content analysis was then conducted, assigning each article's successive components to categories of the coding frame to guide description and interpretation respectively (Schreier, 2014). The analytic process employed a hybrid coding approach (Swain, 2018; Xu & Zammit, 2020), beginning with a deductive coding frame based on how each theory describes, explains, and predicts human development. Data were then inductively open coded to identify theory features and themes respective to life stage distinctions and cross-cutting developmental domains. Themes were iteratively refined through team discussion until consensus was reached.

Community Input

The Native Children's Research Exchange (NCRE) is an interdisciplinary network of scholars studying child development in partnership with American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and other Indigenous communities. A biennial conference (Colorado School of Public Health, n.d.) is held to gather trainees, scholars, educators, tribal leaders, and allied collaborators to strengthen community-based and informed research dissemination. AM, MR, and VQS are NCRE scholars from cohorts 10, 11, and 13. Preliminary findings for this scoping review were presented at the 2025 NCRE conference (Mercurief et al., 2025), where breakout session attendees offered feedback and initial impressions and spoke to how the findings aligned with their respective communities' understanding of human development. Attendees collaboratively discussed its implications for teaching and research. Community input informed the finalization of this scoping review, and this manuscript will be shared among the NCRE network and affiliated partners for wider dissemination.

Results

RQ1: Identified Theories and Relevant Study Characteristics

Eighteen articles met inclusion criteria for this scoping review, yielding 21 distinct Indigenous theories or frameworks of human development (Figure 1). Data on academic discipline, Indigenous community/tribe, developmental phenomena of focus, and developmental stages were also extracted for each theory (Table 3). All articles were associated with the academic disciplines of either Psychology or Human Development, with additional contributions from Social Work ($n = 4$), Education ($n = 3$), Public Health or Health Sciences ($n = 2$), Indigenous Studies ($n = 2$), Environmental Sciences ($n = 1$), and Gerontology ($n = 1$). Theories most frequently originated from First Nations communities in Canada ($n = 5$) and Māori communities in New Zealand ($n = 5$), with several frameworks written by and for multi-tribal Indigenous communities more broadly ($n = 4$). Additional represented Tribal communities included Aboriginal communities of Australia, Alaska Native tribes, Blackfoot, and Cree communities. Across theories, childhood was the most commonly addressed life stage ($n = 13$), followed by adolescence/youthhood ($n = 5$). A smaller subset addressed adulthood or elderhood ($n = 5$) or development across the life course ($n = 4$), and several theories focused on relationships (e.g., attachment theories; $n = 7$). In terms of developmental domains, identity development (including cultural identity development; $n = 9$), relational or social-emotional development ($n = 8$), and spiritual or moral development ($n = 8$) were most frequently emphasized, followed by cognitive or intellectual development ($n = 5$). Nearly half of theories ($n = 9$) functioned as metatheories, which were multidimensional and spanned multiple developmental domains.

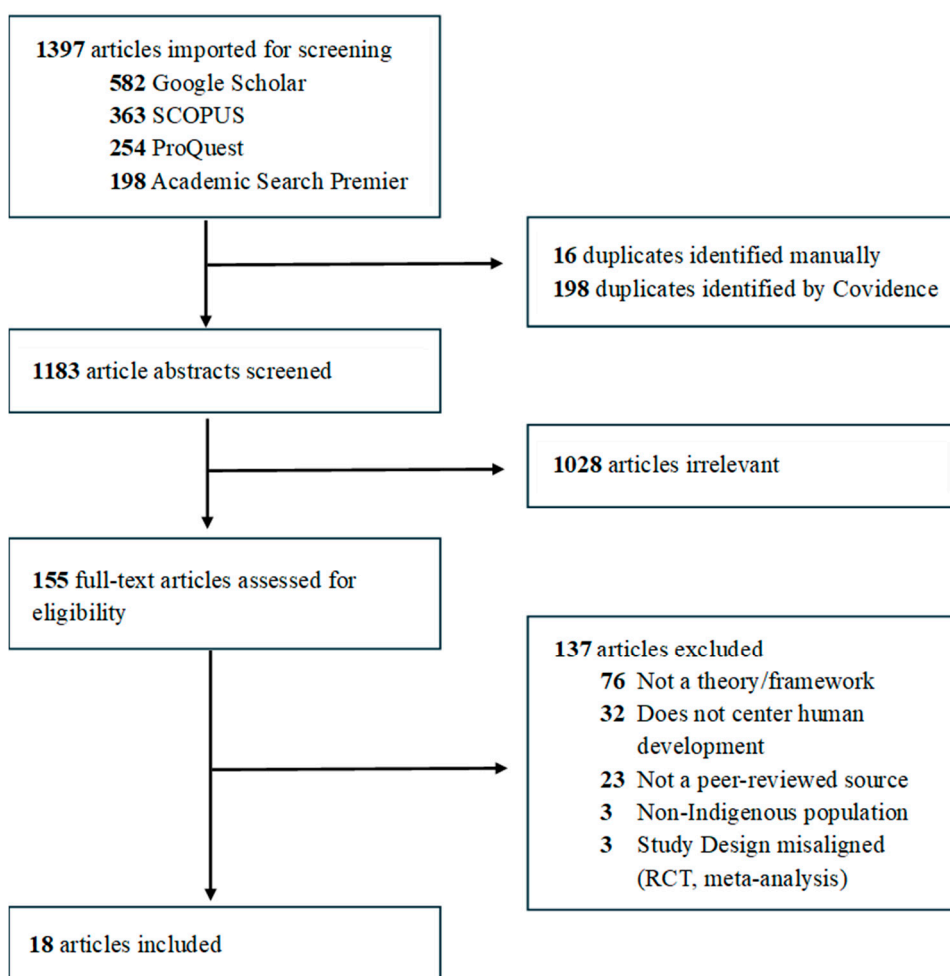


Figure 1. Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) Chart.

Table 3. *Extracted Data: Article Characteristics.*

Authors/ Year	Title	Field	Community/ Tribe	Developmental Phenomena	Developmental Stage(s)
Bailey & Clark, 2024	Exploring Bonding and Attachment in Aboriginal Families	Psychology, Human Development	Aboriginal Peoples of Australia	Social-Emotional or Relational; Identity (incl. Cultural Identity)	Childhood; Relationships
Bear et al., 2022	Reconsidering Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs from a First Nations Perspective	Psychology, Human Development; Social Work	Blackfoot	Metatheory (broad)	Lifespan
Farella, 2021	Framing Indigenous Identity Inclusion in Positive Youth Development: Proclaimed Ignorance, Partial Vacuum, and the Peoplehood Model	Psychology, Human Development; Education	Broader Indigenous Community	Identity (incl. Cultural Identity); Spiritual/ Moral	Youthood
Gilgun, 2002	Completing the Circle: American Indian Medicine Wheels and the Promotion of Resilience	Psychology, Human Development	Broader Indigenous Community	Cognitive/ Intellectual; Social-Emotional or Relational; Spiritual/ Moral	Childhood; Youthhood; Relationships
Green, 2017	Children's Environmental Identity Development in an Alaska Native Rural Context	Psychology, Human Development; Environmental Sciences	Alaska Native	Identity (incl. Cultural Identity); Spiritual/ Moral	Childhood
Macfarlane et al., 2008	Indigenous Epistemology in a National Curriculum Framework	Psychology, Human Development; Education	Māori	Cognitive/ Intellectual; Identity (incl. Cultural Identity); Spiritual/ Moral	Childhood; Youthhood
McCormick & Amundson, 1997	A Career-Life Planning Model for First Nations People	Psychology, Human Development	First Nations/ Aboriginal Peoples of Canada	Social-Emotional or Relational; Identity (incl. Cultural Identity); Spiritual/ Moral	Youthhood; Adulthood; Elderhood; Relationships

Mottram & Dimmock, 2025	Indigenous Australian Perspectives on the Perinatal Period	Psychology, Human Development	Aboriginal Peoples of Australia	Social-Emotional or Relational	Childhood; Adulthood; Relationships
Neckoway et al., 2003	Rethinking the Role of Attachment Theory in Child Welfare Practice with Aboriginal People	Psychology, Human Development; Public Health or Health Sciences; Social Work	First Nations/ Aboriginal Peoples of Canada	Cognitive/ Intellectual; Social-Emotional or Relational; Identity (incl. Cultural Identity); Spiritual/ Moral	Childhood; Relationships
Priest et al., 2012	Aboriginal Perspectives of Child Health and Wellbeing in an Urban Setting: Developing a Conceptual Framework	Psychology, Human Development; Public Health or Health Sciences	Aboriginal Peoples of Australia	Metatheory (broad)	Childhood
Rameka, 2007	Māori Approaches to Assessment	Psychology, Human Development; Education	Māori	Cognitive/ Intellectual; Social-Emotional or Relational; Identity (incl. Cultural Identity)	Childhood
Rata et al., 2014	Creation Narratives as Metaphors for Indigenous Identity Development: The Pawhiri Identity Negotiation Framework	Psychology, Human Development	Māori	Identity (incl. Cultural Identity); Spiritual/ Moral	Lifespan
Simard & Blight, 2011a*	Developing a Culturally Restorative Approach to Aboriginal Child and Youth Development: Transitions to Adulthood (GENERAL THEORY)	Psychology, Human Development; Indigenous Studies	First Nations/ Aboriginal Peoples of Canada	Metatheory (broad)	Childhood; Relationships
Simard & Blight, 2011b*	Developing a Culturally Restorative Approach to Aboriginal Child and Youth Development: Transitions to	Psychology, Human Development; Indigenous Studies	First Nations/ Aboriginal Peoples of Canada	Social-Emotional or Relational; Identity (incl. Cultural Identity); Spiritual/ Moral	Childhood; Youthhood; Relationships

	Adulthood (RAISING HEALTHY ANISHINAABEG CHILDREN)					
Simard & Blight, 2011c*	Developing a Culturally Restorative Approach to Aboriginal Child and Youth Development: Transitions to Adulthood (CULTURAL DEVELOPMENTAL MILESTONES)	Psychology, Human Development; Indigenous Studies	Human Indigenous	First Nations/ Aboriginal Peoples of Canada	Metatheory (broad)	Lifespan
Tamati et al., 2021	He Piki Raukura: Understanding Strengths-Based Māori Child Development Constructs in Kaupapa Māori Early Years Provision	Psychology, Human Development; Indigenous Studies	Human Indigenous	Māori	Cognitive/ Intellectual; Metatheory (broad)	Childhood
Ullrich, 2019	For the Love of our Children: An Indigenous Connectedness Framework	Psychology, Human Development; Social Work	Human	Broader Indigenous Community	Metatheory (broad)	Childhood
Wenger-Nabigon, 2010	The Cree Medicine Wheel as an Organizing Paradigm of Theories of Human Development	Psychology, Human Development; Social Work	Human	Cree	Metatheory (broad)	Lifespan
Wesner et al., 2024	Co-Creating a Conceptual Model of Indigenous Relational Wellbeing in Early Childhood: Planting Seeds of Connectedness	Psychology, Human Development	Human	Broader Indigenous Community	Social-Emotional or Relational; Metatheory (broad)	Childhood; Adulthood; Relationships
Wortman & Lewis, 2021	Gerotranscendence and Alaska Native Successful Aging in the Aleutian Pribilof Islands, Alaska	Psychology, Human Development; Gerontology	Human	Alaska Native, Aleut	Metatheory (broad)	Elderhood

**Note. Three distinct theories were discussed in Simard & Blight, 2011; they are discussed separately in this scoping review.*

RQ2. How do Indigenous theories describe, explain, and predict human development?

How do Indigenous theories describe human development?

To answer this question, authors summarized the organizing tenets of each theory, noting specific contexts and contributors understood to shape human development (Appendix A, Table A2). For clarity, content analysis was performed by life stage.

Prenatal Period and Childhood. In general, this life stage encompassed the prenatal period up to age 11. Many Indigenous theories asserted that children are born spiritually whole and with inherent agency, as receptacles for cultural knowledge. Spiritual development at this stage therefore only required that children receive proper love, guidance, and nurture (Neckoway et al., 2003; Rameka, 2007). Indigenous theories heavily emphasized the importance of identity development in childhood, formed through belonging and connectedness. Various ceremonies such as naming ceremonies serve to connect children with their tribal community and affirm their identity as inherent rather than performed or earned in their community (Mottram & Dimmock, 2025). Alongside a focus on identity, Indigenous theories stated that children's development across multiple domains (e.g., physical, cognitive, social-emotional, and spiritual) should be prioritized simultaneously and never compartmentalized (Gilgun, 2002; Rameka, 2007). Importantly, the onus for a child's ability to reach developmental milestones is placed upon adults surrounding the child (Rameka, 2007; Priest et al., 2012). One article that proposed developmental assessment metrics for children also included parallel measures of caregiver capacity and environmental support for the child's ability to learn and grow, underscoring the relational nature of development (Rameka, 2007). Attachment was frequently addressed as an important marker of healthy relational development for children, but was not confined to the mother-child dyad. Instead, infant-kinship attachment was emphasized (Bailey & Clark, 2024; Neckoway et al., 2003). Children are described as enveloped within kinship networks (Simard & Blight, 2011a), wherein adults in the community share responsibility for raising the child. Special roles exist for that of siblings, aunts, uncles, and other relatives- sometimes called "small mums" and "small dads" (Mottram & Dimmock, 2025)- reflective of this close kin connection.

Youthhood (Adolescence). Although age ranges varied, most articles delineated youthhood between ages 11 and 18. Spiritual and cultural developmental tasks during this period include youth learning more about tribal history, genealogy, stories, traditional land, and ceremonial cycles (Farella, 2011). An important milestone for identity development in youthhood involves finding a vision or sacred purpose for one's life (Simard & Blight, 2011b; 2011c). Youth are not expected to do this alone, as puberty and other coming-of-age ceremonies exist to help them with this developmental milestone. Another critical aspect of identity development in youthhood involves growing an awareness of racism and marginalization, which Rata and colleagues (2014) described as conscientization. For many Indigenous youth, this includes learning to "walk in two worlds," or navigate multiracial or multicultural identities. Relational development remained a key focus, as youth learn how to form healthy relationships with friends, family, and possibly partners (Simard & Blight, 2011b; Wenger-Nabigon, 2010). Youth are expected to understand that belonging to a community entails responsibilities (Farella, 2021; McFarlane et al., 2008), and they should begin to step into social roles more fully. While respect for youth's inherent agency continues, Indigenous theories also emphasized reciprocity where youth should use their agency to be willing listeners and learners (Gilgun, 2002; McFarlane et al., 2008). Emerging independence and mastery were described as key developmental goals of youthhood (Gilgun, 2002; McFarlane et al., 2008), which includes learning essential life skills like subsistence practices, caregiving for siblings, and traditional medicines (Simard & Blight, 2011b; Simard & Blight, 2011c), as well as remaining engaged and motivated with their education and schooling.

Adulthood. Indigenous theories described adulthood as beginning approximately at the age of 18 and potentially lasting the remainder of an individual's life. In terms of spiritual development, adults are expected to assume increased responsibility for spiritual leadership, including conducting ceremonies, promoting community healing, and protecting the earth (Simard & Blight, 2011c). As they become partners, parents, and assume other leadership roles, they are responsible for

demonstrating cultural and spiritual values such as humility, respect, acceptance, and connectedness with all living things. Identity development in adulthood was described as recurring seasons or cycles, with periods of curiosity, discovery, connection- but also periods of loss, disconnection, deconstruction, and reconstruction (Rata et al., 2014). Adults choosing a career or life's work was named as another developmental task associated with identity formation. This was framed as more of a spiritual vocation rather than an economic pursuit (McCormick & Amundson, 1997), as each individual's unique gifts and aptitudes exist for the wellbeing of the community and not for an individual to use to hoard resources. Accordingly, adults should learn the spiritual principle that the pinnacle of life is not self-discovery, but meaningful contribution to community (Bear et al., 2022). Last, adults are also expected to participate in kinship caregiving for the children in their communities (Mottram & Dimmock, 2025; Priest et al., 2012; Rameka, 2007), and demonstrate relational qualities they wish children to emulate, such as empathy, humility, trust, love, humor, and spiritual connectedness (Wesner et al., 2024).

Elderhood. Across Indigenous theories, elderhood was asserted as a spiritual rather than age-defined life stage. According to Wenger-Nabigon (2010), entry into elderhood depends on an adult's ability to wrestle with both the dark and light sides of life, including conquering fear as a central developmental task. For those who reach elderhood, identity development may continue through the reconciliation of one's past, development of a coherent life story, and discovery of one's "genuine self," which may have been hidden by shame, fear, or other hardships (Wortman & Lewis, 2021). Elders are expected to learn acceptance for themselves as they are, including their limitations, by holding a lighthearted attitude toward themselves. Key values demonstrated by elders are caring and contribution, which motivates their main social roles as teacher and leader, as well as their spiritual duty to pass on cultural knowledge (Simard & Blight, 2011c). Several theories cautioned that apathy and disconnection from community (especially from younger generations) in elderhood could result in spiritual emptiness (Wenger-Nabigon, 2010; Simard & Blight, 2011c). It is acknowledged, however, that trauma can impede achievement of this developmental task. Elders cannot care for others if they never learn to care for themselves, so inner healing work is essential (Wenger-Nabigon, 2010). Last, elders were described as having the opportunity to experience "spiritual transcendence," or a shift in perspective in late life, where Elders learn acceptance of the unknown and embrace complexity and mystery in the world. Wortman and Lewis (2021) describe wisdom in Elderhood as the understanding that there are seldom easy answers for life's problems, a "reluctance to superficially separate right from wrong" (p.54), and discernment about when to give advice and when to listen. Overall, elders are content with simplicity, have a clear life purpose, demonstrate connectedness with all living things, and experience a lessened fear of death.

How do Indigenous theories explain human development?

To answer this question, authors commented on how each theory defined "successful development," noting any overarching goals for development stated explicitly or implicitly (Appendix A, Table A2). Across theories, the purpose of human development was described as "non-egoic" in nature (Bear et al., 2022). As humans, we exist not to attain self-actualization (i.e., Maslow; 1943) but to meaningfully contribute to our communities (McCormick & Amundson, 1997). Second, Indigenous theories emphasized achieving balance, harmony, and wholeness in all areas of our lives (Simard & Blight, 2011a). A third goal emerging across theories, particularly expressed within the context of elderhood, was to pass on generational wisdom and ensure cultural continuity (Bailey & Clark, 2024; Wortman & Lewis, 2021). This may be described as viewing one's life as a link in a continuous chain, with appropriate attention given to one's ancestors who came before and future generations which will follow after. Finally, many theories emphasized learning interconnectedness and interdependence with all living things, including learning one's place within community and nature to understand that one of our tasks as humans is to foster health and healing for the earth and all its living creatures (Farella, 2021; Neckoway et al., 2003; Ullrich, 2019).

How do Indigenous theories predict human development?

To answer this question, authors noted the expected or implied pattern or trajectory of development across the lifespan according to each theory (indicating multiple as appropriate; Appendix A, Table A2). Four unique developmental trajectories were identified: relational, cyclical, narrative, and stage-like. **Relational** or role-based developmental trajectories were most common, appearing in the majority (71%) of theories. These theories describe development as an ever-increasing awareness and engagement with one's social role(s) across the lifespan, rising up to meet progressively evolving responsibilities associated with being in right relationship with oneself, others, the earth, and the spiritual realm. An example of a theory that follows this trajectory is the He Piki Raukura Strengths-Based Child Development model (Tamati et al., 2021). In this model, one key goal for identity development is both feeling and acting as a member of the community. The ability to fully step into that relational role unfolds across the lifespan. Developmental "tasks," or signs that show a child is accomplishing these relational goals, include demonstrating a strong sense of belonging and confidence, a collective orientation, and the ability to take accountability (Tamati et al., 2021). Similarly, the Indigenous Connectedness Model (Ulrich, 2019) frames healthy child development in terms of relational connectedness across family, community, spirituality, intergenerational, and environmental domains.

Cyclical or circular developmental trajectories were the second most common (33% of identified theories) describing both individual and collective development as circular in nature. Many theories likened human development to the earth's seasons, each bringing different lessons. Developmental seasons may repeat themselves- sometimes in order, sometimes in no particular order. For example, the Pawhiri Identity Negotiation Framework identifies cycles of identity development including seasons of curiosity, discovery, connection, confusion, disconnection, or isolation (Rata et al., 2014). Identity development is not linear and never assumed to be "achieved," instead healthy identity development is described as remaining engaged with whatever season one is in. **Narrative** developmental trajectories (28% of identified theories) described development as the construction of a life story. Along with building a personal narrative, humans are also a part of a grand narrative or story that existed before they were born (ancestors) and will continue after they pass (future generations). An example of a narrative theory is Gerotranscendence in Alaska Native communities (Wortman & Lewis, 2021). In this theory, development in elderhood involves constructing a coherent life story, emphasizing the importance of reconciling one's past and engaging with future generations. Similarly, the Peoplehood Model (Farella, 2021) situates development within collective story in terms of embodying elements of a "persistent people" that is achieved by stepping into a by learning one's language, history, ancestral knowledge, and embracing a sense of place on one's tribal land. **Stage-like** developmental trajectories were least common (14%) in this review. These theories presented progressive developmental stages (which may or may not be age-bound) each with respective goals and lessons. Green's (2017) Environmental Identity Development Theory, for example, aligns environmental identity development with Erikson's psychosocial stages (1980), wherein children pass through stages of understanding regarding their relation to nature. For Green, children must first learn to trust nature, then see themselves as part of nature, and eventually learn to care for and protect the environment (Green, 2017). The Raising Healthy Anishinaabeg Children Model (Simard & Blight, 2011b) similarly outlines age-defined stages associated with tasks delineating expected cultural and spiritual development for children and youth.

Integrative Synthesis of Core Concepts

Thematic analysis across findings from the "describe," "explain," and "predict" domains of our second research question revealed three overarching themes which reflect a shared conceptualization of human development from Indigenous perspectives: 1) human development as a spiritual journey, 2) human development as community-oriented, and 3) human development as nonlinear and non-compartmentalized. First, Indigenous theories often prioritized growth in spiritual and cultural values by weaving developmental milestones across life stages. Infants enter the world with inherent spiritual identity, claimed and named by the community as one of their own. Youth are expected to learn more about their lineage, history, land, and ceremonies. Moreover, youth are guided to find a

sacred vision or purpose for their lives through puberty rites and other coming-of-age ceremonies. Adults are expected to lead ceremonies and contribute to the healing of their communities, as well as fight for the protection of their lands and the earth as a whole. Adults learn to wrestle with the positive and negative sides of life, aiming for balance and harmony between them rather than striving for continual achievement. If one reaches elderhood, they serve as spiritual and cultural teachers, helping others embrace mystery and complexity in the world and in themselves as they navigate life's journey. These expectations coalesce into lifespan developmental goals centered on maintaining balance and learning interconnectedness with others, the earth, past and future generations, and the spiritual realm.

The concept of development as a spiritual journey is well illustrated by Wenger-Nabigon's (2011) theory. In this framework, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and elderhood life stages are reflected as quadrants within the Cree medicine wheel. Each life stage brings a "light side" or spiritual lessons to be learned, as well as a "rascal," or dark side that must be confronted (Wenger-Nabigon, 2010). For example, in childhood, the light side lesson is identity, whereas the rascal is inferiority. During adolescence and adulthood, the lessons are healthy relationships and respect, respectively, which are contrasted with the rascal of envy in adolescence, and the "father of all rascals" of fear which stands between adulthood and elderhood. The goal is not to avoid or conquer each rascal, but to engage and wrestle with the dark sides of each life stage. Consequently, if adults avoid addressing rascals throughout their lives, especially the final rascal (fear), the door to elderhood remains closed for them. Wenger-Nabigon (2010) explains:

If we do not honour the negative side of life we as humans either fall very ill or, worse, inflict our pain upon each other. Touching the negative aspects of life can be beneficial. If we learn to honour and recognize all of our emotions, including the negative qualities, we can and will become the bearers of our own pearls of wisdom. (p.147)

The second cross-cutting theme emphasizes development as community-oriented and community-driven, while de-centering the individual. From childhood, identity is formed through belonging and connection with kinship attachment. In youthhood, belonging to a community comes with responsibilities, and youth more fully step into social roles. In adulthood, one's career or life's work exists for the benefit of the community rather than solely to acquire material possessions or status for one individual or family. In elderhood, theories warned about resisting apathy, noting how apathy draws one away from their community toward the end of life. Importantly, people are not expected to meet development goals independently, instead the community offers inherent structure through ceremonies and other traditions to guide development. The orientation toward community was also evident in certain developmental trajectories. Cyclical and narrative theories described development both in terms of the individual and in terms of the entire community through time. These concepts coalesce into a spiritual principle that life itself, and thus development, exists to meaningfully contribute to community and assertedly reject the elevation of the individual as the primary developmental unit.

Finally, Indigenous theories held expectations for how development unfolds across the lifespan that reflect distinctly nonlinear trajectories. Rather than envisioning life as a progressive linear trajectory, Indigenous theories defined life transitions primarily in terms of relational growth, as seasons or cycles, or as a narrative story. Each of these unique trajectories held shared assumptions for developmental milestones at each life stage. Relational theories described milestones revolving around one's capacity to step into evolving social roles and fulfill responsibilities to their community. Cyclical theories recognized that humans move through seasons of growth but also seasons of challenge, grief, and stagnation. Narrative theories emphasized moving through life as part of a grand narrative story that existed before you were born and will continue through generations to come. Taken collectively, these nonlinear trajectories highlight that development is not measured by the acquisition of skills, but demonstrated through ever-increasing relational connectedness across the lifespan. Moreover, Indigenous theories rejected compartmentalization of developmental

domains (i.e., physical, cognitive, social-emotional). Instead, all aspects of development held equal priority- mind, body, spirit, and emotions- throughout one's life.

Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first study to systematically identify and synthesize shared conceptual features across Indigenous theories of human development. This scoping review identified 21 developmental theories originating from First Nations, Māori, Aboriginal (Australian), Alaska Native, Blackfoot, and Cree tribal communities, among others. Articles were published primarily within the fields of psychology, human development, social work, and education. Theories highlighted development across all life stages, although there was a heavier representation of child and youth theories compared with theories of adulthood or elderhood. As expected, philosophical differences related to ontology, epistemology, and axiology resulted in Indigenous theories with differing definitions, expectations, and priorities for human development across the lifespan. While many Western developmental theories focus on physical, neurocognitive, or psychosocial development, Indigenous theories in this review prioritized three domains: spiritual development, identity development (including cultural identity), and relational development. Rather than a linear progression of age-bound developmental tasks or behaviors, development according to Indigenous theories appeared more as an unfolding of deepening identity, commitment to social roles, and understanding of spirituality across one's lifespan. Conceptually, Indigenous perspectives on human development can be synthesized into three cross-cutting themes: (1) human development as a spiritual journey; (2) human development as community-oriented and community-driven; and (3) human development as non-linear and non-compartmentalized.

Indigenous Human Development is a Spiritual Journey

Spirituality functioned as a foundational organizing principle resulting in much different priorities for development across one's life compared to Western traditions. Although spirituality varies widely in Indigenous communities, it often encompassed aspects of identity, purpose, belonging, connectedness, and alignment with spiritual values. One recurring assertion was the belief that children are born with agency and are spiritually whole (Neckoway et al., 2003; Rameka, 2007). Because one's identity is inherent, and ancestors provided instructions for healthy, whole living, a child only requires a community ready to provide the love, care, and cultural guidance for them to grow into who they were made to be. Development, therefore, is not conceptualized as remedying an inherent deficiency, writing on a "blank slate" (Locke, 1690/1975), or the unfolding of predetermined genetic traits (Plomin, 2018). Indigenous theories balance a spiritual identity before birth with free agency and relational "becoming" across the lifespan. Furthermore, while many Western paradigms define healthy development in terms of physical, cognitive, or behavioral markers (e.g., Piaget, 1952; Skinner, 1945), Indigenous theories deemphasize skills or effort-based milestones and emphasize the development of spiritual and cultural values such as humility, empathy, generosity, simplicity, humor, connectedness, and love. Qualitative analysis revealed that Indigenous theories in this review define "successful" development as: seeking a sacred vision for your life; balancing mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual health; fulfilling community roles and responsibilities; exhibiting interdependence with all living things; possessing a secure identity and sense of belonging, maintaining trusting relationships with others; and remaining spiritually aware and engaged with the dark and light sides of life.

Indigenous Human Development is Community-Oriented and Community-Driven

Indigenous theories largely de-center the individual, framing the purpose and goal of human development as "non-egoic" (Bear et al., 2022) and encouraging interconnectedness and interdependence at every life stage. In this way, Indigenous theories echoed the opening quote of this paper: individuals are but "one strand in the web of life," or one link in a continuous chain. Some articles explicitly contrasted this viewpoint with Western science by rejecting the individual focus embedded in theories such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). For example, Bear et al. (2022) challenged the concept of "self-actualization" being at the top of Maslow's hierarchy, asserting

that the pinnacle of life is meaningful contribution to one's community. Alongside a focus on human relatives, Green (2017) positioned that as people develop, they should learn their place in nature and work to promote healing and harmony not just for themselves but for the earth and all living things. Consequently, and largely due to the inclusion of spirituality, Indigenous theories devote relatively more attention on *why* we develop than *how* we develop, as is more common in Western theories that emphasize processes and mechanisms (e.g., information-processing theories; Klahr & Wallace, 1976) or the progression of skills (e.g., Piaget's cognitive stages; 1952) with comparatively less emphasis on the moral or communal purposes behind development.

In reciprocal fashion, while individual development is community-oriented, Indigenous theories demonstrate that the community is equally prepared to support each individual's development. No one is expected to "develop" on their own, instead, development is community-driven, structured, and guided by ceremonies and other enduring traditions at every life stage. For example, Mottram and Dimmock (2025) state that establishing a solid identity (a key developmental task of childhood) is not solely the responsibility of the child, it is facilitated by birth ceremonies which solidify a child's identity and place in their community. Similarly, finding a sacred vision or purpose for one's life is a developmental task of youthhood (Simard and Blight; 2011b; 2011c), and communities have pre-established puberty ceremonies and rites of passage to help guide youth through that process. In contrast, many Western theories of development such as Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Erikson (1980) describe family and community as important socializers of development but stop short of prescribing specific community-embedded obligations and collective responsibilities tied to expected developmental milestones. Building on this, Rameka (2007) proposed parallel assessments for caregivers alongside any developmental assessments that measure Indigenous children's abilities, further demonstrating the understanding in Indigenous communities that development is complex, reciprocal, and communal in nature. This expands beyond developmental measures stemming from Western theories which primarily assess the cognitive or behavioral abilities of the child alone, such as delay of gratification tasks (e.g., Mischel et al., 1972), theory of mind tasks (e.g., Wimmer & Perner, 1983), and other academic screeners (e.g., Shrank et al, 2014).

Indigenous Human Development is Non-Linear and Non-Compartmentalized

Notably absent from Indigenous theories in our review was a separate analysis or compartmentalization of concepts like "nature" and "nurture," a dichotomy that has historically structured Western developmental inquiry. This pattern reflects an ontological principle common across Indigenous communities, which asserts that humans are not separate from nature, but a part of nature itself. Moreover, Indigenous theories reject compartmentalization of developmental domains. For example, both Gilgun (2002) and Rameka (2007) took issue with the idea of a hierarchy to children's needs (i.e., first physical, then emotional; Maslow, 1943) and instead insisted that all aspects of the child be prioritized simultaneously. The origin of these disparities may stem from differences in the philosophical and historical motivations for studying development. While the origins of Western developmental theory were spurred by the scientific revolution and a "quest for absolute knowledge," (Overton, 2015, p. 18) Indigenous theories in this review shared a belief that the world is complex, mysterious, and ultimately unknowable (Rameka, 2007). This underlying belief seems to steer Indigenous theories away from analytic partitioning of the biological and environmental influences on human development, as seen in Western traditions such as behavioral genetics (Plomin et al., 2016). Instead, Indigenous theories elevate one's spiritual purpose, one's place in the community and sacred history, and one's agency and ability to co-create knowledge for themselves as they walk their own path throughout life.

Unsurprisingly, Indigenous developmental perspectives diverged most clearly from Western theories aligned with the mechanistic tradition, which presents development as the accumulation of learned behaviors or skills in an additive, linear fashion (e.g., behaviorism; Skinner, 1945; Watson, 1913). Indigenous theories did share some similarities with Western theories aligned with the relational worldview. For example, the developmental framework by Priest and colleagues (2012)

presented children as enveloped in layers of care similar to the concentric circles of the environment in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Additionally, some Indigenous theories like Green (2017) and Simard and Blight (2011b) describe development as following a stage-like trajectory similar to other Western relational theories, namely Erikson's (1980). However, stage-like trajectories were not common in this review. Indigenous theories alternatively followed three recurring nonlinear developmental trajectories: relational, cyclical, and narrative. Relational (or role-based) theories described human development in terms of engaging more deeply with one's social roles across the lifespan, with different expectations for different phases of life. Other relational theories described development in terms of levels of relational connectedness across varying domains (e.g., family, community, spirituality, environment; Ullrich, 2019). Cyclical theories likened development to moving through the earth's seasons, wherein each season brings unique lessons and seasons may repeat themselves. Last, narrative theories likened human development to the building of a life story, while also emphasizing that each individual is part of a grander story that began before their birth (ancestors) and will continue after they die (future generations). Viewing development as relational or cyclical (rather than as a hierarchical set of skills) normalizes fluctuations, struggles, and stagnation- and relieves the need for individuals to strive for continual achievement. Indigenous theories in this review encourage one to seek balance and harmony (Simard & Blight, 2011a), with the understanding life will bring difficult seasons and that new seasons will come in time.

Limitations

The limitations of this scoping review are largely attributable to the methodological approach. Because our focus was to identify theories, frameworks, or models of human development published in peer-reviewed articles and originating from Indigenous communities from the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia; only 18 articles met inclusion criteria. The search strategy was also restricted to peer-reviewed, English-language publications indexed in four databases. This likely represents a small subset of Indigenous conceptualizations of human development known and practiced globally. As a result, relevant literature found in other databases or otherwise published as non-scholarly works, dissertations, theses, or non-English sources may not have been included. Importantly, our protocol may have excluded theories, frameworks, and models from communities that utilize primarily oral traditions. Some conceptualizations of development may be intentionally held and kept within the community in accordance with the principles of Indigenous sovereignty and not intended for wider dissemination. Finally, it was beyond the scope of this review to evaluate the empirical applications of identified theories. Rather, this review aimed to provide a broad synthesis of conceptual frameworks to highlight Indigenous perspectives on human development within social science fields and to nurture a foundation for future theoretical and applied research led by, with, and for Indigenous communities.

Future Directions

During the screening phase of this review, we encountered many rich and nuanced manuscripts articulating Indigenous knowledge at the philosophical level, spanning diverse domains including education, physical activity, mental health approaches, and bi-directional relationships with the environment. Although these manuscripts did not meet inclusion criteria for a developmental theory as defined by disciplinary standards, this broad literature base illustrates that Indigenous communities have already established a substantial intellectual foundation for deep engagement with culturally grounded developmental constructs and critiques of dominant Western paradigms (see Waters et al., 2023; Richardson et al., 2025). Findings from this review underscore the need for the continued development of more formalized, domain-specific, or micro-level theories that articulate mechanisms, developmental processes, and measurable constructs relevant to Indigenous communities. Such theories can in turn guide empirical inquiry of urgent research questions related to health and mental health outcomes while remaining grounded in Indigenous epistemologies. For

example, building on a cyclical theory of development (e.g., Mercurief at al., in preparation), an Indigenous scientist might collaborate with community members to define “seasons” of mental health, develop measures to assess an individual’s current season, and design community-guided interventions aligned with each season. In addition to advancing micro-level theory work, we encourage greater attention on the prenatal period, death and dying, and the ongoing role of ancestors in future studies. While several theories alluded to the importance of these topics, relatively few explicitly positioned them as the primary developmental domain. Indigenous scientists are frequently required to demonstrate or defend culturally grounded work as meeting conventional standards of scientific rigor of empirical research in the social sciences. We believe that future theory-building efforts led by Indigenous scientists and communities will continue to demonstrate that honoring Indigenous values is not antithetical to conducting rigorous scientific research, but rather expands what counts as rigorous science.

Implications and Conclusions

This scoping review identified 21 Indigenous theories of human development and integrated common conceptualizations of development across four life stages (prenatal/childhood, youthhood, adulthood, and elderhood) and three developmental domains (identity development, spirituality, and relational development). Identified theories 1) highlighted development as a spiritual journey, 2) centered community wellbeing and interconnectedness, and 3) demonstrated developmental trajectories which were distinctly nonlinear. Indigenous theories described development as relational, cyclical, or narrative; each with shared expectations for how development unfolds across the lifespan. Findings from this study offer a foundation for future theory-building and empirical research grounded in Indigenous priorities, including the development of novel measurements and interventions that better reflect the nonlinear developmental trajectories identified by this review. This review may also serve as a helpful resource for academic instructors seeking to broaden theoretical perspectives when teaching undergraduate and graduate-level theory classes in psychology and related fields. More broadly, this work affirms that Indigenous theories of human development are not peripheral adaptations of Western models, but robust and philosophically grounded frameworks in their own right. Continued engagement with these theories has the potential to expand the conceptual boundaries of developmental science and to support scholarship that is accountable to Indigenous communities and ways of knowing.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. Reviewer Data Extraction Template.

Data to Extract	Description	Response Options
Publication Details	Author Names	Open-ended.
	Year Published	Open-ended.
	Journal	Open-ended.
Sample	Indigenous Group Represented	Open-ended.
	Is this study generalizable to other Indigenous communities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · No, this paper is tribally specific · Yes, assumed to be widely applicable to Indigenous communities · Undetermined/ Unstated
Field/ Academic Discipline	What field or academic discipline is this paper coming from?	Can select multiple: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Psychology, Human Development, Education, Public Health or Health Sciences, Indigenous Studies, · Other · Unspecified/ Undetermined
Developmental Domain	What developmental domain or phenomenon is the paper focused on?	Can select multiple: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Cognitive, intellectual, or academic · Social-emotional or relational · Identity (including cultural identity) · Physical · Spiritual or Moral · Language · Metatheory (multi-dimensional) · Other
Developmental Stage	What developmental or life stage is this paper focused on?	Can select multiple: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Childhood · Adolescence/ Youthhood · Adulthood · Aging/ Elderhood · Lifespan · Relationships (partnerships, parenting)
How does this theory... Describe the development of [developmental phenomenon]?	- How is the development of [domain or phenomenon] defined? - What are the major contexts and contributors that influence [domain or phenomenon]?	Open-ended. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Describe the main tenets of this theory. · Include major contexts and contributors (e.g., biology, environment, relationships, spirituality, culture, society)

How does this theory.... Explain the development of [<i>developmental domain or phenomenon</i>]?	- <i>Why</i> do humans develop [domain or phenomenon], what <i>goals</i> are associated with development? -What does <i>successful</i> development look like?	Open-ended. · Outline any goals or outcomes associated with proper development of this phenomenon
How does this theory.... Predict the development of [<i>developmental domain or phenomenon</i>]?	-Does development of [domain or phenomenon] follow a predictable <i>pattern</i> or <i>trajectory</i> ?	Open-ended. Whether or not the author explicitly states a trajectory, does this theory appear to be: · Linear, age-related, stage-like, cyclical, relational, or something else?
Relevant References	Did the author cite other papers we should consider for inclusion in this scoping review?	Open-ended.
Reviewer Impressions	Do you have any reflective notes or comments?	Open-ended.

Table A2. *Extracted Data: Brief Summary of Open-Ended Responses (Describe, Explain, Predict).*

Authors/ Year	Title	Describe	Explain	Predict (Pattern)
Bailey & Clark, 2024	Exploring Bonding and Attachment in Aboriginal Families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attachment means children have a strong identity and connection to their tribe. • Critical values include interdependence, spiritual connectedness, cohesion, loyalty, connection to land, and inter-assistance. • Attachment is not solely mother-child dyad, but extends to a “network of connection,” with extended family and ancestors. • Attachment can be hindered by historical trauma. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose of strong attachment is for survival, group wellbeing, spiritual connectedness, cultural continuity, and resilience. 	Relational
Bear et al., 2022	Reconsidering Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs from a First Nations Perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children are already born “actualized.” The top of the pyramid is not “self” actualization but meaningful contribution to society. • Actualization is understood as a circle, not a pyramid, rooted in cultural beliefs. • All parts of human development must be met simultaneously (e.g., basic needs, emotional, spiritual) rather than in a hierarchy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The goal of development is described as “non-egoic.” Relationships are not entered into in order to exploit or add to one individual’s thriving. • Reciprocity is a key value. • “Actualization” is meaningful contribution to society, belongingness, knowing one’s place in nature. 	Cyclical, Relational

Farella, 2021	Framing Indigenous Identity Inclusion in Positive Youth Development: Proclaimed Ignorance, Partial Vacuum, and the Peoplehood Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elements of the peoplehood model and goals for youth development include: language, sacred history, ceremonial cycle, and territory/place. • Embodying these components contributes to a “persistent people” that are ever evolving. 	<p>Youth who are developing properly:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have insight into their cultural identity, stories, language • Have a safe space at home (personal “place”), and understand their “collective place,” connection to land and history • Are connected multi-generationally, have cultural pride, understand ancestral knowledge • Understand ceremonial seasons or cycles, traditional and cultural events 	Narrative; Cyclical
Gilgun, 2002	Completing the Circle: American Indian Medicine Wheels and the Promotion of Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child development is contextualized within four themes: belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. • “Belonging” is compared by authors to Maslow’s “love,” but instead of being the third rung of the pyramid (Maslow, 1943), belonging is foundational. • Adults are responsible for the quality of the child’s environment for their development in the four themes. • Child learn by observation, and will emulate behaviors and values of people who set good examples. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal of “belonging”: attachment to at least one healthy adult for more than a year, one solid friendship, connected to culture, family, spirituality. • Goal of “mastery”: emotion regulation, persistence, has resources they need to do well in school, hobbies, sports. • Goal of “independence”: agency, makes sound choices, lets others make their own choices. Believes their life has purpose. • Goal of “generosity”: Participates in service activities. Takes satisfaction from giving to others, has friends who hold the these qualities. 	Relational; Cyclical

Green, 2017	Children's Environmental Identity Development in an Alaska Native Rural Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children pass through stages in understandings of their environmental identity and relationship with the land. • Erikson's (1994) stages are mirrored: Trust vs. mistrust in nature, spatial autonomy vs environmental shame, environmental competency vs. disdain, environmental action vs. harm. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal is to develop environmental sustainability and spiritual connection to nature. • Children should: be confident and comfortable in nature, see themselves as part of the environment, understand the impact humans have on the environment, learn to care for the environment (e.g., what plants and animals need to grow). 	Stage-Like; Relational
Macfarlane et al., 2008	Indigenous Epistemology in a National Curriculum Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Māori human development is situated in concentric circles organized into levels of "family relation" and obligation. • Education occurs within a context of knowing and being known, building family like relationships. • Education is acquired through direct experience in the natural world. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Five key competencies for child development: thinking/meaning making, care and respect, relationships, autonomy/leadership, and engagement/participation. • When competencies are expressed, children will generate vibrant "mana" or spiritual life force and wellbeing. • Those with mana have personal authority and dignity. • Another goal is maintaining "aroha" or loving kindness, respect, and acceptance of other's individuality. 	Relational; Narrative
McCormick & Amundson, 1997	A Career-Life Planning Model for First Nations People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choosing one's life calling or life's work is an important and spiritual aspect of adult development. • When choosing one's career or life calling, planning includes consideration in five domains: connectedness, balance, needs, roles, gifts/aptitudes, and values. • Gifts/aptitudes are inherent and should be used for the sake of the community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The purpose of having a career or developing one's life's work is spiritual and exists for the good of the community, to maintain connectedness with others and the natural world. 	Relational

<p>Mottram & Dimmock, 2025</p> <p>Indigenous Perspectives on the Perinatal Period</p> <p>Australian</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of maternal-fetal attachment (assigning spiritual identity before birth) • Infant-kinship attachment (aunts and uncles described as "small mums" and "small dads,") • Caretaking roles extended to larger community, roles of traditional adoption • Ceremonies and rites of passage foster attachment (e.g., burial of placenta, first haircut) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infant development is defined in terms of connection with kinship structures and kinship's availability to fulfill roles in the infant's life <p>Relational</p>
<p>Neckoway et al., 2003</p> <p>Rethinking the Role of Attachment Theory in Child Welfare Practice with Aboriginal People</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children are spiritually whole and holy. • Important for mother to instill connectedness in the first two years, but not solely her responsibility. • Attachment extends to other relatives, including lineages and ancestors, and ceremonies serve to "attach" or bond those other relatives to the infant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The goal of attachment is to A) teach interconnectedness to all things and B) attach children to important community members who can teach and guide. <p>Relational</p>
<p>Priest et al., 2012</p> <p>Aboriginal Perspectives of Child Health and Wellbeing in an Urban Setting: Developing a Conceptual Framework</p>	<p>Healthy child development conceptualized using concentric circles:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inner circle: "Strong Child," spirit, physical health, happiness, responsibility, resilience. • Middle circle: "Strong Environment," family relationships, opportunities to learn, material needs met • Outer circle: "Strong Culture," reflected in connectedness, language, ceremony, kinship, roles and responsibilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The goal of healthy child development can be understood as reflecting values associated with each layer of the model: strong child, strong environment, strong culture. • Children are not expected to accomplish this alone; which is why they are enveloped by family, kin, culture, community. <p>Relational</p>

Specific challenges for Koori urban children include living in two worlds (Indigenous and Western), stolen generations, racism.

Rameka, 2007 Māori Approaches to Assessment

- The world is not fully knowable, children encouraged to co-create, explore, and discover.
 - Children are born spiritually whole.
 - Children develop in reciprocal relationships beyond immediate family.
 - Children are described as “receptacles” for ancestral knowledge. The responsibility for learning is twofold, on the part of the community and the child for being willing to learn.
 - Child development should not be compartmentalized (mind, body, spirit, addressed simultaneously).
- Successful child development = a child who is empowered, interdependent, confident, competent, with a healthy mind, body, spirit, and secure sense of belonging.
 - If family and community complete their responsibilities, the child will know they are never alone, and build trusting and respectful relationships with others.
- Relational;
Narrative
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<p>Rata et al., 2014</p> <p>Creation Narratives as Metaphors for Indigenous Identity Development: The Pawhiri Identity Negotiation Framework</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identity stems from ancestry and creation narratives. • An important aspect of identity development is conscientization-awareness of racialization and discrimination. • Indigenous people move through four (non-linear) phases of identity development: Potential (complete ignorance), Development (curiosity, engagement), Transition (loss, despair, deconstruction), and Enlightenment (feast, connection, reciprocity). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The goal of identity development can be described as remaining continuously engaged in identity negotiation. • Periods of enlightenment will come, but are seasonal, people repeat the stages during different life contexts. <p>Cyclical; Narrative</p>
<p>Simard & Blight, 2011a</p> <p>Developing a Culturally Restorative Approach to Aboriginal Child and Youth Development: Transitions to Adulthood (GENERAL ABORIGINAL THEORY)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All children exist within a “protective network” of kinship. All members share responsibility for the child’s development. • Development consists of: cultural attachment, identity development, and relational development, and task achievement. • All parts of the self are included in the model: the core is the Aboriginal spirit, surrounded by all other domains (social, physical, spiritual, cognitive) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development is spiritual and relational, designed to pursue one’s sacred role in the community. • Goal of development is balance, harmony, and wholeness. • “Task Completion” = a child who knows they are loved, knows their sacred purpose, feels good about themselves, perseveres in adversity, and is able to balance between Aboriginal and Western worlds. <p>Relational; Cyclical</p>

Simard & Blight, 2011b	<p>Developing a Culturally Restorative Approach to Aboriginal Child and Youth Development: Transitions to Adulthood (RAISING HEALTHY ANISHINAABEG CHILDREN)</p>	<p>Parenting and teaching are lifelong, collective responsibilities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional values introduced at culturally appropriate times. • Children (ages 5-8): developing values, respect for nature, family, elders; learning safety; learning keystones of identity; listening to legends and stories. • Children (ages 9-12): preparation for puberty, rites of passage, gender-specific teachings. • Youth Ages 13-18: continued rites of passage, respect for all living things, stepping into social roles. Learning from mistakes, deepening knowledge of medicine, language, culture. Positive values should be humility, sharing, respect, and humor. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy Anishinaabeg children make good decisions on their own and apply values to their own lives. • They have positive self-identification, are spiritually connected, and connected to extended family and cultural community 	Stage-Like
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<p>Simard & Blight, 2011c</p>	<p>Developing a Culturally Restorative Approach to Aboriginal Child and Youth Development: Transitions to Adulthood (CULTURAL DEVELOPMENTAL MILESTONES)</p>	<p>Life stages are described as the “four hills of life.” Each stage has psychosocial tasks and related ceremonies.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Childhood (0-11): Identity formation and trusting relationships, supported by ceremonies such as Welcoming, Naming, Clan Walkout • Youthhood (12-15): Understanding physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs; developing essential life skills; attaining a vision through fasting or initiation into the Medicine Lodge • Adulthood (approximately 15-50): Independence, parenthood, and leadership; learning to participate in and conduct ceremonies and healing practices. • Elderhood (50+): becoming a teacher, leading ceremonies, transmitting cultural knowledge. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal of childhood: develop a strong identity. If this does not occur, they will have an identity crisis and lack of trust in others. • Goal of youthhood: attaining a vision. If this does not occur, they will experience inability to cope, mental and emotional “arrest,” and spiritual emptiness. • Goal of adulthood: learn to conduct ceremonies and healing. If they do not accomplish this, they may experience addiction, lack of self esteem, inability to care for others. • Goal of elderhood: assume leadership roles in ceremonies, become a teacher. If this is not accomplished, the elder may have difficulty sharing and no sense of fulfillment in life. 	<p>Stage-Like</p>
<p>Tamati et al., 2021</p>	<p>He Piki Raukura: Understanding Strengths-Based Māori Child Development Constructs in Kaupapa Māori Early Years Provision</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child development and behavioral constructs include developing a secure Māori identity; feeling and acting as a member of the community; developing courage and perseverance, positivity; developing integrity and responsibility within the community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Characteristics of a child who is meeting all goals are: confident, proud of cultural heritage, has a secure identity, is pro-social, has a collective orientation, is persistent and hopeful, takes accountability. 	<p>Relational</p>

Ullrich, 2019	For the Love of our Children: An Indigenous Connectedness Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child thriving is related to connectedness across five domains: intergenerational (including ancestors), community, family (naming, ceremonies, family time), environment (land), and spirituality (teachings, values, ceremonies, love). • To obtain balance, children should be connected in all five domains. • Notably, the importance of language is highlighted across all five domains. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children who experience connectedness have a grounded identity, access to guidance on how to live a good life, connection to community and ancestors, love and respect for nature, roles and responsibilities in their community, know their language, and are culturally and spiritually aware and grounded. 	Relational
Wenger-Nabigon, 2010	The Cree Medicine Wheel as an Organizing Paradigm of Theories of Human Development	<p>Medicine wheel has four parts, reflecting four seasons of human development. Each season has a “dark side,” or rascal, and a “light side.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • East: childhood, spring, emphasis on feelings and emotions. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Light side: purpose, emotional expression, language, self-esteem and self-love. Dark side: shame, anger, inequality, powerlessness. • South: adolescence, summer, emphasis on relationships. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Light side: values and identity solidified, relationships with self, family and community, patience. Dark side: envy. • West: adulthood, autumn, emphasis on respect. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Light side: respect, reason, humility, our place in nature. Dark side: resentment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ultimate goal of development is balance between positive and negative sides of life. • One must grapple with the dark sides or “rascals” of each life stage in favor of the lessons and values that stage can teach us. • Toward the end of life, ultimate goal is caring, contribution, and avoiding apathy. Elders cannot care for their community without having first cared for themselves. 	Cyclical; Narrative

"Rascal" between west and north (elderhood) doors is fear.

- North: elderhood, winter, emphasis on caring.
- Light side: caring, change, movement, power. Dark side: apathy.

Development of early relational wellbeing (ERW) is grounded in ceremony, culture, and spirituality. ERW is represented with concentric circles.

Wesner et al.,
2024

Co-Creating a Conceptual Model of Indigenous Relational Wellbeing in Early Childhood: Planting Seeds of Connectedness

- First Layer of ERW: Relational practices, including ceremony, storytelling, teaching, language, nurturing, and belonging.
- Second Layer of ERW: Development of these practices in future life stages (adolescence, adulthood, elderhood).
- Outermost Layer of ERW: Indicators of ERW (outcomes) like kinship, identity,

- The expected outcome of healthy child development is that children embody the indicators of early relational wellbeing (kinship, identity, autonomy, empathy, trust, love, humor, and secure attachment). Relational; Cyclical
-

autonomy, empathy, trust, love, humor, and secure attachment.

Wortman &
Lewis, 2021

Gerotranscendence and Alaska
Native Successful Aging in the
Aleutian Pribilof Islands, Alaska

“Gerotranscendence” is a shift in perspective toward the end of life (the cosmic, the self, and social).

- The Cosmic: reconciliation of past, connection to previous and future generations, acceptance of the unknown, enjoyment of life, less fear of death.
- The Self: discover hidden aspects of self, decrease self-centeredness, shift focus to others, accept one’s life and body as is.
- Social/Relationships: Emancipated Innocence (transcend needless social norms), Modern Asceticism (contentment with simplicity), Everyday Wisdom (reluctance to superficially answer life’s questions, discerning when to give advice and when to withhold)

- Four elements of successful aging are described as: mental and emotional wellbeing, spirituality, purposefulness and engagement, and physical health.
- Desire to spend remaining time in community and on ancestral lands.
- Acceptance of limitations, taking oneself less seriously
- Developing a coherent life story
- Focus on generativity with younger generations

Relational;
Narrative

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