

Urban Indigenous Perspectives on Juggling Paid Work and Unpaid Care for Elders



What this research is about

In 2019, a community-based research study was conducted to explore Indigenous experiences of combining paid employment while also caring for adult or elderly family members. The study was part of a larger research program that aims to create a Canadian Caregiver Inclusive and Accommodating Workplace Organization Standard. A key focus of this study was to ensure that Indigenous perspectives and experiences are included in these workplace standards and policies.

Indigenous unpaid caregivers with paid jobs face unique challenges. These stem from the legacy of colonialism related to multigenerational and other harms. Indigenous elders have a shorter life expectancy and experience more chronic illness, barriers to health care, and social exclusion. Elders are highly valued for their knowledge, wisdom, and patience. They also want to share cultural wisdom and worldviews to their communities, known as “Indigenous cultural generativity.” Most caregiving for Elders is done at home for these reasons. More cultural, caregiver, and gender-sensitive workplace environments are therefore needed to support family caregivers.

What the researchers did

Researchers conducted two focus groups or “sharing circles” with nine participants. They took place at an Indigenous Friendship Centre located in southwestern Ontario. Seven women and one man were recruited through the Friendship Centre by network sampling. This allowed study participants to recruit their peers to take part in the study. The Indigenous peer researcher also participated as an unpaid caregiver of an adult relative. Methods used included community-based research, where research is guided by the communities’ priorities and community members are involved in all parts of the study.

Questions were asked about the participants’ experiences balancing caregiving and work

What you need to know

Paid employees who also perform unpaid caregiving duties for adult family members at home are subject to stress, mental, and emotional health issues. Indigenous unpaid caregivers with paid jobs are often more challenged in this area. Indigenous culture highly values care work, and many elders would prefer to live out their days at home.

While Indigenous-led workplaces accommodate this “culture of care” with support and flexibility, many white, colonial “mainstream” workplaces do not. This leaves Indigenous employees who care for older adults with feelings of tension with co-workers and bosses, guilt, and a sense of divided duties between caregiving, family life, and work. This study looked at urban Indigenous perspectives on how to balance paid work and unpaid care work.

responsibilities, the familial and cultural significance of caregiving, challenges and rewards from caregiving, and ideas for workplace policies to support employed caregivers. Data analysis included a feminist, relational narrative approach (interpreting how people describe their experiences), along with insights from Indigenous storytelling methods.

What the researchers found

There were four key findings:

1. Cultural generativity: care as instruction and responsibility

Caregiving is a way of teaching younger generations about the cultural value of caring for elders. Caregiving is also seen as a moral obligation toward aging parents and elders in general. This creates a cycle of younger generations supporting older relatives while older relatives are assisting younger family members.

2. Guilt among Indigenous caregivers in mainstream workplaces

Balancing unpaid caregiving and paid employment could lead to feelings of guilt and obligation. Some felt unable to meet expectations from co-workers, bosses, their children, and spouses, while also fulfilling their caregiving responsibilities.

3. Gendered caregiving

Historically, Indigenous women have mostly acted as caregivers. This is still the case. The one male participant focused mainly on emotional and social bonding with his relative, without any of the physical caregiving tasks such as bathing, feeding, helping in the bathroom, and cooking. Women had a more defined sense of duty to provide care, and more often performed the physical aspects of care.

4. Indigenous-led organizations as sites containing Indigenous care ethics or “carer culture”

Mainstream workplaces felt dehumanizing since they lacked support systems and feelings of kinship. Indigenous workplaces more actively promoted work-life balance and encouraged talking about caregiving struggles. Caregiving was valued and prioritized in these workplaces, and they felt supported.

How you can use this research

Redesigning workplace policy to be more family-friendly can have positive economic impacts. The “centrality of care” that is a large part of most Indigenous worldviews should be more recognized in settler colonial society. This could help to balance the mental, sociocultural, and overall wellbeing of employees and the relatives they care for. This is especially important for Indigenous employees, who are more likely to provide home care.

About the researchers

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Citation

Jewell, E., Doucet, A., Falk, J., & Hilston, K. (2022). “Looking after our own is what we do”: Urban Ontario Indigenous perspectives on juggling paid work and unpaid care work for adult family members. *Wellbeing, Space and Society*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wss.2022.100102>

Study funding

This research was supported by a Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada (SSHRC) and Canadian Institutes of Health Research Partnership Grant (PI Allison Williams), as well as the Canada Research Chairs Program and a SSHRC Partnership Grant (PI Andrea Doucet).

Research Snapshot by Erika Cao

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