

Examining Protective Factors of Mental Health among Native Queer/Two-Spirit People

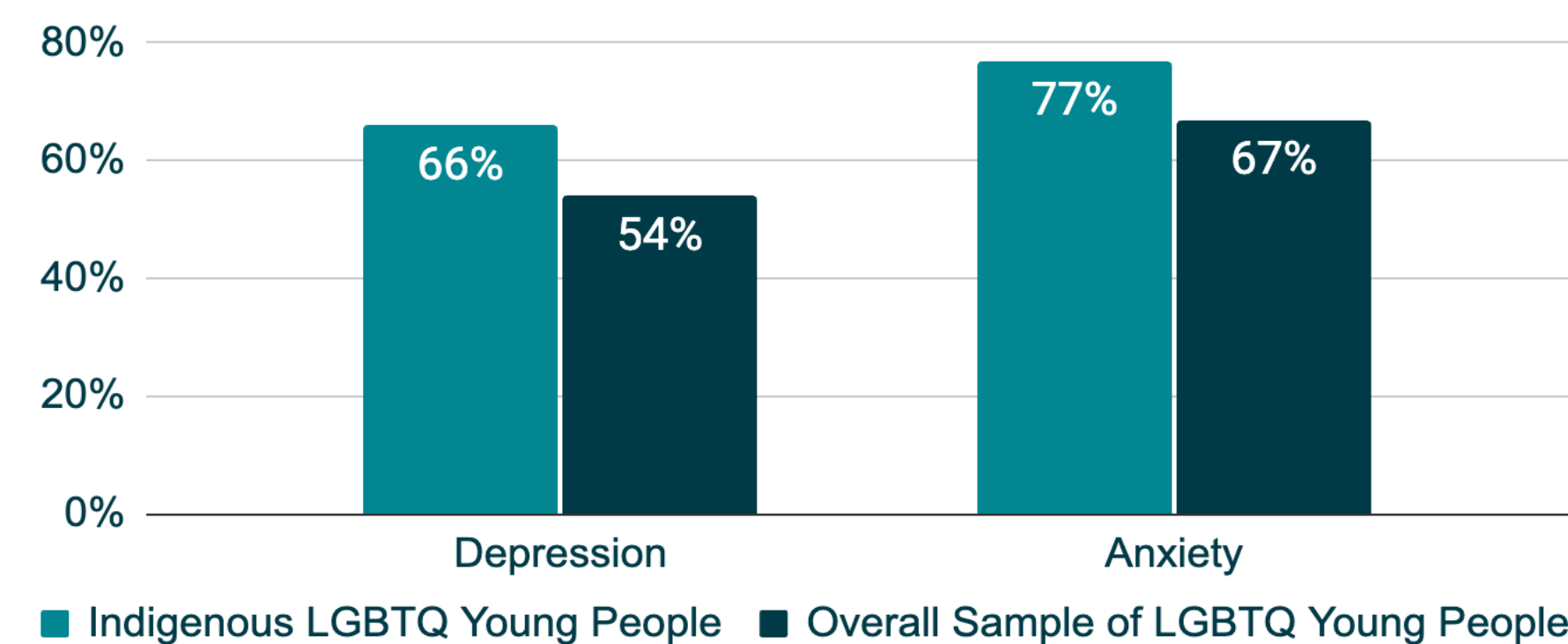
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INTRODUCTION

Native Queer and/or Two-Spirit individuals may experience heightened mental health disparities compared to other LGBTQ non-native and heterosexual Native youth, exhibiting greater rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidality (DeChants et al., 2023, Schuler et al., 2023). Symptoms and diagnoses of substance use disorders are more common among adults in this population as well (Qeadan et al., 2022, Yuan et al., 2014).

Symptoms of Anxiety and Depression Among Indigenous LGBTQ Young People



Source: *The Trevor Project* (2023)

Research addressing mental health often only examines risk factors associated with these populations (Thomas et al., 2022, Burnette & Figley, 2016). To understand the full scope of well-being, protective factors that prevent and alleviate harm must be explored as well. Highlighting protective factors draws attention to the history of resilience in these communities (Thomas et al., 2022). Additionally, cultural variations in protective factors must be considered to provide appropriate resources for individuals with multiple intersecting identities (Walters, 1997).

The purpose of this review is to examine protective factors that contribute to positive mental health outcomes among Two-Spirit and Native Queer people and create a model of health that bridges sources of resiliency from Queer populations and Native populations to encourage the development of culturally inclusive care and spaces.

METHODOLOGY

- “Native” refers to American Indian (AI), Alaska Native (AN), Native Hawaiian (NH), and Indigenous people described in this study.
- “Queer” will encompass terms such as Sexual and Gender Minority (SGM) and LGBTQ+. Though we recognize the problematic history behind the term Queer, it is utilized in an effort of reclamation and inclusivity. It is an umbrella term describing sexual and gender identities that are not heterosexual or cisgender (Collins, 2019).
- Individuals with both or similar identities will be described as “Two-Spirit” or “Native Queer people.” Two-spirit is commonly used to describe Native Queer people; however, it is a self-identifying term and does not apply to all within this community (Thomas et al., 2022).

An initial literature search was conducted on PubMed:

- (American Indian OR Alaska Native OR Native Hawaiian) AND (queer) AND (protective factors) AND (mental health) retrieved 0 results.

To broaden the search, two other separate queries were performed:

- queer + protective factors + mental health retrieved 132 results
- native + protective factors + mental health retrieved 114 results.

Due to the sparseness of these results, AI tools (i.e., Litmaps, Perplexity) were utilized to expand the findings, which were then verified as peer-reviewed on PubMed or a university library database. Articles that focused solely on risk factors, scoping reviews, or meta-analyses were excluded, and studies that incorporated protective factors for queer, native, or both sample populations were included.

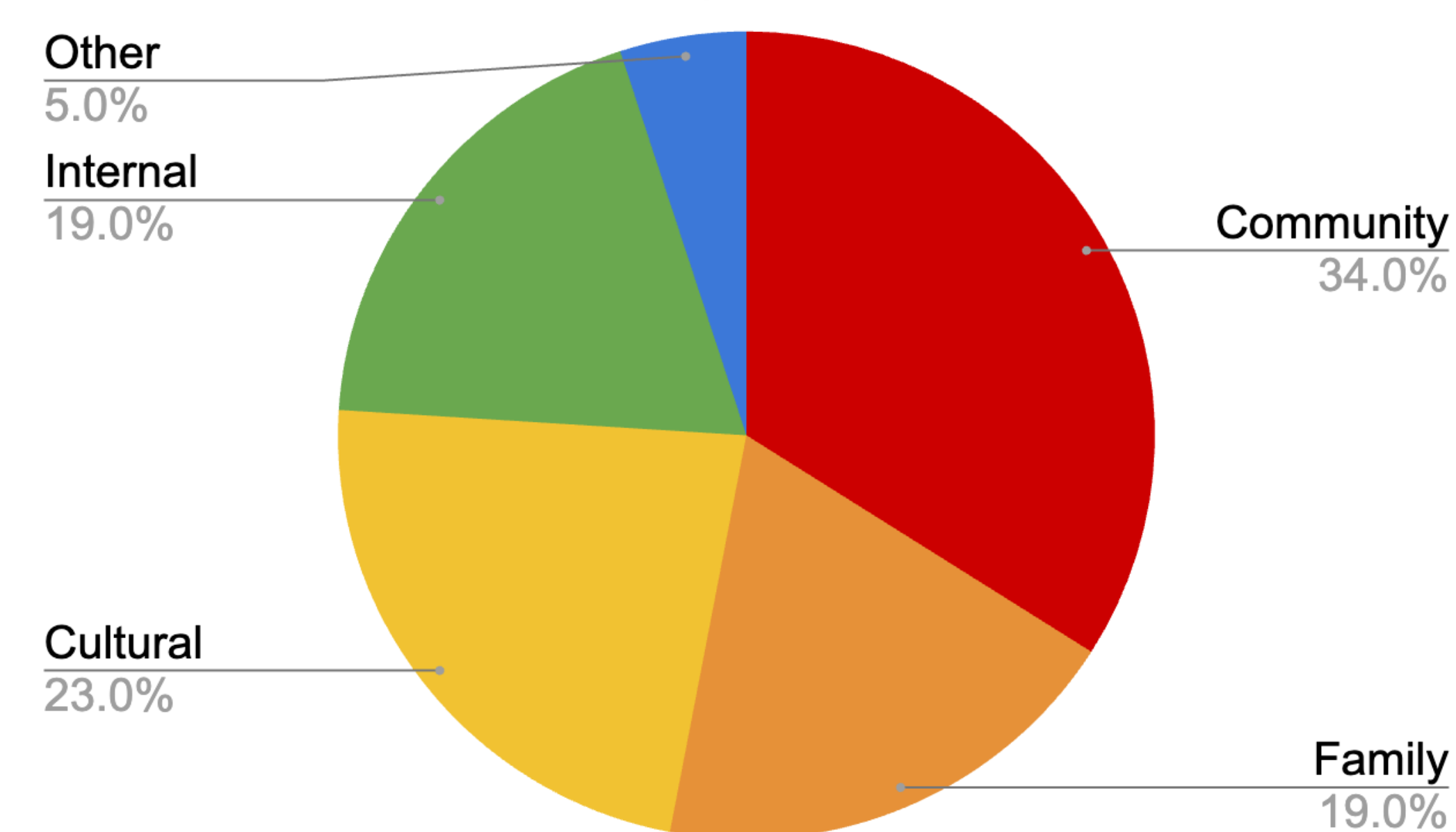
FINDINGS

25 research publications in total were reviewed: 4 for Native Queer populations, 9 for Queer populations, and 12 for Native populations.

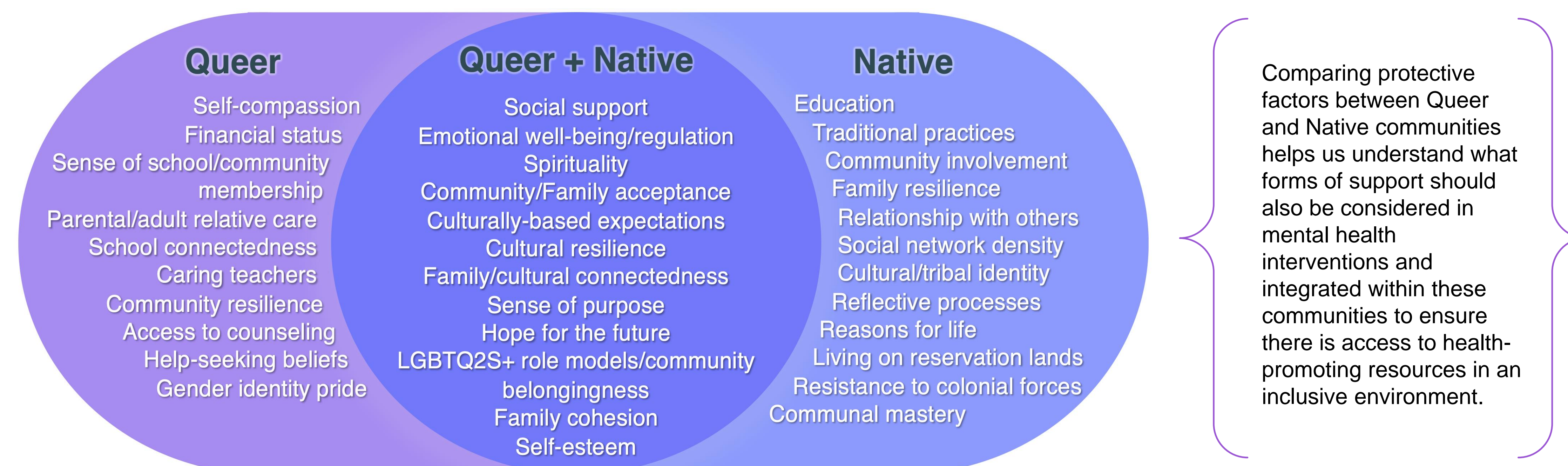
86 protective factors were compiled and categorized, according to the definitions outlined in their corresponding literature, into five main themes:

- **Community Support:** Support provided by the community (e.g., social networks, peers, community resources).
- **Family Support:** Emotional, practical, and social support provided by family members.
- **Cultural Support:** Engagement with and preservation of cultural practices, values, and identity.
- **Internal Support:** An individual's emotional and psychological resources.
- **Other:** Factors such as financial status, active lifestyle, and education.

Protective Factors Categorized Into 5 Main Themes



Similarities in Protective Factors of Mental Health among Queer and Native Communities



Ecosystemic Model of Protective Factors of Mental Health among Native Queer People

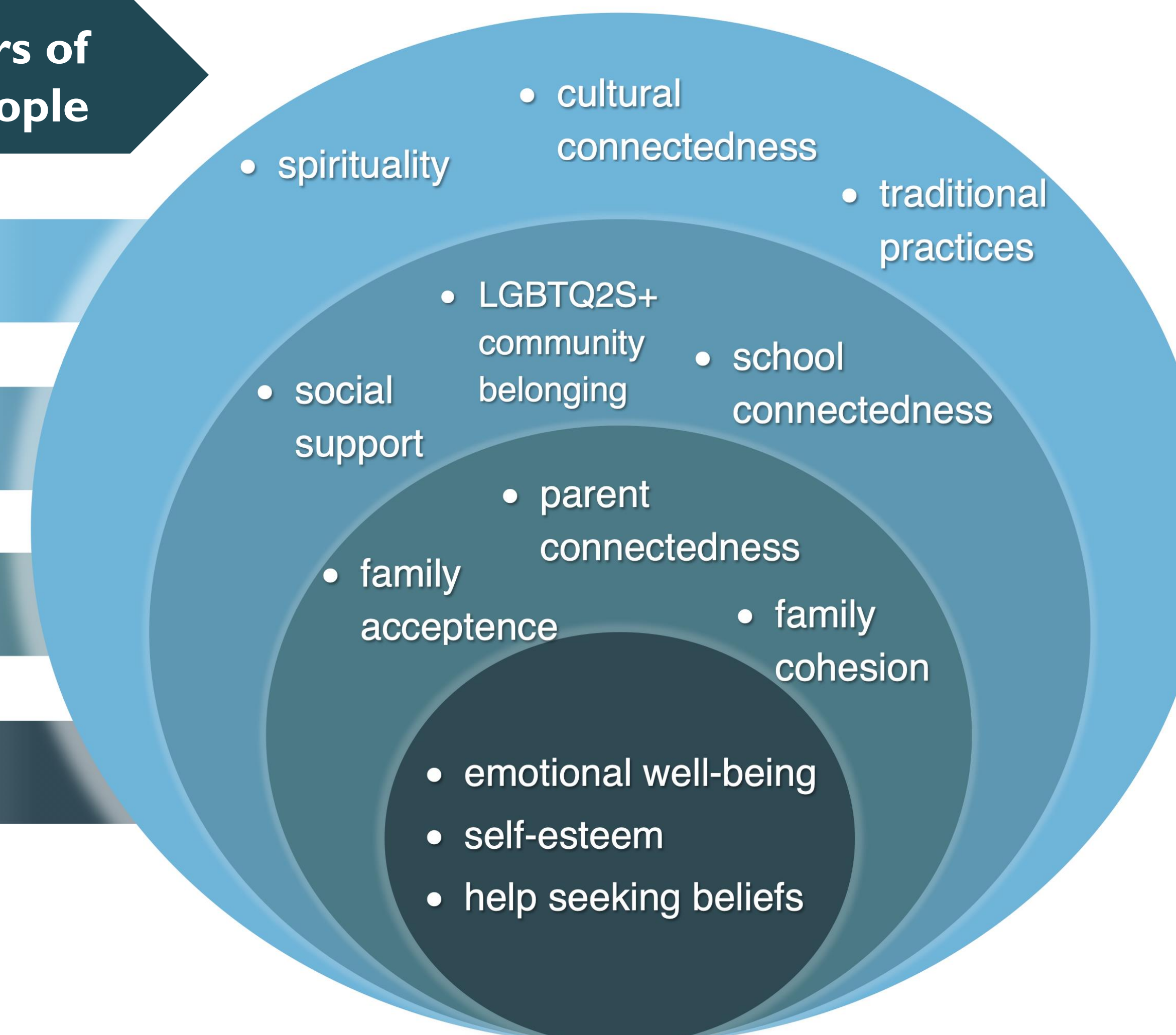
Drawing upon an ecosystemic framework rooted in resilience research that emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals and social systems (Waller, 2001) and adapted for American Indian and Native Alaska youth (Burnette & Figley, 2016), the identified protective factors for Queer and Native communities were integrated into this model. This holistic view demonstrates the interaction of protective influences within and between each ecological level.

CULTURE

COMMUNITY

FAMILY

INDIVIDUAL



LIMITATIONS

- Limited research on protective factors underscores the urgent need for increased studies and resources to improve well-being and social equity in Native Queer populations.
- Additional searches not relegated to health may have expanded results to include other protective factors (e.g. art, music, creativity, etc.)
- Many studies used small sample sizes, focused primarily on youth, or were specific to certain tribes and thus, not generalizable.

Despite these limitations, this study aims to contribute to a vastly underdeveloped area and advocates for more research in this field by highlighting the nuanced considerations and cultural safety that future studies require (Carlson & Redvers, 2023)

CONCLUSIONS

Community and cultural support were the most prominent protective factors for Native Queer/Two-Spirit individuals, highlighting the need for further research into their impact on mental health. Additionally, an ecosystemic model of health tailored to this population helps clinicians understand the interplay of multiple factors at varying levels, thus encouraging more culturally inclusive care. Recognizing these factors (both risk and protective) as culturally distinct for AI/AN youth, as opposed to non AI/AN youth, necessitates a culturally-grounded approach in examining these populations (Burnette & Figley, 2016), and contextualizes the multidimensional impact on identity development (Walters, 1997).

Applying a perspective of cultural safety (rather than cultural competency or humility) shifts power imbalances and redirects the focus of health disparities from indigenous peoples to the inequities driven by non-indigenous cultures (Carlson & Redvers, 2023).

Other considerations include conducting studies specific to the under-researched Native Hawaii Māhū population and exploring the nuance of terms, such as Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer. Better understanding Native perspectives of sexual/gender identity can serve to avoid misclassification and enhance sampling strategies for Two-Spirit and Native Queer populations (Thomas et al., 2022).

SUPPORT RESOURCES



Native Youth Sexual Health Network Mental Health Manual: A mental health peer support manual for Indigiqueer, Two-Spirit, LGBTQ+, and Gender Non-Conforming Indigenous youth.



Paths (Re)Membered Project: Centers the strengths, resilience, and histories of the Two-Spirit and LGBTQ+ community in a movement toward health equity.



988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: A 24/7 lifeline that offers free and confidential support for people in distress, along with prevention and crisis resources.

REFERENCES



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