DEFINING CULTURAL RESILIENCE TO STRENGTHEN NATIVE YOUTH: A BRIEF REPORT FROM THE INTERGENERATIONAL CONNECTION PROJECT

By Allyson Kelley, Clayton Small, Maha Charani Small, Hawkeye Montileaux, and Shawnee White

Abstract

Native American youth are placed at greater risk for suicide than any other age or ethnic population in the United States. Resilience has helped Native Americans overcome adversity. In this paper, authors provide an example of how intergenerational mentoring can moderate or reduce these risk factors. The Intergenerational Connection Project at Native PRIDE (ICP) works with advisory councils in four Native communities in Montana and South Dakota. To better understand resilience, this paper answers two questions: (1) how do communities define cultural resilience, and (2) how can cultural resilience be operationalized in a cultural context? The ICP team worked with community advisory councils to develop a cultural resilience scale that was administered at the beginning of the project and six months later, at the end of the Project. An independent samples *t*-test demonstrated a significant increase in all scale items from baseline and at six-month follow-up. Results indicate that all community definitions include terms related to adversity and the transfer of cultural knowledge through sharing, participation, and involvement. Community definitions also included conversations about spirituality, language, values, and interactions between elders and youth. Authors conclude with a strong message that strengths-based interventions like the ICP are needed to address suicide risk in Native communities.

Key words: mentoring programs, cultural resilience, American Indian youth, strengths-based, suicide risk

Introduction

This paper describes how four Native communities define and measure cultural resilience to lower suicide risk. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among young people in the United States (Cash and Bridge 2009). Major risk factors for suicide among youth in general include previous suicide attempt, psychiatric disorder, personality disorder, impulsive aggression, access to lethal means, hopelessness, family history of depression or suicide, loss of parent to death or divorce, family discord, physical or sexual abuse, lack of support, and dealing with homosexuality in an unsupportive family, community, or school (Cash and Bridge 2009).

Native Americans have the highest rates of attempted and completed suicide in the United States (Anderson 2002). American Indian/Alaska Native youth aged 10 to 24 years have the highest suicide rates of all ethnic populations in the United States (Wexler et.al, 2015). Previous studies on suicide among Native youth attribute general suicide risk factors combined with extreme alienation from family and community where cultural connections are particularly vital to identity specific to Native Americans and consumption of hard liquor, poor general health, and female gender (Grossman, Milligan, and Deyo 1991). Many feel the manifestations of these risk factors are linked to historical trauma related to colonization and oppression unique to Natives' lived experiences. (Whitbeck et al. 2004).

Many tribes were left without their land base and live with persistent socioeconomic disadvantages rooted in limitations established by government policies that define the relationship between the United States government and natives, such that this relationship is different than with any other population in America (Brave Heart 1998). However, resilience has helped Native communities overcome colonization and maintain their culture and way of life (Kelley and Small 2016).

This paper describes how four Native communities define and measure cultural resilience to lower suicide risk.

Resilience

Resilience is most often defined as a positive adaptation despite adversity (Luthar 2005). Researchers categorize resiliency models using three primary types: (1) compensatory, (2) protective, and (3) challenge (Fergus and Zimmerman 2005). In this study, the focus is on the protective model, where a resiliency factor (cultural resilience and the intergenerational mentoring connection) moderates or reduces the effects of a risk factor (trauma, violence, discrimination, family discord). For the purposes of this article, *culture* is defined as, "shared learned behavior and belief systems and value orientations that influence customs, norms, practices, and social institutions" of a group of people (American Psychological Association 2003:380). Cultural resilience refers to the role that culture may play in the resilience of an individual or community (Fleming and Ledogar 2008). Community resilience is defined as the ability of a community to utilize resources to respond and recover after a disturbance (Norris et.al 2008).

It is necessary to understand how cultural resilience is operationalized within Native communities to support Native youth in response to risk and adversity. First, both Native and non-Native must
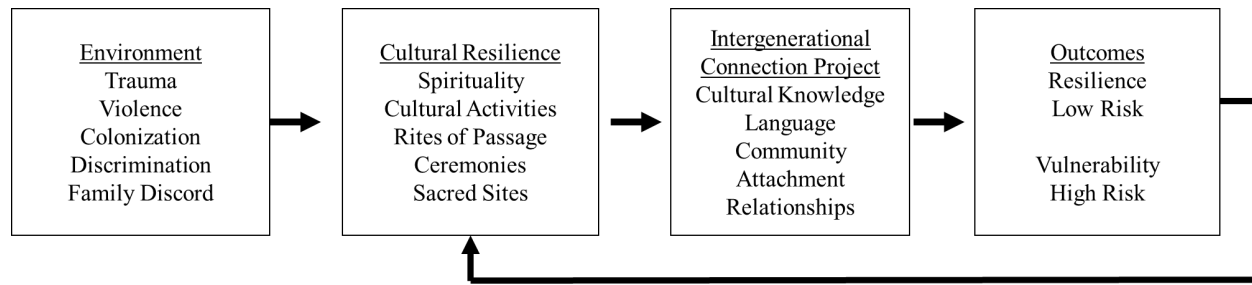
Figure 1. ICP Conceptual Model for Strengthening Resilience

be taught awareness about colonization and its effects (Small 2014). This includes ways to empower the colonized (Small 2014). Second, there must be a shared understanding of what cultural resilience means based on a continuum of less optimum resilience to optimum resilience (Hunter and Chandler 1999). Third, cultural resilience requires the presence of a distinct culture (set of values, language, beliefs) and substantial risk (Fleming and Ledogar 2008). With 567 federally recognized tribes and approximately 250 who are not federally recognized but every bit as valid in the United States, there are differences in culture, and at the same time, there are common values, beliefs, and behaviors that help promote understanding of cultural resilience (HeavyRunner and Morris 1997). Finally, culture as a resource for individual or community resilience has not been studied extensively (Fleming and Ledogar 2008). Chandler and Lalonde (1998, 2005) studied the concepts of cultural resilience (also referred to as cultural continuity) and found that as cultural resilience increased in Native populations, suicide rates decreased.

Resilience and Mentoring

Mentoring programs in Native communities can promote cultural resilience. Mentoring relationships include pairing a non-parental adult with a youth (Keller 2005). These relationship-based initiatives hold promise for youth who are at high risk for suicide (Zand et.al 2009). Previous research on mentoring programs demonstrated efficacy of school-based functioning, healthy relationships, and life skills (Zand et.al 2009). However, empirical research is in its infancy on the role of mentoring relationships and cultural

resilience, and outcomes regarding Native youth at this time are limited (Zand et.al 2009).

To address this gap in the literature and work toward an evidence base, the Intergenerational Connection Project (ICP) was designed to lower suicide risk and strengthen individual and community resilience through youth-elder mentoring (see Figure 1).

The Curricula

In response to the limited number of tribal-specific mentoring interventions for at-risk youth, Native PRIDE partnered with four Native communities to design and implement a mentoring project for Native youth and elders. In these partner communities, alcohol and drug use is common, and family discord, violence, and trauma place youth at higher risk for suicide. Native PRIDE has a long history of working with these communities to implement the Good Road of Life and Native HOPE. These culturally-based curricula build on the strengths of Native communities while building leadership skills in youth. Since 2007, Native PRIDE has trained more than 5,000 Native community members. The Indian Health Service, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and the Association for Native Americans recognize Native HOPE and Good Road of Life as promising practices for addressing suicide and the related risk factors of substance abuse, violence-bullying, trauma, and depression. To assess the impact of these curricula, Native PRIDE uses strength-based measures like the Sources of Strength (see Kelley and Small 2016).

The Intergenerational Connection Project

In October 2016, Native PRIDE received a five-year Administration for Native Americans Initiative for Leadership, Empowerment, and Development grant (https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ana) to develop and implement the ICP. The goals of ICP are to reduce risk factors in youth that lead to suicide while promoting protective factors that increase resiliency. The ICP team includes one project director, one project coordinator, four site coordinators, and one evaluator.

ICP facilitates mentoring relationships between communities, Native youth, and Native elders. In the last eight months, advisory councils have been established in each community, and members attended a two-day ICP introductory training in all four communities. The purpose of the advisory council trainings was to launch the ICP council and to develop a one-year ICP action plan that includes cultural activities with youth, family and elders in the community, mental health providers, and spiritual leaders. During advisory council trainings, members learn about the ICP and participate in team building activities, mentoring, and role play. Training begins in a large circle and then breaks into small groups dubbed Clans. Clans are led by experienced adult facilitators and create a safe and sacred place for learning and establishing norms. This process incorporates culture, spirituality, and wellness-healing. Clans defined cultural resilience and developed a list of cultural activities and sacred sites they would like to visit (mentors and youth) during the five-year ICP. After clans create definitions of cultural resilience and activity lists to operationalize it, the facilitator brings everyone back into a large circle to review

definitions and reach a consensus about how they want to define cultural resilience as a community. These trainings reached more than 220 youth, elders, and community members in the project's first year (2016-2017).

Using a strengths-based approach to resiliency (Zimmerman 2013), ICP advisory councils worked in clans to answer two questions: (1) how do communities define cultural resilience? and (2) how can cultural resilience be operationalized in a cultural context?

How Do Communities Define Cultural Resilience?

Community 1: Traditional transmission to younger generation supporting confidence in one's ability to navigate the world.
Community 2: Staying alive in our culture by daily participation that strengthens our cultural traditions with one another.
Community 3: To involve and empower youth to positively adapt to change through participation in ceremonies.
Community 4: Involvement in cultural activities and cultural values to overcome negative influences.

Community definitions of cultural resilience reflect unique community perspectives about their culture and what the term "resilience" means within their own cultural context. All the definitions include terms related to adversity and the transfer of cultural knowledge through sharing, participation, and involvement. Community definitions also included conversations about spirituality, language, values, and interactions between elders and youth and taking care of each other.

Youth views about cultural resilience varied. We met with youth and asked them to tell us about cultural resilience:

We are a strong community. No matter what, we don't give up. My generation is dying out. I would like to have more trainings like Native hope that way we can get closer with our culture and meeting people in our community. Every Sunday I go

sweat, and every day I pray, and every summer I go Sundance. We are culturally resilient, that is how it is for my generation, we are bouncing back for the culture. (Male Native Youth, eighteen years old)
Cultural resilience. I definitely think of our past and now because what was done to us was horrible but you can tell now that we are coming back definitely the fact that we are bringing back our language and way of life, our ceremonies are strong. I just think of the fact of what was ours, they tried to take it away from us but we knew, we held on it as much as possible, throughout the beatings our grandparents shared with us and it is coming back. (Female Native Youth, sixteen years old)
I go to sweat, ceremonies, I have been Sundancing for ten years. I feel like I am very active in our culture. Cultural resilience. Us as Native people our ability to maintain our ways despite all of the hardships our people have endured. How much we know about it and carryon and teach it to others. (Male Native Youth, eighteen years old)

How Can Cultural Resilience be Operationalized?

Understanding how cultural resilience can be used to reduce risk factors for suicide in Native youth was explored by each community. ICP documented the kinds of activities that were implemented in one Native community in the last twelve months. These activities included cultural day camps, hand games, teepee raising and painting, making Native foods, call back ceremonies, and drum making. Youth and mentors visited sacred sites including Bear Butte and Devils Tower. Another aspect of ICP activities were rite of passage ceremonies, including naming ceremonies, sweat lodge, and food offerings. Defining and operationalizing cultural resilience using community-definitions was the first step for planning elder-youth mentoring activities. The next step was documenting community resilience in a cultural context.

Method

First, our team worked with advisory councils in four Native communities to develop a cultural resilience scale that include the following dimensions: cultural knowledge and connections, language involvement and usage, sense of community and attachment to community, and intergenerational connections. Ratings were based on a five-point scale, where 1=Crisis, 2=Vulnerable, 3=Safe, 4=Stable, 5=Thriving. Second, ICP youth and elders completed the baseline cultural resilience scale in February 2017 (N=32) and in August 2017 at the end of the project (N=37). Completed scales were collected from community site coordinators and entered and analyzed using SPSS version 24.0.

Results

An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to compare community cultural resilience scores at baseline (February 2017) and at follow-up (August 2017). There was a significant increase for all scale items at baseline and at six-month follow- up—cultural knowledge, language involvement and usage, sense of community and attachment, and intergenerational connections.

At the beginning of ICP, elders and youth rated their community resilience as vulnerable to safe. At the end of the ICP year, ratings increased significantly toward the rating of safe to stable. These results suggest that ICP cultural activities and mentoring have increased community resilience scores and underscore the importance of assessing the impact of culturally-based mentoring programs.

Conclusion

In this brief report, we offered four community definitions of cultural resilience and summarized youth perspectives about cultural resilience. We also stressed the importance of documenting community perspectives of cultural resilience and how cultural resilience can be strengthened through projects like the Intergenerational Connection Project.

Preventing suicide and suicidal behaviors occurs in a cultural context. This cultural context is different for each tribe

Table 1. Community Cultural Resilience Scale

	Baseline February 2017 Mean (SD)	Follow-up August 2017 Mean (SD)
Community cultural knowledge and connections	2.75 (1.6)	3.73 (1.04) **
Community language involvement and usage	2.70 (1.9)	3.72 (1.13) **
Sense of community and attachment	2.60 (1.4)	3.66 (1.19) **
Community intergenerational connections	2.5 (1.6)	3.63 (1.12) **

**p<.01

and individual. Every tribe, youth, elder, and advisory council member has their own unique history that contributes to their resilience and vulnerability related to suicide risk. More funding is needed in Native communities that supports culturally-driven strengths-based interventions to address suicide risk. We urge professionals and communities to focus suicide prevention efforts on strengths-based resiliency factors as we have done in the ICP. One ICP elder said, "…[A]ccording to the published risk factors for suicide, every single person in our community is at risk." With these words in mind, mentoring programs like ICP may not eliminate all the risk factors that Native communities experience, but they can facilitate a connection to the community and culture and social support from a trusted elder/mentor. Ultimately, these are protective against suicide and will help youth access resources while feeling more connected to who they are and their way of life.

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Shawnee White Letter

April 27, 2018

Hello,

My name is Shawnee White. I am currently a freshman student at Little Wound High School. I am also a proud member of the ICP Strengthening of the Spirit team.

When I hear the words "cultural resilience" I think of how strong our ancestors were in the past and how our way of life was lived on a daily basis. The structure, society, culture, spirituality, and willingness to survive and live in harmony with the earth is definitely a beautiful thought.

When that way of life was threatened by the United States Government through persecution, punishment, cultural genocide, massacres, and the boarding school era, I can imagine that it was a time of disparity, hurt, defeating, and humiliating emotions that they had endured. The oppression and depression felt from such atrocities was a true test of our legacy, natural way of life, and our existence as human beings.

Our current generation is still faced with difficult challenges such as drugs, alcohol, lateral violence and oppression, suicide along with many other broken feelings stemming from historical trauma. Alcohol and drugs has no preference of age, gender, race, or color; it attacks all of us in a negative way. Our identity says a lot about who we are. Preserving our Sundances, ceremonies, language, social songs and dances such as powwow, honorings, rodeos, along with many other cultural events that reflect our heritage and traditional customs is a reminder to me that we, Lakota, are still here, alive and well, and mirror the strength shown and taught to us by our ancestors. This is what cultural resilience means to me.

Thank you for this opportunity and asking me to write this. I had a good time.

— *Shawnee White*

Allyson Kelley
(kelleyallyson@gmail.com) is a senior community health scientist and the founder of Allyson Kelley & Associates PLLC. Kelley supports research and evaluation efforts for several tribal public health initiatives in the Rocky Mountain region. Her research interests include building tribal community capacity to address the cultural, social, and environmental factors that contribute to differences in health outcomes among American Indian people. Kelley is the data manager for the Intergenerational Connection Project.

Clayton Small
(claytonsmall@aol.com) is the CEO of Native PRIDE (http://www.nativeprideus.org) and a member of the Northern Cheyenne tribe. Small is known throughout Indian Country for his work in the development of resilience-based mentoring and leadership programs for youth and families. He is the developer and lead author of the Good Road of Life and Native HOPE curriculum. These training programs are currently utilized by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Indian Health Services, Department of Justice, SAMHSA, and various tribal programs throughout the nation. Small's programs offer leadership and hope for Native people. Small is the Project Director for the Intergenerational Connection Project.

Maha Charani Small
(mcharani@yahoo.com) is Lebanese American and the Vice President of Native PRIDE. She has experience in education, counseling, and curriculum development. She supervises the curriculum development and implementation of programs. She is a founding member of the Native PRIDE organization as well as the Project Coordinator for the Intergenerational Connection Project.

Hawkeye Montileaux
(HawkeyeMontileaux@littlewound.us) is the Intergenerational Connection Project Site Coordinator at Littlewound School. He works closely with school counselors and mental health specialists to implement a therapeutic model of healing and hope for middle and high school youth. Montileaux leads a group of twenty Lakota youth who make up the ICP Strengthening the Spirit team. This team provides mentoring and support for youth placed at risk for suicide and substance use.

Shawnee White
(Shawneecree303@yahoo.com) is an evaluation associate for the Intergenerational Connection Project and a sophomore at Little Wound School. White is a member of the ICP Strengthening of the Spirit team. She works closely with the team to collect data and support culturally-based mentoring activities. ∎