

WISE PRACTICES

FOR PROMOTING LIFE IN FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES

HEALING THROUGH CULTURE: WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

CULTURE AS HEALING

In his article exploring Indigenous culture as mental health treatment, Gone (2013) describes the therapeutic approach of the Healing Lodge. He argues that participation in traditional practices can be a significant part of a healing journey, and is associated with positive shifts in First Nations **CULTURAL IDENTITY, BELONGING, AND PURPOSE**. In therapeutic terms, Indigenous cultural reclamation fundamentally rejects the assimilationist mandate of the residential schools in service to a ‘cultural renaissance of the Red Man’ (p. 696). The article makes a strong case for “**CULTURE-AS-TREATMENT**” which is supported by other studies as well (Crooks et al, 2017; Snowshoe et al, 2017).

For instance, Barker, Goodman, and DeBeck (2017) also identify “culture-as-treatment” as a framework for addressing the high rates of suicide among young people in many First Nations communities. Under this framework, rather than privileging individual psychological interventions, they assert that “Indigenous youth suicide is identified as a community crisis requiring social change through **CULTURAL RECLAMATION**” (p. 209).

Gone (2013) posits that the notion of Historical Trauma (HT) is an important “countercolonial construct” in that it preserves a relational emphasis, focuses on social pathology rather than “broken brains” (p. 688) and makes way for “opportunities for indigenous cultural education and ceremonial participation in service to **POWERFUL RENEWALS IN TRIBAL IDENTIFICATION**” (p. 688).

Acknowledging the diversity among American Indian/Alaskan Native cultures, some commonalities explored by Baete Kenyon and Hanson (2012) include: the focus on balance among spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical dimensions of wellness; and collective over individualistic thinking. Understanding “**CULTURE AS PREVENTION**”, research shows that the inclusion of these and other aspects of “cultural and spiritual development [show] a reduction in risk factors for suicide” (p. 273, see also Howard, 2010 for cultural considerations).

RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILY AND COMMUNITY AS HEALING

Indigenous understandings of resilience emphasize the importance of a strength-based approach to fostering resiliency in youth – such as **SUPPORTING FAMILY AND COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS** instead of ‘protecting’ children by removing them from their families (de Finney, 2017; Kirmayer et al, 2009). Importantly, the theories and approaches drawn on to understand resilience as a community process are informed by (and thus congruent with) Indigenous ways of knowing and living (Bird-Naytowhow, et al, 2017).

In a study by Strickland, Walsh, and Cooper (2006), data were collected from focus groups with 40 American Indian parents and individual interviews with nine American Indian elders. “All recognized a need for family and community-based interventions to reduce stress, depression, and hopelessness” (p. 8). These authors’ recommendations are based on the idea that “suicide prevention for American Indian people must be aimed at strengthening family, community, and cultural values” (p. 11). They highlight the importance of **COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACHES**, and **CULTURALLY RELEVANT THEORIES** to inform them, as do many other authors (Chino & DeBruyn, 2006; May et al, 2005; Saskamoose et al, 2017).

The work of Phillip, Ford, Henry, Rasmus, and Allen (2016) supports this. Their research indicates that CONNECTIONS TO ADULTS (as opposed to peers) were understood as an important protective factor in relation to family and community wellness, but not necessarily on an individual level. Adults in this project referred to immediate and extended family, Elders, and other community members.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH LAND AS HEALING

Equally important is connection to the land and environment, which is not understood as contextual, but also as INTERPERSONAL, POLITICAL, AND INTIMATE (de Finney, 2017; Isbister-Bear, Hatala, & Sjoblom, 2017). Individualistic models of resilience that dominate psychological literature need to be enlarged to take into account the dynamic systems that facilitate resilience for individuals, communities, and populations. INDIGENOUS EPISTEMOLOGIES can help with this (Chino & DeBruyn, 2006; de Finney, 2017). Leenaars, EchoHawk, Lester, and Leenaars (2007) assert that CONNECTION TO THE LAND IS VITAL, and can offer protective factors that contribute to suicide prevention.

Harder, Holyk, and Klassen-Ross (2015) report on a project that took place among the Carrier Sekani First Nations of northern British Columbia. They describe the promotion of Carrier systems as the core of suicide prevention. This includes “the development of a community-led suicide intervention resource manual based on Carrier values and the creation and provision of what became known as ‘culture camps’” (p. 22). The camps emphasized “traditional food gathering techniques, language, survival techniques, clan affiliation, and the bah’lats system” (p. 26). Research findings into this initiative demonstrated that taken together these experiences contributed to a SENSE OF BELONGING AND IDENTITY among participants. They also expressed that “engaging and participating in culture camp added new layers of meaning to their lives. Participants made reference to experiences of self-awareness, enhancement, and discovery” (p. 28).

LANGUAGE AND STORY AS HEALING

Through detailed narrative analysis and links with both scholarly literature and Mi’kmaq traditional knowledge, Kirmayer et al (2012) explore “the spirit of the treaties” as a source of Mi’kmaq resilience. Then they similarly explore 1) Mohawk resilience, based in STORIES OF RESISTANCE AND REVITALIZATION, 2) Metis resilience, which centres STORIES OF SELF-RELIANCE, debrouillardise, and RELATIONAL RESILIENCE, and 3) Inuit resilience, drawing strength from LANGUAGE AND THE LAND. The authors’ explicit detail of these stories helps to illustrate the significance of the form of story itself in relation to resilience – and PRESERVING DIVERSITY in our understandings of it. The content of these stories of resilience is significant in that “Aboriginal perspectives remind us that much of what seems to promote resilience originates outside the individual” (p. 411).

McCarty, Romero, and Zepeta (2006) also point to the significance of language for identity development. Based on their research, these authors recommend a strategic marshalling of resources to support language retention. “Most youth in this study indicated that they value the Native language, view it as central to their identities, want

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All the walls between services – like social services or medical or leadership – are not felt that much during the project. Everybody feels like one community. It really involves the whole community more and more.

and expect parents to teach it to them ... and, in many cases, employ it as a strategic tool to facilitate their learning of English in school” (p. 43).

RESISTING UNIVERSALIZED ‘BEST’ PRACTICES

By drawing on a range of previously published research, Tatz (2012) highlights the fact that there was a time in the not so distant past when Aboriginal suicide was seen to be “a rare occurrence.” Indeed, suicide was something new in Aboriginal life around 1980, “but it was a phenomenon that escalated to a rate that was among the highest in the world by the end of the century” (p. 925). Hatala et al (2017)’s research indicates that many of the hardships endured by Indigenous young people have contributed to a thwarted future orientation, which limits them from experiencing themselves in the continuity of time (and enhances their risk of suicide and poor mental wellness). Thus, [THE DECOLONIZING WORK OF RECLAIMING CULTURAL PRACTICES AND TEACHINGS](#) is integral to combating historical trauma (and in turn, life promotion work) in Indigenous communities (Clarke, 2016). Communities in which cultural ties are strong are most often those communities in which suicide rates are low or non-existent.

Many Aboriginal people may be sceptical of mainstream mental health practices, and the language of resilience can be a different and hopeful way forward. It has facilitated the emergence of [CREATIVE AND COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITY HEALING PRACTICES](#). A re-emergence of celebrating traditional cultural practices seem to be contributing to resilience among young people who are identifying anew with cultural knowledge, ceremonies, and practices – and fostering pride (Isbister-Bear, Hatala, & Sjoblom, 2017).

Welsey-Esquimaux and Snowball (2010) argue the concept ‘[WISE PRACTICES](#)’ (contrasted with the more common notion of ‘best practices’) can lift up the morale of Indigenous people by deliberately resisting a victim representation and tapping into an “underlying current of wellness that is related to traditional teachings that has found root and expression at the community level” (p. 391). Wexler (2014), too, clearly articulates the connection between [CULTURE AND RESILIENCE](#). She draws on a wide range of research (including her own) to demonstrate how Indigenous cultures support people to overcome “acute and ongoing challenges” (p. 73).

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