

WISE PRACTICES

FOR PROMOTING LIFE IN FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES STRENGTHENING INDIGENOUS IDENTITY: WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

LOSS OF CULTURE

Elliot-Groves' (2017) recent research makes explicit links between increased rates of suicide in the Cowichan Tribes (British Columbia) and **LOSS OF CONNECTION TO LAND AND CULTURE**, in conjunction with interpersonal factors such as a thwarted sense of belonging. Other Indigenous scholars have pointed to the loss of culture that has come with settler-colonialism and its deleterious effects on wellbeing for Indigenous people. These include but are not limited to high rates of suicide (see for example Ansloos, 2017; Gone, 2013; Harder, Holyk, Russell, & Klassen-Ross, 2015; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Kirmayer et al (2007) observe that “processes of marginalization and acculturation stress do not simply reflect individual differences in adaptation, but are largely determined by social and political forces beyond the individual” (p. 78). Rather than solely focusing on individual risk factors when it comes to suicide among First Nations youth, these authors point out that “governmental policies of forced assimilation enacted through the residential school system and the child welfare system resulted in profound disruption in the transmission of culture and the maintenance of healthy communities” (p. 78). Leenaars et al (2007) pay particular attention to this loss of culture, and the **SUBSEQUENT TRAUMA** as central to the relatively new phenomenon of Indigenous youth suicide - emphasizing the vital connection between land and culture.

They say, “people don't know who they are, where they came from, and where they are going” (p. 484). Since 1999, Leenaars and a group of Indigenous colleagues asserted that refusing to be silent is a remedy for high suicide rates, as it connects people with each other, with who they are, and with the past and the future. Learning from Elders and reinvigorating cultural knowledge, can unburden the mind and promote life. These efforts can serve to **ACTIVELY RESIST ASSIMILATION** policies that enabled the cultural genocide. “Generations had suffered, but the people are now a healing people” (p. 349).

COLLIDING CULTURES

Wexler's (2009) research illustrates how difficult it can be for young people to **NEGOTIATE WESTERN VALUES** taught through school (prioritizing individual choice) and traditional Indigenous values taught through their families and communities (prioritizing relational decision-making). The idea of individual choice leads to negative judgements of individuals when so-called 'bad' decisions are made, because this way of thinking doesn't account for how relational processes inform action. “Caught within this web of relations, many people feel as if they have very little room to maneuver, even though they believe they should have control over their lives” (p. 13), further strengthening and internalizing colonial discourses by blaming people for not doing better.

Through explicitly detailed stories, Kirmayer et al (2012) help 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). The discussion and conclusion of this article do a beautiful job of preserving the diversity of the stories shared and also tying them together in terms of the national 'story' of Canada as a peaceful and fair nation. The authors posit that while these traditional stories were once place-

specific and in many ways still are, their important teachings now also simultaneously inform of HOW WE MOVE FORWARD COLLECTIVELY. “[T]he new forms of networking made possible by the Internet and electronic media also allow individuals and remote communities to advance their interests in larger popular and political arenas. In these ways, Indigenous cultures and communities may come to play an increasingly active role in the global exchange of cultures and ideas” (p. 409).

CULTURAL CONTINUITY

The work of Chandler and Proulx (2006) suggests that when we lose a sense of continuity then “life seems no longer worth the trouble it costs” and suicide then and only then becomes a real possibility (p. 127). With this in mind, they explored how it is people come to understand themselves as “continuous persons – persons with a past for which they feel responsible, and future in which they are seriously invested,” as this can have significant implications for suicide prevention (p. 127). They hypothesized a connection between this SENSE OF A SELF OVER TIME and suicide, and then ranked a number of communities in terms of ‘cultural continuity’ markers (such as self-government, control of services, and title over traditional lands).

They found that “... every band possessing all of these cultural continuity factors experienced no youth suicides during the 5-year study window, whereas those communities lacking in any of these ‘protective’ factors suffered youth suicide rates more than 100 times the national average” (p. 139). Importantly, in their summary, the authors explicitly connect the colonial project to the fact that many of these communities have lost track of themselves in time and their sense of CULTURAL CONTINUITY.

Hallett, Chandler, and Lalonde (2007) state that “at least in the case of BC, those bands in which a majority of members reported a conversational knowledge of an Aboriginal language also experienced low to absent youth suicide rates. By contrast, those bands in which less than half of the members reported conversational knowledge suicide rates were six times greater” (p. 398).

These projects are all based on the earlier work of Chandler and Lalonde (1998), who identified four empirically supported assumptions that are often cited by many other authors in this review: 1) that young people die by suicide more than adults; 2) that those whose cultures are under siege are more likely to die by suicide; 3) that “suicidal adolescents will prove to be uniquely marked by an inability to sustain a sense of self-continuity” (p. 3); and 4) that “First Nations groups characterized by community efforts to achieve a greater sense of cultural continuity will show reduced suicide rates” (p. 3).

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Even though current suicide prevention often focuses on prediction of risk, this is misguided since “the probabilities for accurately predicting extremely low base-rate occurrences or statistically rare occurrences such as

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We recognize that the spirit is most vulnerable to run into struggles about committing to the continued journey of life at the points of transition, because they often are hard places to go – from one stage to the next.

But throughout time we’ve actually recognized that and we’ve created various ceremonies that are associated with those different stages. And those ceremonies are conducted then to help those young men and young women, as well as older people as they transition into later stages ...

suicide are remarkably low” (Alcantara & Gone, 2007, p. 459). Further complicating the likelihood of this being effective is the paradoxical reality that “any ‘treatment’ for suicide must necessarily occur before the act itself” (p. 459). Prediction is not necessary for meaningful engagement, however, and practices can be developed along a continuum focusing on the individual, the individual-environment relationship, and the environment (Alcantara & Gone, 2007).

Nicol (2012) states that young people need to feel they matter in their communities and feel a sense of pride. She reports on a range of initiatives that centre suicide less and focus more on spiritual and cultural practices that are more holistic in nature and have a meaningful “impact on preventing youth suicide” (p. 23). “Young people tend to enjoy better health when they have clear and positive ideas about who they are, how they can contribute to a larger purpose, people to help them, and avenues to do so” (Wexler et al, 2012, p. 617). This is particularly important for Indigenous youth whose identities, self-esteem, and self-efficacy have been thwarted by the cultural disruption caused by colonization, assimilation, and racism - these are all linked to suicide and substance abuse (Wexler et al, 2012).

As noted above, not all Indigenous communities have high rates of suicide (Chandler & Proulx, 2006). The notion of cultural continuity highlights the potential of culturally appropriate Positive Youth Development as a promising approach to suicide prevention. Howard’s (2010) research indicates that “promoting traditional cultural identity, including language, and traditional beliefs and values is a proactive approach. Spirituality is also found to be important” (p. 177).

Understanding “culture as prevention”, research shows that the inclusion of “cultural and spiritual development [show] a reduction in risk factors for suicide” (Baete Kenyon & Hanson, 2012, p. 273). The authors then outline a Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework to demonstrate how cultural strengths can be integrated into programs and policies. PYD works to increase protective factors (and decrease risk factors) and to provide support for youth at home, in school and in their community. The overall goal is to provide a safe and nurturing environment for youth, rather than focusing on ‘fixing’ their problems.

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