

Seeing the Protective Rainbow: How Families Survive and Thrive in the American Indian and Alaska Native Community

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Family Resiliency in Native American Communities

This brief summarizes a longer paper American Indian and Alaskan Native Family Resiliency: A Protective Rainbow that breaks new ground in several ways. As one of the few empirically based studies on Native American family resiliency which included members of numerous tribal groups, the study explores the nature of family resiliency in tribal life today. Using first-person narratives combined with other data, the study looks at the unique resiliency themes, factors and characteristics of Native American families that allow them to respond to adverse situations. Told from a Native perspective, the research provides practitioners, policy makers, and community-based organizations with a nuanced view of how American Indian and Alaskan Native American communities have survived, what they value, and how deeply rooted practice and beliefs have sustained them for generations.

On its own the study is not conclusive, but rather provides guidance for a broader research agenda and opportunities for more culturally responsive engagement in these communities. It opens the door to further research and development in a host of areas, including family policy, social networks development, and cultural competency.

Overview

Context is critical in understanding Native American culture and society and is influenced by historical issues of federal-Indian law, traumatic effects of land loss, relocation to other states, tribal identity and enrollment, boarding school experiences, pressures to assimilate, and social and economic changes. Their context is also infused by strengths, abilities, opportunities, and behaviors to handle problems in their own families and communities in the Native American tradition.

Native Americans have been historically traumatized and are the victims and survivors of colonialism (Brennan and Mackey 1973). As individuals, families, communities, and tribes, they have overcome numerous physical, psychological, social, religious and cultural



“And I’ve always known our Indian people are resilient. And we’ve been resilient because of our culture and our spirituality and within the Creator. I’ve always known that. And I’m just so glad that there will be some validation of what we knew all along.”

– Focus Group Participant

abuses caused by insensitive or even intentionally harmful federal actions and policies. As a result, children were removed from their families and communities, families destroyed, and tribes separated from their land. Native American approaches to coping with these radical social and cultural changes are the foundation for the study summarized in this brief. The study looked in detail at family resiliency and includes many examples of resilience promoting behavior in individuals and families. These examples and stories paint a powerful picture of how family strengths and resiliency support the development and well-being of individuals, families, and as a result the community in general.

Family resiliency provides a powerful lens for disassembling the components of culture and practice and a compelling means to understand social networks in Native American communities in a new way. This study explores the complexity of family resiliency and connects an array of factors without elevating any single one as a solution to complex problems. This discussion and analysis illustrates the intangibles and other factors that might be written off as idiosyncratic or situational but are elements of a metaphorical rainbow that has served to protect these communities from over 500 years of historical and institutional trauma.

Family Resiliency Defined

Resiliency is a complex construct that can involve the domains of human behavior, gender, mental health, social work, violence, issues related to adulthood, theory, and policy. Many authors agree that no precise theory nor agreed upon definition of resiliency exists. Several researchers have posited definitions:

...the ability to bounce or spring back after being stretched or constrained or recovering strength and spirit (Greene, 2002).

It is fluid, process and product oriented, dynamic, developmental, and interactive between many environments from the individual, family, and group to the community; it consists of finding a balance when coping during stressful times and is influenced by life context (Greene and Conrad 2002).

...resilience does not come from rare and special qualities but from the everyday magic of ordinary human resources in the minds, brains, and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and their communities (Greene and Conrad 2002).

Resilience is “reserved for unpredicted or markedly successful adaptations to negative life events, trauma, stress, and other forms of risk (Fraser et al 1999).”

Resiliency is often discussed in conjunction with family strengths. According to Moore et al, “We think of family strengths as the set of relationships and processes that support and protect families and family members, especially during times of adversity and change. Family strengths help to maintain family cohesion while also supporting the development and well-being of individual family members (Moore et al. 2002).”

Resiliency: A Tri-Focal View in Native American Families

A deep understanding of Native resiliency requires a look at knowledge about three areas: resiliency in general, the relational worldview, and Native American strengths. Within Native American families, resiliency is a particularly complex construct in part due to the importance and extent of family and kinship roles. Consisting of a larger social unit, Native American families are defined by how they provide for children and the elderly in the human life cycle. Extended family often includes blood relatives and also includes those related by clan, informal adoption, spiritual ties, and other tribal community recognition processes.

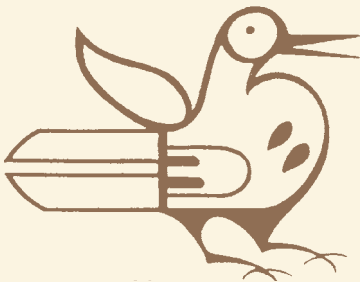
We grew up pretty poor... She always said that we were rich. And we were rich because we had our relatives and we were rich because we had our friends.

Another layer of complexity is that the Native American ethos is based on different worldviews, languages, values, cultures, and religions; further complicated by the huge tribal diversity that exists. Native Americans, also, hold a relational world view which further distinguishes them. Terry Cross describes the foundational belief system of this relational world view as having four quadrants – the mental, physical, spiritual, and contextual. Native American strengths are an important adjunct including some 42 strengths identified by Goodluck such as tribal identity, extended family, language, traditions, humor, ritual, group orientation, stories, view of children, and spirituality. Family strengths help to maintain family cohesion while also supporting the development and well-being of individual family members (Moore et al. 2002).

Using this trifocal approach provides us with the knowledge, values, language, and skills needed to understand the complexity of resiliency from the tribal cultural perspective. Resiliency in Native American communities involves an interdependence of factors that are relational rather than linear according to Long and Nelson. While precise definitions vary across the broader community, many Native Americans characterize resiliency first through the broader themes of culture, traditions, language, spirituality, family and survival. For complex tribal groups like this, Grotberg defined resiliency as:

A universal capacity which allows a person, group, or community to prevent, minimize or overcome the damaging effects of adversity. Resilience may transform or make stronger the lives of those who are resilient. The resilient behavior may be in response to adversity in the form of maintenance or normal development despite adversity, or a promoter of growth beyond the present level of functioning (as cited in Greene and Conrad, 2002).

The concepts and practices of wellness, walking in beauty, harmony, and balance are extensions of resiliency-in-action within a tribal culture. Thus, when one sees an individual, family, group, or community showing signs of unhealthy, unbalanced, dysfunctional, and out of harmony behavior, this is a signal to all of the group members to “come into ceremony” once again. The cycle begins to restore itself through the use of traditions, values, and practices known to that culture and tribe.



Because Native Americans have such an inclusive group approach rather than a more individual orientation and differing values and belief systems “cultural resilience” may be a better fit with this population. Iris HeavyRunner, a respected Native American researcher, is the conceptual mother for an understanding of cultural resilience in tribal communities. Along with her colleague, J. Morris, HeavyRunner has discussed traditional native culture and resilience and how these concepts provide fuel and energy to support healing in tribal communities (Heavyrunner and Morris 1997). She describes cultural resilience as a “message of hope, courage, faith, and persistence...it is at the core of why someone decides to heal.”

According to Angell three themes of Native American resilience are traditional name, search for harmony, and identity. These themes provide Native individuals the protection against harmful influences in cross-cultural experiences. The connection to language and culture and the importance of resiliency is further underscored by the fact that every indigenous language has a word that means resilience (HeavyRunner and Marshall 2003). For example, one Lakota word for resiliency is wacan tognaka (translated as strong will) and a word in Ho-Chunch is wa nah igh mash jah (translated as strong mind).

Rainbow as Metaphor: Native Resiliency

The narratives in this study drew out an overriding theme; the protective nature of resiliency in the personal, familial, community, and tribal environments. The ability to be resilient in difficult times has allowed the individual, family, community and tribe to survive and provide for its members and to go forward in spite of difficulties. Seven other themes developed from the data, as follows and not presented in any hierarchal form: ethos and values, religion and spirituality, language, extended family, responses from culture, sense of humor and moving forward to the Seventh Generation. These seven themes are distinct and interwoven, representing the often invisible social and cultural context in which Native Americans live, play and work.

Native American belief systems often rely on elements from nature and the environment to illustrate their connections to the earth, animals, humans, unseen realities and other beings. Drawing from these beliefs, we used the rainbow as a metaphor to present these themes in a culturally relevant manner. The rainbow shows that the cycle of life continues, and demonstrates that the stories of Native people are part of an unending pattern of earth, sky and air.



The Rainbow

Traditional belief systems often rely on elements from nature and the environment to illustrate their connections to the earth, animals, humans, unseen realities, and other beings. In this context, the rainbow shows that the cycle of life continues, and demonstrates that the stories of the Indian people are part of an unending pattern of earth, sky, and air.



The Seven Themes of the Rainbow

Ethos and Values: Ethos is described as giving individuals their sense of belonging to a culture with similar belief systems and practices that guide their behavior. Neufeldt and Guralnik describe ethos as the “characteristics and distinguishing attitudes, habits, beliefs...of an individual or of a group (Neufeldt and Guralnik, 1991).” Respect is guided by a set of morals and behaviors that are based on higher level beliefs such as hope and optimism. “Being good” is part of the belief.

“Respect toward other individuals is a paramount value...[I was taught to] always show people respect, no matter who it was.”

Religion and Spirituality: Religion was paramount in forming Native American ideas about resilience. For them, religion is part of the total circle of life and consistent with their relational worldview; mind, body, spirit, and context are considered one entity. Native Americans have strong religious beliefs to aid them in difficult times.

“...And I’ve always known our Indian people are resilient...we’ve been resilient because of our culture and our spirituality and within the Creator.”

“I think spirituality plays a very important role in our lives. If something happens, we all contact each other and have ceremony or do whatever we need to do to take care of the problem.”

Language: Language is seen as critical for passing culture, values, and beliefs to children by parents and elders. An understanding of traditional tribal language is important to convey the meaning of stories. In many of their stories, Native Americans talked about the loss of language including stories of how grandparents were forced to speak English in boarding schools, stripping them of their tribal languages.

“When you think of war, when someone wants to defeat someone else, the first thing they take is their religion, they take their language and their culture, and they take their spirituality...so we’ve been through a war.”

“Language itself [is] important. I get the stories from elders and use those. This reminds me of the things I gotta do to be responsible for my family, my children, myself, my tribe, and my language... I was told by an elder that language is a discipline in life... But that’s what keeps me going, my language, my culture. So that’s what we stress to young people and [you] have to learn that to get where you want to go.

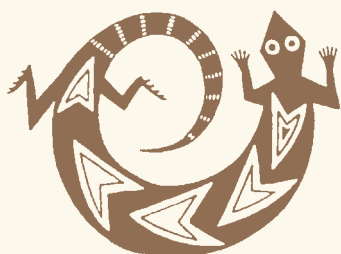


Extended Family: The extended family is the nexus for resilience to express itself. The family, clan relationships, extended family, and other relatives play an important role in how they coped with adverse circumstances. This extended family plays a vital role with everyone coming together in times of stress and crisis to support family members. Stories illustrated the acceptance of one's role in family and community, the sense of loss of elders and their knowledge and wisdom, the pull to be available to children, siblings, family, community and tribe in order to give back what had been given by the elders.

"Everybody pulled together, the whole community pulled together and they helped everybody bounce back. If you don't have problems, then you can't get strong."

"...unity with family, clan, and community, unwritten education which is how we learned things, respect to family, self, elders, and environment. We live a subsistence lifestyle. We're spiritual; we have a language; we have an identity. That networking of love, it's not just my family or my wife's family, it's my aunts and uncles and grandparents."

"I feel like there's nothing I could tell an elder about resiliency. I would have to listen to them. If I could tell young people something, I would tell them to hold onto their elders with all of their might."



Responses from the Culture: Many cultural based practices and tribal programs support members and families to bring out their strengths and to cope with various problems. Twelve cultural rituals that were most often referred to were: beadwork, drumming, sweat lodges, talking circles, dancing, smudging, prayer, visions and dreams, pow wows, naming ceremonies, medicine man and sun dance. Two tribal programs, canoe journey and cultural camps, were mentioned, revitalizing tradition and expanding horizons in terms of creative energy and ideas.

"...traditional ways, as a center for me...The sweats [sweat lodge], it [sic] not really a sweat... the things that I go back to and sweat about is kind of healing for me. It's me where I need to be all the time..."

"And then the young men are in the inner circle and then their parents and grandparents are in the outer circle and then they say, you know, spiritually the ancestors are in the ... circle...It's just really wonderful to see the effect that it has on those boys."

Sense of Humor: Humor is the ability to not take life so seriously and an internal mechanism to help us put things into perspective, cope with difficulties, and bring grace into the world. It can be very subtle or more direct with jokes or self-deprecating stories.

"A strength, I think, is a good sense of humor. I think it helps people to bounce back. In my family we've laughed at times that were some of the saddest, but it helped us get through it."

"I think humor is a huge part of our life...I think that my family uses humor a lot. Again, in a gentle way..."

Moving Forward to the Seventh Generation: Resiliency is part of a family's ability to move into the future and take a problem and cope with it in their own special way, ultimately moving to resolution or acceptance. Future thinking is also part of the resilient person. The concept of the "Seventh Generation" is inferred from the Great Law of the Iroquois which in practice means that Native American's must consider the impact of their decisions on the next seven generations.

"[We are like a] blade of grass. When stepped on it bounces back and suggests that there's a strong inner core there that allows families to carry on [with the] stresses of life that come to everyone."

"The nature of Native American family resiliency is that resiliency is a cornerstone of family and tribal systems that provides protection within a cultural context. The traditions learned from elders and other community members provide a shield for individuals, families, and tribal communities to handle the problems in both personal and professional worlds."

Working More Effectively with Native American Communities:

Using these seven themes as a context, partners to Native communities can build trust to develop lasting relationships with community members over time. This study provides a useful entry point to understanding how these unseen forces operate. A deeper understanding of resiliency in tribal communities can inform the development of culturally responsive family strengthening approaches and models.

Federal, state and local policymakers, as well as, philanthropic organizations, can use this study to more effectively understand family resiliency across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, leading to deeper knowledge about the distinctions of communities and regions. This understanding can further inform public policies, program development, and engagement opportunities. For example, The Annie E. Casey Foundation used much of its learning



about Native family resiliency and asset-based approaches when developing its Native American Initiative. Furthermore, Organic Philanthropy, the Foundation's philanthropic model for working in Native and Southwest Border communities, is rooted in the belief that each community has inherent strengths, wisdom, resiliency and hope upon which to build a better future. In this model, Native communities possess the capacity and wisdom to find innovative solutions that allow them to meet their challenges head-on.

If we can understand what helps some people to function well in the context of high adversity, we may be able to incorporate this knowledge into new practice strategies (Fraser et al 1999).

Research Methods

This project is an outgrowth of prior research conducted by the authors in the area of Native American children and youth well-being indicators. Identifying Native American strengths instead of focusing only on a deficit perspective was an important element of this work. Including deficit and positive indicators provides a more balanced picture of Native American well-being and both of these perspectives gives tribes and practitioners more complete access to the breadth of research data and information available for future planning and program development.

Quantitative and qualitative research methods were used to guide this investigation. The data was collected in focus groups comprised of individuals attending national Native American oriented conferences and training sessions in late 2002. The participants expressed their views and opinions about how they have personally experienced resiliency in their own lives and often gave examples from their professional work. The participants were primarily from Native American cultural backgrounds working as professionals in various human services-oriented organizations and representing all tribes around the country.

Note: All quotes in this document are from participants in the study unless otherwise noted

Footnotes

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