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Article *in* The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth · January 2009

DOI: 10.1353/hcy.0.0055

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LISA WEXLER

THE IMPORTANCE OF IDENTITY, CULTURE AND HISTORY FOR INDIGENOUS YOUTH WELLNESS

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous people have experienced profound disruptions, including epidemics, forced relocation, cultural colonization, and genocide over the past few centuries. Indigenous young people have not evenly understood or consciously articulated these historical events,¹ but the behavioral health consequences for them have been well documented. These historical events have been linked to acculturation stress and identity conflicts, and rapid social change has been associated with significant health problems among Indigenous young people.²⁻⁵ Conversely, studies have consistently found robust correlations between positive affiliation and engagement with their culture and Indigenous young people's well-being and resilience.⁶⁻⁹ Resilience, here, can be understood as the processes by which people overcome life challenges to achieve their sense of well-being. Although the connection between culture and these processes are clear, previous studies have neglected to describe *how* cultural identity plays into Indigenous youth wellness and resilience. Specifically, they have failed to explain how a strong and positive link to their culture supports young people, especially as they encounter and respond to hardships. In this article, I will present a model for understanding the role of ethnic identity development in Indigenous youth resilience and will point to the value of historical consciousness in that process.

HISTORICAL TRAUMA AND INDIGENOUS YOUTH HEALTH

Historical trauma has been defined as "a combination of acculturative stress, cultural bereavement, genocide, and racism that has been generalized, internalized, and institutionalized."^{10, 12} Such trauma is cumulative and unresolved,¹¹ as well as both historic and ongoing."¹² According to Indigenous people and

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researchers, historical trauma can be implicated in many of the current health problems experienced by Indigenous communities.^{13,14}

For example, the youth suicide rate for Indigenous populations around the globe is elevated when compared to other minority groups.^{15–19} Research has clearly established a connection between these high suicide rates and the culture loss or historical trauma experienced by Indigenous people.^{16, 20–23} These generalized associations of historical trauma refer to the lingering and negative effects associated with traumas experienced by previous generations and affecting contemporary people.¹ Although the influence of historical trauma on Indigenous health is assumed,^{7,24} few investigations have provided an explanatory model to describe this link.

This is also true for the converse. Scholarship connecting cultural affiliation to youth well-being is abundant,^{25–27} but the mechanics of this process go without scrutiny. The link between cultural affiliation and well-being is explained as the answer to core questions such as “Who am I?” “Who are we as a people?” and “Where am I going?”⁷ but the specific processes involved in this discovery remain unexamined. I will consider how and in what ways historical consciousness and memory—individual and group awareness of the past—intersects with cultural identity and affects the health of Indigenous youth.

Although there has been some scholarship on history and memory that emphasizes linkages between historical understandings and cultural identity,¹ there has been little attention paid to the mechanisms that support these connections. The following arguments borrow mainly from youth development, Indigenous mental health, and post-conflict psychology.

Adolescent Development and Culture

Developing a distinct identity and crafting a collateral sense of purpose are key elements in healthy youth development.^{28,29} Accomplishing these tasks fosters continued healthy development and psychological ease.

In order to get a realistic picture of how this process works in the lives of Indigenous youth, it is important to consider how the dominant society intersects with identity formation and negotiation in adolescence. Identity formation is related to expectations of what it means to be a man or woman, Indigenous or White, elder or youth in different settings. The relative importance and meaning of these categories is shaped by the young person’s community and the dominant society. In the case of Indigenous youth, images of the “noble savage” or the “drunk Indian”³⁰ make it hard for them to construct salient identities within the larger society without a strong sense of their group history. Clearly, identifying with one’s heritage and developing a strong cultural identity is extremely important for Indigenous young people.

Cultural identification includes recognizing one's cultural attributes—beliefs, values, practices, norms, traditions, and heritage—along with understanding how they are (and are not) reflected in one's self.^{31, 32} These cultural attributes are both internally and externally defined, as they come from personal choices as well as ascriptions of others. As Indigenous young people negotiate these different (sometimes contradicting) notions of selfhood, they are engaged in a creative endeavor.³³ They are constrained by ideas of the past and the present—those found in their traditional culture as well as those embedded in the dominant society.³⁴ The outcomes of these processes—the development of a clear sense of self—can be fundamental in supporting healthy development.

Crafting a strong cultural identity is a particularly important developmental task for Indigenous and other ethnic minority young people who experience discrimination, racism, and prejudice.³⁵ In the ethnic identity development model,³⁶ adolescents construct their ethnic identity around two basic dimensions: exploration and commitment. The former measures how much effort is put into understanding the dimensions and significance of one's ethnic heritage, whereas the latter signifies the strength of one's ethnic affiliation. The best outcome of this process are "adolescents with an achieved ethnic identity [who] have a working knowledge of their ethnic heritage, a clear idea of the meaning of their ethnic group membership, and a commitment to their ethnicity and the role it plays in their lives."³⁵

A positive ethnic identity seems to provide minority adolescents with self-esteem gained through coping skills that make them more likely to use active strategies to confront hardship. This has been found to be particularly important for Indigenous young people who may have experienced discrimination and prejudice based on their ethnic group affiliation.³⁷ A strong sense of cultural identity has also been correlated with higher levels of psychological health for Indigenous youth.^{6, 7, 38} Psychological well-being encourages individuals to meaningfully engage with larger societal issues.

Historical Memory, Indigenous Identity Development, and Youth Health

History provides groups not only with a platform for mutual affinity, but also with a sense of collective meaning-making about who they are, where they came from, and what future direction they should take. This is because "memory is the foundation of self and society."³⁹ To create an ethnic identity "requires that certain beliefs, practices, or characteristics be elevated to core values and claimed as shared experiences. . . . A shared history invests ethnic identity with social value and contributes directly to mental health."²²

The ways in which a people understand their collective, cultural history can have profound effects on an individual's sense of identity. Joane Nagel's

work illustrates how the civil rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s provided incentive for Indigenous individuals to claim (or reclaim) their native ancestry. In these years, the U.S. Census recorded triple the number of people claiming American Indian heritage, an increase that cannot be accounted for by simple population growth or measurement error. She claims that the Red Power movement strengthened many people's ethnic identity "by dramatizing long held grievances, communicating an empowered and empowering image of Indianness, and providing Native Americans, particularly Native youth, opportunities for action and participation in the larger Indian cause."⁴⁰ In this way, social memory functions as a historical interpretation that imbues meaning to individuals and communities and presents strategies for future collective action.⁴¹

Collective/cultural memory helps individuals find their place in larger temporal and social contexts and situates them as actors in their community and in the world. This is important developmentally since young people tend to do better if they identify with values that transcend themselves. This means that youth are more likely to thrive if they relate to values that supersede family and self and that have historical continuity, commanding respect from others who have lived before and who will live after them.⁴² In a large study conducted with two tribes, one in the Northern Plains and one in the Southwest, Jervis et al. state, "It is clear that the past is neither forgotten nor deemed unimportant among contemporary American Indian tribes."⁴³ As a significant component of many tribal communities, collective/cultural memory can provide positive guidance to Indigenous young people as they construct their identities by pointing the way to a socially and personally productive future.

Within the context of historical trauma and ongoing discrimination, culture and its historical context can provide individuals with stabilizing resources to draw on when seeking to frame a coherent sense of self. In this way, affiliation with one's Indigenous culture can provide a framework in which individuals can locate themselves in relation to others, to a larger shared context, and to history. "The production of culture creates collective meaning, a perception of community through mythology and history, and shapes symbolic bases for ethnic mobilization."⁴⁴ For individuals, this has translated into feelings of connection, belonging, and purpose which have been associated with resilience and well-being in many different age groups and peoples.⁴³⁻⁴⁵

This cultural orientation and historical foundation can provide a sense of grounding, self-worth, social connectedness, and purpose to indigenous young people. This broad explanation provides a rationale for the strong associations found between various forms of cultural affiliation and Indigenous youth well-

being.^{6-8,33,46} When young people have a clear understanding of their cultural past, present, and future, it is easier for them to sustain a sense of connectedness and commitment to their future.⁴⁷

Cultural identifications emphasize membership and connection to a group, socially-defined roles that call for moral and civic responsibility, and ways to enact these roles in service of a greater purpose. In combination, recognition of a positive, socially defined role and enactment of that role based on a moral and civic identity are linked to thriving.^{43, 48-50} This literature has not yet focused on Indigenous people and the function of cultural identity in producing socially defined roles, explicit pathways to combat hardships (resilience), and pathways to contribute to a greater, community good (thriving). Understanding these processes is vital to support Indigenous efforts to improve the health outcomes of youth living in post-conflict areas.^{13, 23}

Identity-Relevance of Meaning

Little is known about the social processes and personal and community meanings that reinforce the connection between history, culture, and health in the lived experience of Indigenous people, but the concept of Identity-Relevance of Meaning (IRM)⁵¹ provides a helpful theoretical structure for this inquiry. Simply stated, the theory posits that if young people can make sense of their experiences by locating themselves and their situation within historical understandings and community meanings, they are better able to overcome hardship and sustain psychological health. IRM provides a theoretical foundation to begin to understand the importance of individual meaning-making within the confines of historical, social, political context.

IRM was developed by Brian Barber after studying young people who have experienced political violence.⁵¹ After interviewing Palestinian and Bosnian young people years after experiencing war, he came to appreciate that the perceptions of, functioning in, and experience of adapting to war are shaped heavily by the meaning that the conflict holds for the young people and their communities. Thus, the meanings that their historical, political, cultural, and religious systems give young people to interpret the origin, purpose, and value of the conflict shapes the psychological and health ramifications of that conflict. Palestinian young people have a rich ideology that gives clear information as to the nature of the conflict and their role in it, but there is almost a complete absence of such historical direction for the Bosnians, who, therefore, have suffered substantially more psychologically from their war experiences.⁵²

IRM provides a useful perspective to understand the stark health disparities young people in Indigenous communities suffer as they try to make sense of and adapt to their communities' post-conflict experience. Although previous

research has documented Indigenous adults' and elders' understanding that historical events and experiences (e.g., the trauma of boarding schools, outlawing of traditional languages, and the spread of disease) are the root cause of many social and health problems.^{13,24,53} Indigenous young people are much less apt to make this claim. Instead, young Indigenous people often understand their communities' present difficulties as arising from personal and collective failure, rather than emerging from historical trauma and ongoing colonization.⁵⁴ This is perhaps because contemporary oppression is ambiguous, embedded in the everyday structures of school,⁵⁵ business, media, etc.¹⁹ This makes it invisible to many.

Because of this inability to locate their current experiences in historical, post-conflict context, young people have more difficulty associating their personal hardships with a shared community experience. Without this collective meaning-making, many Indigenous young people are unable to see clear and meaningful ways to contribute to their personal and collective struggle. With this gap in their knowledge, they may experience ambivalence about their cultural identity as well as a lack of connection, legitimacy, and urgency related to the (cultural) conflict itself. One way of addressing this involves helping Indigenous young people find a meaningful connection with their heritage and the role it plays in their lives. This can not only provide them with a solid foundation for developing their cultural identity, it can also support youth in crafting a collective, transcendent purpose. These endeavors have been shown to have real health consequences for Indigenous youth.

CONCLUSION

Although research on Indigenous young people has long identified cultural affiliation as an important factor in supporting resilience and well-being, there has been little attention given to developing a theoretical framework to understand this association more fully. In this paper, I argue that a historical understanding of and affiliation with one's culture can provide Indigenous youth with a perspective that transcends the self, incorporates a larger temporal and social dimension to individual experiences, and offers young people a collective pathway forward. As in other post-conflict arenas, young people have improved psychological outcomes when their "systems of meaning provide information that can be used to understand and define [themselves] within the events or experiences with which [they are] confronted."⁵² In the case of Indigenous young people, many do not understand *their experiences* as embedded in larger historical and social realities that include war, forced relocations, outlawing of Indigenous languages, and genocide. This does not provide them

with clear ways to understand their own and their communities' difficulties. This inability to make connections can lead to collective recriminations and self-depreciation.⁵⁴ Having a strong cultural identity can provide Indigenous young people with a historically grounded, stabilizing way to understand their people's and their own past and the present. By developing a strong cultural identity, Indigenous youth can craft renditions of themselves that have shared and personal continuity and which can then contribute to a shared and individual future.

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274 THE IMPORTANCE OF IDENTITY, CULTURE AND HISTORY

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276 THE IMPORTANCE OF IDENTITY, CULTURE AND HISTORY

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