

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

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

W h e n e e d t o g o t o t h e i n t e r n e t f o r m o r e i n f o r m a t i o n a b o u t t h e A n n i e E . C a s e y F o u n d a t i o n , v i s i t w w w . a n n i e e . c a s e y f o u n d a t i o n . o r g



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. O-ye-hemh"

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..."

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

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 The Annie E. Casey Foundation

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