Native American Resilience

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What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.
~ Henry Stanley Haskins

Background

Recent research has explored the biological, psychological, and sociocultural impact of historical and intergenerational trauma on the well-being of Native populations. Cultures often have historical antecedents that impact resilience-related processes and outcomes, and these factors act as powerful influences on the experiences and development of many contemporary Native Americans (Ungar, 2010). These Indigenous people were nearly obliterated by disease, war, and genocide. Their population was reduced from an estimated 10 million to fewer than a million people (Zinn, 2000). Survivors and their descendants endured oppression, cultural erosion, forced relocation, and forced assimilation, as well as discrimination and institutional racism (Belcourt-Dittloff, 2006). There were deliberate attempts by American government agencies, schools, and churches to destroy Native American tribal structures, clans, customs, and traditions. Children were removed from their homes and placed in boarding schools in an attempt to eradicate tribal languages and culture and "Americanize" them (Strand & Peacock, 2003). Native Americans were not recognized as U.S. citizens until 1924 when the Citizenship Act was passed. Their religious freedoms were not recognized until 1978 when the American Indian Religious Freedom Act was passed, which gave them the constitutional right to exercise traditional religious practices for the first time in over a century. Garrett (1996) describes five stages of U.S. Government policy that have led to current Native American tribal sovereignty; they are

> (1) the removal period (1600s to 1840s) characterized by the saying, "the only good Indian is a dead Indian"; (2) the reservation period (1860 to 1920s) characterized by the saying, "kill the Indian, but save the person"; (3) the reorganization period (1930s to 1950s) with schools allowed on the reservation; (4) the termination period (1950s to 1960s) with Relocation Programs intended to achieve sociocultural integration in order to end dependence on the federal government (resulted in the sale of large tracts of Indian lands and increased poverty); and (5) the self-determination period (1973 to the present) with increased tribal sovereignty following a period of American Indian activism.

These are but a few examples of the historical factors affecting Native Americans. When we consider the many challenges they have endured, the fact that tribes still exist as functioning cultural entities clearly provides an image of the strengths and resilience exhibited by the Native American people (Belcourt-Dittloff, 2006).

However, while American Indian cultures have survived, and in some recent cases, thrived, these multiple traumas experienced over many generations have multiplied the risks for individuals. We know that risk factors (traumatic experiences) are cumulative. Brokenleg (2012) suggests that if one generation does not heal, problems are transmitted to subsequent generations. It is posited that multigenerational traumas, grinding poverty, and lack of cultural identity create a higher risk for substance abuse, suicide, and chronic disease in Native American communities (Telis, 2013; Garrett, 1996). According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2004), compared to other U.S. minority groups, American Indian/Alaska Native suicide and homicide rates are 80% - 90% greater, death rates due to alcoholism were over 600% greater, and deaths due to heart disease, diabetes mellitus, accidental injuries, gastrointestinal disease, influenza, pneumonia, and cerebrovascular disease are substantially higher than other ethnic groups. Brokenleg (2012) believes many physical and mental issues are symptomatic solutions to intergenerational traumas, and as such, must be addressed in order for the individual to become resilient.

Definitions

There is no one absolute definition or theory of resilience. Some of the more popular definitions include, "a dynamic process that enables the individual to respond or adapt under adverse situations" (Thornton & Sanchez, 2010); "a human ability to recover quickly from disruptive change, or misfortune without being overwhelmed or acting in dysfunctional or harmful ways" (Al Siebert Resilience Center); "the ability to bounce or spring back after being stretched or constrained or recovering strength and spirit (Greene, 2002); and "unpredicted or markedly successful adaptations to negative life events, trauma, stress, and other forms of risk" (Fraser et al., 1999).

These definitions adequately describe the resiliency process most individuals experience during a lifespan, but may not capture the essence of the Native American experience – as cultural entities or as individuals. According to HeavyRunner and Marshall (2003), every indigenous language has a word that means resilience. For example, one Lakota word for resiliency is wacan tognaka , which is translated as strong will, and a Ho-Chunk word, wa nah igh mash jah, meaning strong mind. James Clairmont, a Lakota leader, expressed how the concept of resilience is inherent in his tribal culture: "The closest translation of 'resilience' is a sacred word that means 'resistance' … resisting bad thoughts, bad behaviors. We accept what life gives us, good and bad, and Gifts from the Creator. We try to get through hard times, stressful times, with a good heart. The gift [of adversity] is the lesson we learn from overcoming it" (LaFrombois, et al., 2006). Strong mind, strong will, and a strong and good heart – these are characteristics that resilient Native Americans possess in dealing with a lifetime of prolonged and near constant adversity.

Developing Resilience

Developing the mind, will, and heart helps create resiliency. "Resiliency," states Brokenleg (2012), "is being strong on the inside, having a courageous spirit" (p. 12). This does not suggest that resiliency is a specific, static trait. Resilience is a process that involves interactions between families, communities, and social and cultural environments.

Studies of resilience in Native American communities have found a number of consistent themes, including a strong sense of identity, a legacy of survival passed down by ancestors, feeling good about their tribal culture, accountability and responsibility, and successfully bridging cultures (Grandbois & Sanders, 2009, 2012; Stumblingbear-Riddle & Roman, 2012; Goodluck & Willeto, 2009; Strand & Peacock, 2003).

Strong Identity. Identity formation is influenced by parents, friends, community, and sociocultural factors and includes the development of personal identity, such as goals, values, and beliefs; social identity, which is group identification and affiliation; and cultural identity, a subset of social identity that includes solidarity and connectedness with a cultural/ethnic group (Castro & Murray, 2010). Constructing and maintaining identity is a process of adaptation, meaning that even though changes occur in life, one claims ownership of the past and feels committed to the future. Feeling good about oneself (self-esteem, self-worth, self-regard) and what one can accomplish (self-efficacy) are based on beliefs that form in early childhood and continue to evolve throughout life.

Legacy of Survival. Learning of their history through oral narratives – the passing down of stories from one generation to the next – may strengthen or shatter a sense of self. Native American families differ in how they retell stories of the past. One family may tell stories that linger on tragedies of the past, who is responsible for the way things currently are, and who can or cannot be trusted. Another family may reframe the story, focusing on the strengths and assets exhibited despite the adversities that were endured. These "resilient" narratives can help future generations make sense of what happened and provide knowledge and strength to overcome similar obstacles and help to educate others (Fast & Collin-Vezina, 2010). Hensley (2009) states, "…I realized that laying blame would never resolve the dilemma we faced. It would simply serve to avoid the issue. While it would be useful to show our people where we had been and what had happened to us, we had to put that behind us and confront the issues that lay ahead. …We had to move forward, to put to work the good spirit that is innate in our people" (p 215).

Tribal Culture Acceptance. Enculturation is a process by which individuals learn their home culture. Acknowledging, accepting, and feeling good about the tribal culture, past and present, is a strong protective factor. Accepting one's tribal culture provides a sense of belonging to a community, an appreciation of the influences of elders, and encourages participation in cultural activities (Strand & Peacock, 2003; Stumblingbear-Riddle & Roman, 2012). Identifying with the

richness of cultural strengths and traditions can result in greater self-concept, affecting self-efficacy (Copeland, 2007). A common finding across studies indicates that identifying with an individual's traditional culture and values and participating in tribal customs can provide a buffer against adversity and risk-taking (Fast & Collin-Vezina, 2010). The very element that governmental policies attempted to destroy turns out to be vital to the physical and emotional well-being of the Native American people.

Accountability and Responsibility. Responsibility inspires a sense of pride, power, and independence (Grandbois & Sanders 2012). Being accountable for one's actions and behaviors, as well as the consequences of those actions and behaviors, is a cause and a result of self-efficacy. Believing in one's capability and accountability is compatible with educational attainment, employment, and other goal-directed behaviors (Castro & Murray, 2010). Accepting the responsibility for one's own mental, emotional, and physical well-being may lead to overcoming personal problems, such as substance abuse. "They can make a change and own their problems….When you own it, you take control" (Rave, 2007).

Bridging Cultures. Acculturation is when two or more cultures are in persistent contact and change occurs in each of the cultures in varying degrees. Four basic levels of acculturation have been identified for Native Americans:

1. Traditional: Generally speak and think in their native language; practice only traditional customs and beliefs. Identifies/enculturated with traditional Native American values, behaviors, and expectations. (Monocultural)
2. Marginal: May speak both the Native language and English; may not, however, fully accept the cultural heritage and practices of their tribal group nor fully identify with mainstream cultural values and behaviors.
3. Bicultural: Generally accepted by dominant society; simultaneously able to know, accept, and practice both mainstream values and the traditional values and beliefs of their cultural heritage. Raised/enculturated with traditional Native American values/worldview, but has acquired the behaviors required for functioning in mainstream American culture. (Acculturated)
4. Assimilated: Generally accepted by dominant society; identifies and embraces only mainstream American values, behaviors, and expectations. Loss of Native American characteristics, such as language, customs, ethnicity, and self-identity. (Monocultural) (adapted from LaFromboise, Trimble, & Mohatt, 1990, p. 638; Little Soldier, 1985)

Marginal Native Americans are the ones most likely to experience difficulties from cultural conflict and serious identity crises. Feeling torn between two cultures may make it difficult to benefit from either one. Traditional and assimilated Native Americans may experience difficulties because of alienation – either alienated from, or not participating in, the mainstream culture, or rejecting all traditional cultural values, behaviors, and beliefs.

Individuals who successfully bridge/transition between majority and minority cultures develop a balanced, secure, and integrated identity which incorporates various cultural influences and expectations. They exhibit positive skills and attitudes toward both cultures that may foster positive emotions and self-concept and a growing sense of competence and resilience (Castro & Murray, 2010). Bicultural individuals are less likely to suffer depression, have less personal, social, and academic difficulty, and have lower levels of hopelessness than marginal, traditional, or assimilated groups (Garrett, 1996; Stumblingbear-Riddle & Roman, 2012). However, it must be noted that becoming bicultural may not be an easy or smooth process. Some individuals will not be able to see themselves being accepted and successful in the mainstream culture, believing their identity, and thus their value, has been ignored or underestimated. And those who are able to simultaneously accept and practice both mainstream values and traditional values may belong to tribes that have difficulty understanding and accepting that an individual can be part of two or more cultures.

While the common themes presented above shed light on factors that help build on the existing resilience of the Native American people, there remains much more to be studied, with the unique challenges that accompany such research.

Challenges

To understand resilience in Native American populations, a number of issues must be considered. Resilience must be studied within the context of the Native American worldview. Tribal/ethnic diversity can make this difficult, as there are over 500 tribes in the United States, most with differing languages, traditions, and ways of interpreting the world. Each tribe will have its own stories of tragedies, traumas, strengths, and adaptation. Tribes will vary in their historical and current situations regarding poverty, discrimination, and other issues that may be hard to isolate or explain. Tribal members may live in urban areas or on reservation lands, adding to the diversity of experiences. Traditional cultures may have difficulty trusting, accepting, working with, being studied by, or listening to non-native or “white” people.

Comment

One way to promote resilience in Native Americans, and one seldom considered or discussed, may be in teaching non-natives the value, worth, and strength of Native peoples. We understand the strong influence social support from friends and families has as a protective factor in terms of resilience; imagine the positive impact social acceptance and respect from the “mainstream” culture could have on a “minority” culture. The American mainstream, “melting pot” culture is quite individualistic. Native American culture is more community-oriented. If we can shift from our ego-centric world views (I, Me, Mine) to a more ethno-centric worldview (Us), the transactional empathy we develop will allow us to hold space for other perspectives. Research suggests that Native Americans are healthier if they develop a bicultural orientation; could the

same be said of us? Perhaps we can be healthier and happier if we understand and adopt some of the traditional values and beliefs of Indigenous people, including (but not limited to!) respect for others, respect for nature/land, respect for elders, love for children, humility, responsibility to our "tribe," sharing, and strong family support.

> "We are the descendants of people who learned to take what the conditions offered us and thrive. That was the spirit that guided our families, clans, tribes, and nations. It is a spiritual force, deeply embedded in our people, and it is just as important in the rapidly changing world we now inhabit as it was when all Alyeska belonged to Native peoples." (Hensley, 2009, p. 223)

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