



Traditional Native Culture and Resilience



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Cultural resilience is a relatively new term, but it is a concept that predates the so called "discovery" of our people. The elders teach us that our children are gifts from the Creator and it is the family, community, school, and tribe's responsibility to nurture, protect, and guide them. We have long recognized how important it is for children to have people in their lives who nurture their spirit, stand by them, encourage and support them. This traditional process is what contemporary researchers, educators, and social service providers are now calling fostering resilience. Thus, resilience is not new to our people; it is a concept that has been taught for centuries. The word is new; the meaning is old.

Our world view is the cultural lens through which we understand where we came from, where we are today, and where we are going. Our cultural identity is our source of strength. In historical times the cultures and world views of tribal peoples were regarded by non-Indians as impediments to the speedy assimilation of the young. Regrettably, remnants of such viewpoints continue to be held by some professionals who impact the lives of contemporary Indian youth. It is critical that researchers, educators, and social service providers recognize the valid and positive role culture plays in supporting Indian youth and tapping their resilience.

A culture's world view is grounded in fundamental beliefs which guide and shape life experiences of young people. It is not easy to summarize fundamental Indian values and beliefs because there are 554 federally recognized tribes in the U.S. alone and an almost equal number in Canada. In spite of tribal differences, there are shared core values, beliefs and behaviors. Ten are highlighted here to guide our thinking about innate or natural, cultural resilience: spirituality,

child-rearing/extended family, veneration of age/wisdom/tradition, respect for nature, generosity and sharing, cooperation/group harmony, autonomy/respect for others, composure/patience, relativity of time, and non-verbal communication. Educators and others must understand that the values held by Native children are interrelated.



Spirituality is a fundamental, continuous part of our lives. In traditional times, spirituality was integral to one's daily life. Embodied in Native spirituality is the concept of interconnectedness. The spiritual nature of all living things was recognized and respected. The mystical aspects of life were openly discussed. A strong ceremonial practice was interwoven into the cycle of seasons. Ceremonies marked important times in our people's lives, such as children's naming ceremonies or puberty rites.

We believe that spirituality is at the core of our survival. Many Native educators agree that our spirituality has been the cornerstone of our survival through generations of adversity and oppression. Most traditional people approach Indian spirituality with tremendous care and respect. It is very important that educators and other service providers recognize its value while also respecting the private nature of our spiritual beliefs and practices. Basil Johnson, (Ojibway), explains the deep personal nature of traditional spirituality.

"To understand the origin and the nature of life, existence, and death, the Ojibway speaking peoples conducted inquiries within the soul-spirit that was the very depth of their being. Through dream or vision quest they elicited revelation-knowledge that they then commemorated and perpetuated in story and re-enacted in ritual. But in addition to insight, they also gained a reverence for the mystery of life which animated all things: human-kind, animal-kind, plant-kind, and the very earth itself." — Johnson, (1982, p. 7)

Spirituality is one of four essential parts of our world view philosophy. The others are the mental, emotional and physical aspects of life. All four dimensions must be kept in balance. A child is born with a natural capacity or resilience evidenced in all four dimensions. This resilience is our innate capacity for well-being. Enroute to unlocking community resilience, our goal is for children to recognize when they are out of balance, understand what caused the imbalance and learn how to regain balance. Dr. Roger Mills calls this "healthy thought recognition."

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We have a variety of strategies or cultural ways to teach healthy balance. Joseph Epes Brown, reveals, "one of the symbols that expresses most completely the Plains Indian concept of the relationship between human beings and the world of nature surrounding them is the cross inscribed within the circle" (Brown, 1988, p. 34). In some tribes we use the medicine wheel to help young people understand the interconnectedness of the mind, spirit, heart and body.

What is often termed the "Red Road" philosophy has been articulated well by Isna Iciga (Gene Thin Elk):

"The Red Road is a holistic approach to mental, physical, spiritual and emotional wellness based on Native American healing concepts and traditions, having prayer as the basis of all healing. Native American psychology is essential in reaching the inner person (spirit) using specific sound, movement, and color. All these essences are present in the Medicine Wheel, which is innate to Native Americans. The traditions and values of the Native American People ensure balance by living these cultural traditions through the Red Road. Healing is a way of life for the Native American who understands and lives the cultural traditions and values" - Aborgast, (1995, p. 319)

Our traditional philosophy is holistic. The contemporary health realization work of Dr. Roger Mills is very helpful in explaining the role of thinking in our experiences. This is one example of the understanding we want children to have about their natural resilience.

Our culture is rich with ways to teach children the world view philosophy or the good way of life. These include using our traditional languages, ceremonies, dances, blood/clan systems, music/arts, medicine, foods' clothing, and more. Our children's cultural strength or resilience can also be fostered by the oral tradition of storytelling. Children learn to listen with patience and respect. Our stories can be told over and over; they are developmental. At every step we learn something new. In essence we grow up with our stories. They are protective factors that convey culturally specific high expectations, caring, support, and opportunities for participation.

The traditional Indian family unit is the **extended family**. Each child has an abundance of blood and clan relatives to share the responsibility of child-rearing. **Elders** hand down tribal legends, history and traditions and, therefore, are treated with tremendous respect. Our belief in the **sacredness of all creation** causes us to view ourselves as caretakers of the natural realm. Recognizing the connection with others, emphasis is placed on **sharing material possessions**. In our world view, it is more important to be a good person than to acquire material goods. Natural

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cooperation among group members takes precedence over competition. **Harmony** within the group is all-important. Balance and harmony are maintained by not imposing on an individual's rights or beliefs. **Being quiet and still** is not uncomfortable to Indian people. We are **comfortable with silence** and talking for the sake of talking was not our way. **Time is viewed as flowing and always with us.** We learn to follow nature's rhythm.

Educators and others working with Indian youth who demonstrate respect for these fundamental values, beliefs and behaviors, foster resilience. They can build on young peoples' connection to all other living entities, encourage and openly discuss their spiritual development; recognize the vital role played by elders, aunts, uncles, and other blood or clan relatives and seek their involvement. We also can make use of the outdoors, encourage generosity of spirit, incorporate more cooperative learning activities, respect the individual, allow for a longer response time, be more flexible with timelines, and respect that learning can also occur through listening and in silence.

Taken as a whole these traditional values and beliefs are the cultural foundation which, if respected, extends high expectations; caring, supportive relationships and meaningful opportunities for participation to Native children. We believe when these innate, cultural protective factors are brought into play, the natural resilience of children will be realized. Our beliefs, values, or philosophy must be incorporated into any work done with our children. Social service providers, educators, and others must help Indian families become safe and secure places for children. Researchers and evaluators need to use culturally competent research and evaluation designs in Native schools and communities to capture and interpret the essence of our growth accurately.

Cultural teachings unearth individual resilience as documented with many personal stories in *Wounded Warriors* by Doyle Arbogast. These interviewed individuals found - "*what their ancestors always knew-that the pathways to peace, balance, and living are found by taking responsibility to honor the beauty, spirit, and the mystery of their own heritage*"— Arbogast, (1995, p. 1)

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Cultural practices unlock our human potential. Sisoka Luta, (Jerome Kills Small) states, "*through the drum I feel the Native American part of my spirituality. I have a special bond with it. I know that a lot of the others find the greater part of their strength in other things like the sweatlodge and the pipe. For me, I get my strength from the drum.*" — Arbogast, (1995, p. 145)

Sungmanitu Hanska, (Long Coyote) says, "*getting involved and attending things that are part of my people's ways have been incredibly significant. I have a seed inside that needs to be*

nourished before it will grow. When this seed gets a little nourishment, like permission and encouragement, or an invitation for myself to nourish it, it begins to sprout. I am beginning to understand that the seed is my Spirit" — Arbogast, (1995, p. 84)

We believe this is the innate health or resilience Dr. Roger Mills, Bonnie Bernard, and others describe.

Candace Fleming (Kickapoo/Oneida/Cherokee), explains, *"In an attempt to depart from lifestyles and situations that compromise well-being, Indians... [Native Americans/Alaska Natives/First Nations] have begun to identify for themselves culturally congruent values and behaviors that enhance life for the individual, the family, and the community ... A balanced treatment ... needs to focus on the resiliency, strengths, and significant contributions"* — Fleming, (1992, p. 137).

In our work with 20 national Native educators/trainers we found agreement that our tribal identity, spirituality, elders, ceremonies and rituals, humor, oral tradition, family, and support networks are essential protective strategies. These are the things that have kept us strong. A study in progress with the Minneapolis-based Healthy Nations collaborative surveyed 136 Native program directors and front-line workers. They indicate they draw tremendous strength from family support systems, caring communities, strong identities, spirituality, and cultural values, world view, ceremonies, and traditions. These resources foster our cultural resilience.

Our recent training experiences indicate Native prevention workers find the term resilience helpful. One participant said, "Now I have a word for what I have always known and struggled to explain to the children and adults I work with." Resilience helps us assist students in reconnecting with our cultural strength. Our work in Red Lake, Minnesota, has been resilience-based. We are pleased to see that a hopeful resilience message, well grounded in local cultural traditions, frees educators, social service providers and tribal community members to view future possibilities with excitement and energy. Our innate human capacity for transformation and change, our resilience, is ever present; like the circle of life it is unbroken and unending. Black Elk describes the circle of strength this way:

"You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round. In the old days when we were a strong and happy people, all our power came to us from the sacred hoop of the nation, and so long as the hoop was unbroken, the people flourished. The flowering tree was the living center of the hoop, and the circle of the four quarters nourished it. The east gave peace and light, the south gave warmth, the west gave rain, and the north with its cold and mighty wind gave strength and endurance. This knowledge came to us from the outer world with our religion. Everything the power of the world does is done in a circle. The sky is round, and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun comes forth and goes

down again in a circle. The moon does the same, and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves" — Brown, (1988, p. 35)

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