

Journal of Indigenous Research

Full Circle: Returning Native Research to the People

Volume 1 *Special Issue*
Issue 2

Article 1

March 2012

A Preliminary Report on the Relationships Between Collective Self-Esteem, Historical Trauma, and Mental Health among Alaska Native Peoples

Tina Marie Woods
University of Alaska Anchorage, tmwoods2@alaska.edu

Ruth Zuniga
University of Alaska Anchorage, rzuniga@alaska.edu

E. J. R. David
University of Alaska Anchorage, ejrdavid@uaa.alaska.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/kicjir>

Recommended Citation

Woods, Tina Marie; Zuniga, Ruth; and David, E. J. R. (2012) "A Preliminary Report on the Relationships Between Collective Self-Esteem, Historical Trauma, and Mental Health among Alaska Native Peoples," *Journal of Indigenous Research*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26077/9ypc-5b89>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/kicjir/vol1/iss2/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Indigenous Research by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usu.edu.



A Preliminary Report on the Relationships Between Collective Self-Esteem, Historical Trauma, and Mental Health among Alaska Native Peoples

Cover Page Footnote

Author Note: We thank Aubrey Wegeleben for assisting in data collection, Matt Sena for his advice, the communities who welcomed us, and the participants who shared their experiences with us.

Correspondence about this article may be addressed to E.J.R. David at ejrdavid@uaa.alaska.edu.

A Preliminary Report on the Relationships Between Collective Self-Esteem, Historical Trauma, and Mental Health among Alaska Native Peoples

Alaska Native Peoples have experienced many years of colonization which has contributed to a loss of traditions, values, and native ways of being (Napoleon, 1996; Roderick, 2008; Sullivan & Brems, 1997). This significant cultural loss and the trauma associated with such experiences (i.e., historical trauma), along with experiences of modern day racism and discrimination, have contributed to many consequences such as high rates of depression, alcoholism, psychological distress, suicide, and other psychological issues within the Alaska Native community today (Brave Heart, 2004; Duran & Duran, 1995; Manson, 2000; Napoleon, 1996; Sullivan & Brems, 1997).

Despite these concerns, however, it is important to remember that contrary to stereotypes, not all Alaska Native individuals suffer from conditions such as depression and psychological distress, which often lead to other problematic behaviors such as alcohol use and suicide. In reality, the alcohol abstinence rate among American Indians and Alaska Natives (50%) is two times higher than the rate for the general American population (Kunitz, & Levy, 1994; Levy & Kunitz, 1974; May & Gossage, 2001). Furthermore, suicide among Alaska Natives over 55 years-old is low to nonexistent, when people over 55 years old in the general population have the highest suicide rate among all age groups (Sullivan & Brems, 1997). Therefore, it is important to investigate factors that make Alaska Natives resilient against depression and psychological distress – the negative effects of historical trauma and cultural loss. To this end, our project explored the possibility that cultural pride and connectedness may be one such factor that help Alaska Native individuals better deal with historical trauma and contemporary experiences of stress (for example, discrimination and stereotyping), and keep them from experiencing psychological distress and depression.

Cultural Pride and Connectedness: Collective Self-Esteem

In psychology, a common way to refer to cultural pride and connectedness is collective self-esteem (CSE). CSE is how individuals positively evaluate and view the social group that they belong to (including cultural pride), and it also involves the extent to which individuals participate in and are involved in the practices and traditions of their group (e.g., cultural

connectedness). Because of historical oppression through colonialism and contemporary experiences of racism and discrimination (e.g., Napoleon, 1996), some Alaska Natives' CSE may have been negatively affected – that is, they may now negatively evaluate and view their heritage. Prior research among other minority groups has shown that experiences of oppression can lead to lower CSE (e.g., David, 2008), and having low CSE can negatively affect one's mental health and psychological well-being (e.g., Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, & Broadnax, 1994; David, 2008). The opposite is also true, in that higher levels of CSE is related to fewer psychological distress and depression symptoms. Therefore, Alaska Native individuals who still positively view their heritage and who are still culturally connected (high levels of CSE) despite historical colonialism and modern day oppression may be less likely to experience distress and depression, which also lowers the likelihood of substance use and suicide. Our research team attempted to explore these relationships.

Methods

Our research team followed culturally responsive and appropriate protocol in conducting research with Alaska Native Peoples (Figure 1). This process was collaborative, iterative, and respectful. Once the research ideas emerged, the support, permission and guidance of multiple Alaska Native health and tribal organizations - along with Alaska Native elders, leaders, and community members - were sought and obtained. The research questions and planned methods were presented to communities and supportive organizations prior to obtaining institutional review board approval. The collaboratively agreed upon research method was to conduct a survey about mental health symptoms (depression and distress), collective self-esteem, and thoughts and emotions about historical trauma. The participants were 66 Alaska Native individuals (76% women), ages 18 to 64 (average of 42 years), and who were residing in rural and urban communities.

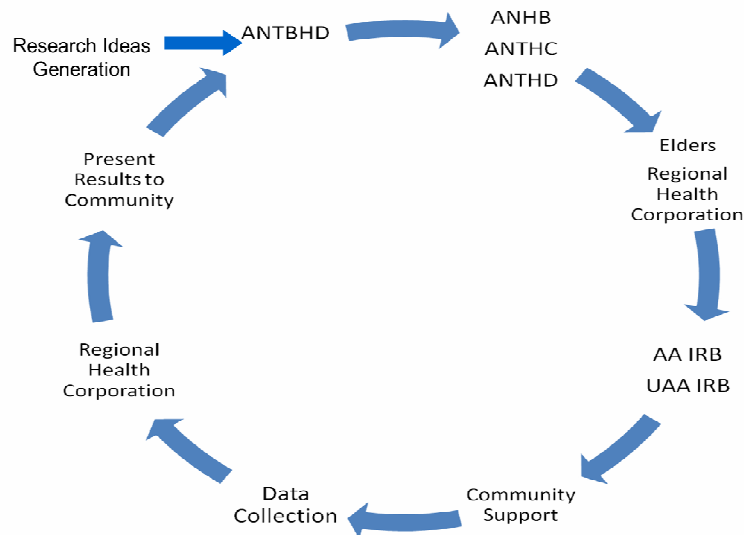


Figure 1: ANTBHD- Alaska Native Tribal Behavioral Health Directors, ANHB- Alaska Native Health Board, ANTHC- Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, ANTHD- Alaska Native Tribal Health Directors, AAIRB- Alaska Area Institutional Review Board, UAAIRB- University of Alaska Anchorage Institutional Review Board

Preliminary Results and Discussion

Although the results presented here are preliminary and that information from more participants are needed, the current findings offer important information about factors that may influence Alaska Native mental health. According to the results, it appears that more frequently thinking about historical trauma and experiencing negative emotions associated with such trauma are related to more psychological distress and depression symptoms. These findings are consistent with previous writings (e.g., Napoleon, 1996) arguing that historical trauma and the accompanying cultural loss contribute to the many concerns faced by Alaska Natives today. However, our findings also suggest that individuals who are culturally proud and connected (high CSE) tend to think about historical trauma less frequently and therefore experience fewer negative emotions associated with historical trauma. It is possible that Alaska Natives who are culturally proud and connected more frequently think about and are aware of the positive things about their heritage, which makes them feel positive

emotions and good about themselves. Feeling good about themselves and their group, in turn, may lead to a lower likelihood of experiencing psychological distress and depression symptoms. Indeed, our findings also suggest that cultural pride and connectedness (high CSE) is related to fewer psychological distress and depression symptoms.

Overall, the preliminary findings highlight the importance of cultural pride and connectedness in protecting Alaska Native individuals from the negative mental health effects of historical trauma and modern day stressors (discrimination and racism). It seems programs that help individuals become more aware of the positive characteristics and aspects of their heritage and helping them stay connected with their heritage community (enhancing CSE) might be worthwhile endeavors because such programs might prevent people from experiencing psychological distress and depression, which in turn, may reduce the likelihood of problematic behaviors such as alcohol use and suicide. Some examples of programs include, but are not limited to, cultural revitalization programs, traditional gatherings, and traditional ceremonies. Thus, we recommend that future research and community programs with Alaska Native Peoples need to consider the enhancement of collective self-esteem and its potential benefits.

References

- Brave Heart, M. Y. H. (2004). The historical trauma response among Natives and its relationship to substance abuse: A Lakota illustration. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs, 35*, 7-13.
- Crocker, J., Luhtanen, R., Blaine, B., & Broadnax, S. (1994). Collective self-esteem and psychological well-being among White, Black, and Asian college students. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 20*, 503–513.
- David, E. J. R. (2008). A colonial mentality model of depression for Filipino Americans. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology, 14*, 118–127.
- Duran, E., & Duran, B. (1995). *Native American postcolonial psychology*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Kunitz, S. J., & Levy, J. E. (1994). *Drinking careers: A twenty-five year study of three Navajo populations*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Levy, J. E., & Kunitz, S. J. (1974). *Indian drinking: Navajo practices and Anglo-American theories*. New York: Wiley.

- Manson, S. M. (2000). Mental health services for American Indians and Alaska Natives: Needs, use, and barriers to effective care. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, 45*, 617-626.
- May, P. A., & Gossage, J. P. (2001). New Data on the Epidemiology of Adult Drinking and Substance Use among American Indians of the Northern States: Male and Female Data on Prevalence, Patterns, and Consequences. *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research, 10*, 1-26.
- Napoleon, H. (1996). *Yuuyaraq: The way of the Human Being*. Alaska Native Knowledge Network: Fairbanks, AK.
- Roderick, L. (2008). *Do Alaska Native people get free medical care?* Anchorage, AK: University of Alaska Anchorage and Alaska Pacific University.
- Sullivan, A. & Brems, C. (1997). The Psychological Repercussions of the Sociocultural Oppression Of Alaska Native Peoples. *Genetic, Social, and General Psychology Monographs, 123*, 411-440.