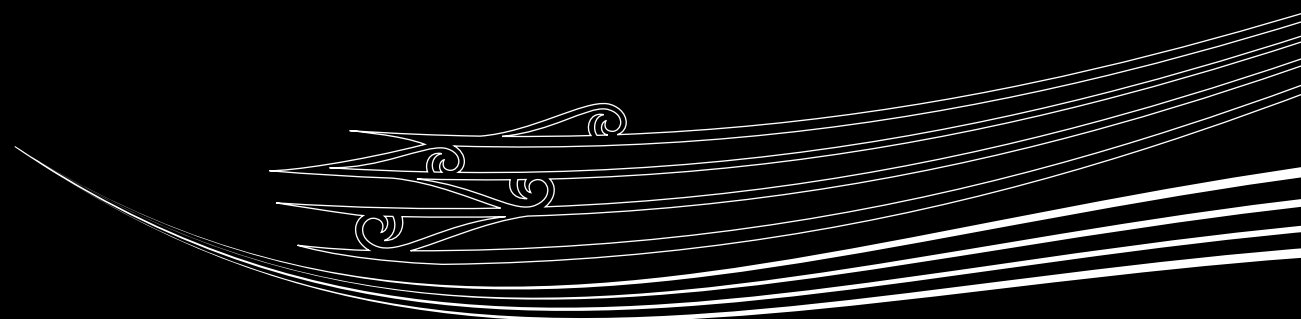




PURSUING WICOZANI (THE GOOD WAY OF LIFE):
FUNCTIONAL ADAPTATIONS THROUGH DAKOTA LIFEWAYS

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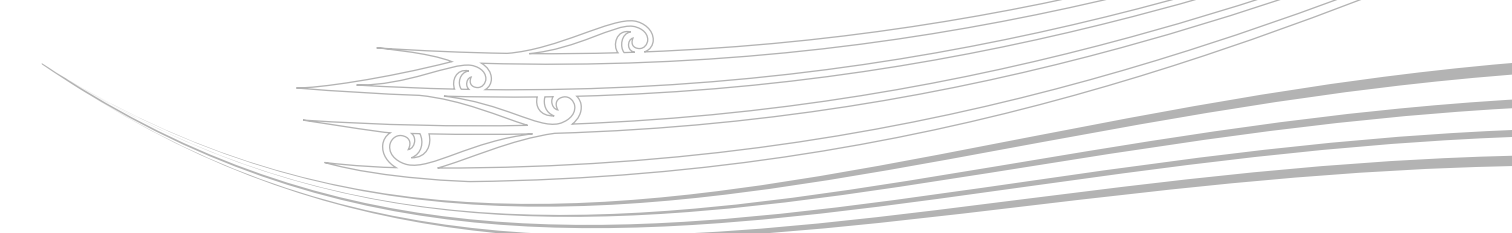
Abstract

Using focus group methodology, we examined the Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota idea of *wicozani* (pronounced *wee-cho'zah-nee*), or “the good way of life”, as it relates to individual and family life and assert its value in guiding functional adaptations. Additional theoretical scaffolding is drawn from Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development within the framework of Hill’s (1949) family stress model, reifying the effectiveness of *wicozani* to direct community-generated functional adaptations that will strengthen American Indian families. Focus group participants outline historical values necessary to achieve *wicozani*. Themes shared show that Native resiliency is based on traditional community beliefs and practices. As American Indians face modern challenges, re-embracing and developing long held ideals will provide a basis for functional adaptation in the future.

Introduction

American Indian communities, families and individuals face a variety of challenges. Disrupted by generations of war, disease, and forced assimilation policies, many American Indian cultures experience turbulent crises. Inter-generational stress, demoralization, chemical dependency and internal oppression disrupt remnant managerial institutions and society stabilizing mechanisms. Unemployment and poverty—exacerbated by geographic and cultural isolation—plague many reservations. Abdicated parental duties, crime, and juvenile delinquency are inordinately rising. Teenage pregnancy, foetal alcohol syndrome, violence and an array of psychological disorders are evidences of a deeper anomic calamity stemming from broad cultural imbalances. These disruptive forces weigh upon American Indian families, affecting perceptions, taxing resources, and stimulating cyclic patterns of maladjustment.

The purpose of this paper is not to dwell on American Indian struggles or the effects of colonialism but rather to facilitate a discussion of American Indian family strengths and adaptations to community-specific family needs and to provide increased cultural understanding for those who provide prevention and intervention services within these and similar communities. Efforts to develop a healthy and respectful discourse have emerged (Gone, 2004; Gone, 2007) but broad questions remain unanswered (McCubbin, Thompson, Thompson & Fromer, 1998). Why do so many Native families struggle? How can current family theories and strategies help us understand these struggles? What resources are available to assist in functional adaptation? Ultimately, what adaptations will help Native people to strengthen families and still retain their indigenous culture? This paper seeks to answer these questions through a relevant theoretical lens and from an American Indian context. It shares our understanding of Dakota/Lakota/Nakota (hereafter referred to as Dakota) community members’ self-diagnosis and suggested adaptations that lead to *wicozani*, or “the good way of life”. This research—and the assertion of *wicozani*—is an outgrowth of a Dakota-designed alcohol prevention programme: *Takoja*



Niwiciyape: Giving Life to the Grandchildren. This research was gathered with the help of Dakota community members and elders as focus group participants and facilitators in order to ensure accurate insight into Dakota cultural and family strengths, challenges and coping mechanisms and to directly incorporate those insights into the culturally specific, family-based Takoja Niwiciyape programme. It is our hope that those seeking to work in these and similar communities would follow this model of respectfully gaining insight and understanding of community challenges from the community members' perspectives and then collaboratively develop solutions that focus on existing community and cultural strengths.

Theoretical Foundation

The centrality and applicability of wicozani is the guiding theoretical force in this paper. *Wicozani*—the good way of life—is a traditional Dakota lifeway and worldview that emphasizes making proper choices for holistic (physical, spiritual and mental) health. We also employ support from well established Western models of family health which are consistent with wicozani. Reuben Hill (1949) developed the ABC-X model to explain how families cope with stressful events. He identified three elements that determine an individual or family's level of adjustment: (“A”) the stressor or provoking event; (“B”) the available resources; and (“C”) the perceived meaning or interpretation of the stressor. These three elements interact to yield (“X”) the adjustment—positive, negative or otherwise. These factors all interconnect as frequency and intensity of events influence demands on resources and impact the meaning attributed to events. This model illustrates the mutual significance of resources and perception in determining adjustment and maps well onto the principles of wicozani. More recent variations on the model manipulate these factors but ultimately uphold their significance (McCubbin, 1981; McCubbin & Patterson, 1982, 1983; Patterson, 1988). Additionally, Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD) identifies a closable gap between “actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving” and the elevated level of “potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). In short, societal resources constitute valuable coping mechanisms for helping individuals and families improve their capacity to resolve a challenging crisis. Finally, Boss (1985) suggests that adaptability to stress is a key factor in maintaining family cohesion and forging healthy interpretations of stressors and harnessing additional resources to offset future crises. An important focus of social science is thus to identify which adaptations positively influence stress management and resiliency and those which promote positive outcomes to stressors. These studies demonstrate that the results of societal and family stresses are mediated by several factors: resources, perception of the event and resources, societal supports and adaptability.

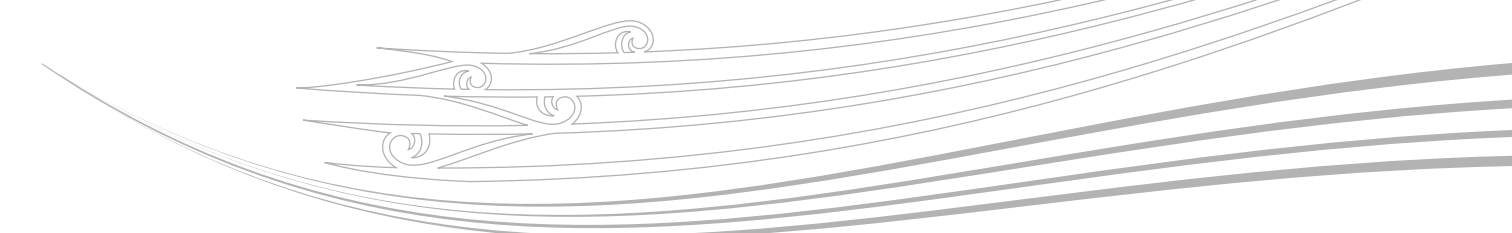


An American Indian Context

While it is tempting to simply apply well established stress management models to American Indian families and individuals, discussion of ethnic groups must consider culture and characteristics. To quote one sociologist, “When Western subjectivity is imposed on colonized peoples, not only will the phenomenon under scrutiny evade the lens of positivism, but further hegemony will be imposed on the community in question“ (Duran & Duran, 1995). It is therefore necessary to mediate mainstream family science with American Indian self-diagnosis. This will lead to a better understanding of wicozani—the good way of life.

Reservation era assimilationist policy in the United States and Canada sought to strip American Indians of traditional lifeways; for many a detrimental refugee syndrome accompanied territorial and familial displacement. Boarding schools removed Native children from their homes with the motto “kill the Indian, save the man.” Assimilationist efforts targeted indigenous culture and kinship-based socialization; disassociated individuals from tribes; oppressed Native American languages; altered traditional values in fathering, spirituality, role-modelling, work ethic and respect; and enforced conformity to European dress and behaviour. During the 20th century inconsistent federal policy oscillated between usurpation of tribal organization and leadership to termination. Today American Indians remain a diverse people. However, Anglo-American reformers and changing federal policy have spawned a plethora of widely shared problematic issues: disassociation of origin, purpose and future; loss of autochthonous culture and ritual; and declining and de-emphasis of fraternities and clan organizations.

In recent years, increasing studies on American Indians provide insight to better understand American Indian stressors. Studies have specifically examined American Indian stress, trauma, and mental, emotional and social health stressors (Beals et al., 2005; Buchwald, Goldberg, Noonan, Beals, & Manson, 2005; Parker, 2004), often yielding startling results. Community and family stressors reported by American Indians include alcoholism, sexual abuse (Wardman & Quantz, 2005), sorrow, loneliness and feeling unloved, dishonesty, greed, disrespect, violence, illness, lack of spirituality (Simmons, Novins & Allen, 2004), emotional distress and disturbances, internalized oppression, demoralization, isolation, management of a growing and youthful population, juvenile crime, foetal alcohol syndrome (Simmons et al., 2004), anger, parenting problems, lack of cultural identity (Wardman & Quantz, 2005), lack of family support, (Wadsworth, Rieckmann, Benson, & Compas, 2004) intergenerational post traumatic stress disorder (Wardman & Quantz, 2005), unemployment and poverty (Novins, LeMaster, Thurman & Plested, 2004; Wadsworth et al., 2004), child abuse in various forms (Simmons et al., 2004; Wardman & Quantz, 2005), and post-colonial oppression and consequent transgenerational trauma (Wadsworth et al., 2004).



Far fewer studies on American Indian stress and resiliency identify coping strategies and protective factors and, even then, specific applicable principles are rare to none. In a 1998 text devoted to *Resiliency in American Indian and Immigrant Families*, functionally applicable suggestions remained a minor focus (McCubbin, Thompson, Thompson, & Fromer, 1998). A 2004 study of Navajo adolescent stress concluded that typical coping measures discovered through examining European middle-class subjects may not be fully applicable to Native populations (Wadsworth et al., 2004). The study explained that the communal nature of Navajo society suggested that social influences might play a greater role in stress management. Similarly, a 1992 article briefly suggested Native-specific tactics for alcoholism management on reservations (Fleming, 1992). Focusing on the same issue, Wardman & Quantz (2005) studied American Indians overcoming alcohol abuse and noted five common resources in combating alcohol addiction: (1) an acute life changing event, near death experience, “hitting rock bottom”; (2) increased responsibilities; (3) positive support network; (4) personal development; and (5) cultural participation.

Unfortunately, generations of Anglo-American reformers have rightly sensitized American Indian communities to outside “suggestions” for cultural adaptations. Nevertheless, fully shutting out the benefits of modern family science research is also imprudent. Academic and American Indian communities must reconcile this rift through continued communication, research and Native-centred solutions. This paper attempts to offer one model of reconciliation.

Methods

This study employed focus group methodology to identify individual and family related issues that reflected both stress and strength orientations. These orientations were explored in the context of American Indian culture and life on the reservation. In June and August of 2005, cross segments of community elders, services providers and leaders living on three South Dakota reservations (Crow Creek, Lower Brule & Sisseton-Wahpeton) participated in nine focus groups. The focus group facilitator was also Dakota. The focus groups’ size ranged from two to six, with an average group size of five members. Participants were given an honorarium and stipend for mileage. Dakota community leaders identified focus group members from the three reservations who were then invited to participate in a group discussion related to cultural issues and concerns. Participants were chosen because Dakota elders felt those individuals reflected *wicozani*—the good way of life—through functional adaptation to their life stressors. The authors also relied on Dakota contributors to interpret responses. For purposes of this paper, functional adaptation involves the process of engaging Native-identified stressors and overcoming them through both indigenous and modern strategies, as recognized by community members.

Focus group questions followed a standard protocol (general to specific). Each focus group began with a broad inquiry into the most important things participants were taught as



youth by their own parents or guardians; the facilitator then asked if those lessons were still relevant for youth today. The facilitator then asked participants about important life skills for the next generation. A final question explored what makes a strong, healthy family in the Dakota way of life. In abiding by Dakota culture, the facilitator extended wide latitude to participants that resulted in a rich and minimally directed record. Given these cultural dynamics, focus groups lasted between one and a half to two hours.

Themes

Transcript analysis of focus group responses revealed 16 themes associated with the stresses and strengths related to wicozani. Three independent reviewers initially examined the transcripts and identified key themes. Reviewers then met and constructed four major categories to group the themes: family health, tradition, education and substance abuse. Finally, reviews identified minor sub-themes within the transcripts and grouped them within the appropriate categories and focus areas. Listed below are the four categories, major themes and sub-themes (in italics).

Substance Abuse:

Alcohol: substance use/abuse, consequences of alcohol, parental alcohol use/abuse, recovery from alcoholism/addiction, substance free

Other Drug Use

Family Health:

Abuse: domestic violence, help seeking, safety

Family: challenges like enabling, gambling, inbreeding, cohesion, helping, marriage, responsibility, commitment, roles, shifting family structure, togetherness

Fathering: absent fathers, fatherhood, gate-keeping, young fathers

Parenting: affection, communication, discipline, grandparents raising grandchildren, parental failures, parental responsibility, parental support, teaching Role Models: good role-modelling, poor role models

Tradition:

Identity: identity, heritage, Indian name, peer pressure, self-esteem, suicide

Respect: disrespect, listen, manners, respect

Spirituality: balance, church, forgiveness, god, prayer, spiritual loss, spirituality, traditional and Christian spirituality

Tradition: activities, cultural challenges, Dakota way of life, traditional loss

Values: basics, community, gratitude, honesty, individualism, love, morality, trust, value loss

Work Ethic



Education:

Activities: *examples include athletics, boys and girls clubs, camping, horse shows, fairs, livestock shows*

Education

Government: *capitalism, entitlement, political problems*

Survival: *including adaptive survival, independence, fitting into modern society*

These themes provide important insight into Dakota values including wicozani—choosing the good way of life—and suggest answers and functionally adaptive responses to stressors and challenges faced by Dakota people. The scope of this paper precludes evaluation of all themes. However, many of the themes and subthemes will be illuminated through quotes and paraphrased comments of participants thus highlighting the utility of those themes for functional adaptation. Additionally, the ABC-X model of stress management and Vygotsky’s concept of community mentorship offer a simple but effective framework for interpreting how Dakota participants’ perceptions of life challenges and their resources for dealing with them interact to influence individual and family adjustments. This study integrates participant feedback to issue an indigenous guided pathway to bonadaptations.

Stressors Faced by American Indian People

Much like the challenges facing broader American Indian communities, the stressors identified by focus group participants varied widely. Participants often expressed isolation, helplessness and demoralization. Despair and sadness surfaced in their concerns. Many spoke of a lost ideal state. One Crow Creek elder explained, “I think the old way is gone. You’ll never bring that back. To a certain extent you might—ceremonies, Sundances—but the way they lived, that’s not gonna ever continue, it’s not gonna come back.” They also pointed out low self-esteem, poor or non-existent work ethic and lack of motivation in others as contributing factors to the challenges and stressors experienced by many reservation families.

Poverty, many felt, impacts family life and the ability to deal with impending stressors and crisis events. Participants were not specifically asked about poverty as a source of stress; however, household incomes and basic demographics do validate such observations and concerns introduced by participants. A study several years prior to the focus groups found that median household income on South Dakota Reservations was only 67% of the state average (South Dakota Business Research Bureau, 2000). The Crow Creek median household income was just over US\$12,000—34% of the state average (Cochran, 2003). Rather than wholly blame the injustice of poverty, many focus group participants noted idleness, weak work ethic, and a lack of “mentoring” or modelling that Vygotsky (1978) argues is crucial for development. Participants expressed concern that youth and adults were not as industrious as preceding generations. Surely a controversial opinion, this



nonetheless remained the overwhelming perspective of focus group participants. One participant explained, “Because of the commodity line we don’t have to do anything. ‘Go stand in line and you’ll get something’ It worries me, it bothers me.” These perspectives have a tremendous influence on the way Dakota elders and service providers address the challenges and stressors.

Some participants targeted the financially collectivistic nature of reservations. A Sisseton-Wahpeton elder explained that youth grow up without industrious habits. They do not understand the value of work because everything is given to them.

You gotta hustle for yourself and the kids aren’t learning that . . . I mean, I had to hustle for everything that I got in my life. Nothing ever came on a silver platter to me, and I don’t like what’s going on today.

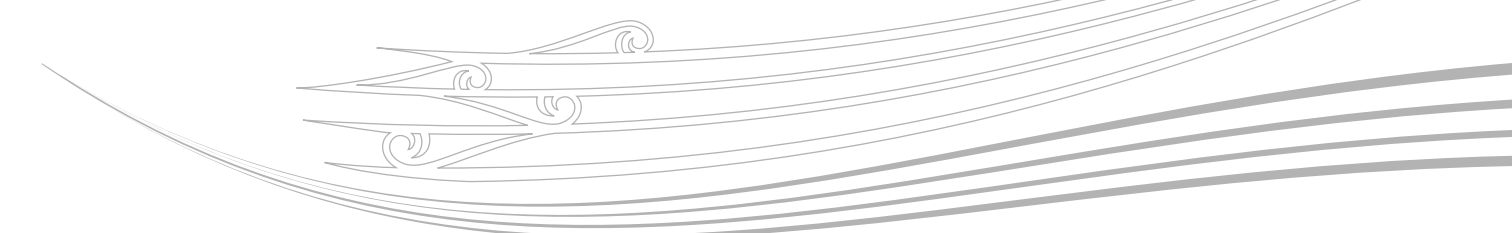
Although this collectivist environment could be perceived as a resource, many agreed that the nature of reservation life actually prepared American Indians for stressful failure should they attempt to live outside the reservation.

Substance Abuse

Nearly all participants identified alcoholism and drug use as key stressors or instigators of stress-related crises. One elder succinctly stated, “As we got older, you know, in the thirties and forties, a lot of our relations started dying from alcohol—mostly cirrhosis.” He concluded that whether Anglo-American or American Indian, “alcohol’s alcohol, and it’ll ruin you.” Alcoholism, they noted, led to abdicated parental duties. They explained, fathers abandon mothers and children; mothers likewise leave children with babysitters or unattended when they go out to drink. Without the influence of a positive mentor or role-model, development of the next generation is hindered (Vygotsky, 1978). Many lamented that their children and grandchildren are perpetuating this problem not only with alcohol, but with many other drugs that now circulate on the reservation. One elder expressed concern over his grandson’s use of oxycodone, a potent pain reliever: “He stayed high on that all the time. And it was mood-altering to where he wouldn’t listen to any discipline or direction. I mean, it was his way or no way. So eventually they kicked him out of school.” Many participants similarly noted an increasingly dangerous trend toward drug use in their communities.

Resources and Definition of Stressors

Dakotas, Lakotas and Nakotas share a rich cultural heritage and a slowly increasing financial stability that provides a variety of resources for stress management. Positive perceptions generated from cultural insight, along with increased availability of resources (including financial as well as cultural wealth), creates a dynamic wherein resource (B) and perception (C) interact to increase the likelihood of functional adaptation and healthy outcomes (X).



Focus group participants suggested that a functional nuclear family—complete with husband and wife—is key to a happy and productive life in today’s society. Consistent with Vygotsky, some emphasized the continuing need for supportive extended kinships which serve as community-generated seedbeds for functional adaptation, positive development and maintaining tradition.

There is a long-held and widespread perception that a set of 12 fundamental values epitomize Dakota culture. These values are essential to the “traditional” Dakota way of life and may serve as resources in aiding functional adaptation. They include *unsiiciyapi* (humility), *wowacintanka* (perseverance), *wowoohola* (respect), *wayuonihan* (honour), *cantoknake* (love), *icicupi* (sacrifice), *wowicake* (truth), *waunsilapi* (compassion), *woohitike* (bravery), *cantewasake* (fortitude), *canteyuke* (generosity), and *woksape* (wisdom) (Marshall, 2002). Although the number of these values may vary in some communities (some refer to a set of seven, others of only four), the basic concepts remain the same and are often referred to in community life. They are also central to cultural programmes designed to revitalize “traditional” ways (for example, the *Takoja Niwiciyape: Giving Life to the Grandchildren* alcohol prevention programme designed by and for Dakota people to promote the 12 Oyate values and return focus to *wicozani*—the good way of life—see Marshall, 2002, for a thorough treatment of the 12 Oyate values). Understanding these values and perspectives may lead to culturally balanced, resolution-focused “definitions of their situations and stressors” and help engender *wicozani* as a primary emphasis and prompt more community-generated functional adaptation. Each of the three categories below provides structure to the related themes introduced by the focus group participants as they self-diagnosed elements of *wicozani*.

Family

Many respondents suggested that a re-emphasis on the family unit was a key factor in living the good way of life. An elder from Lower Brule explained that family is the most important factor in a balanced positive life. One Sisseton-Wahpeton elder succinctly put it “the kids need a mom and a dad. We’ve got too many kids growing up now, either without a mom or without a dad.” He shared a story of a schoolteacher that provided much needed hugs and affection to otherwise deprived Dakota children. Another elder affirmed the need for parents and children to spend time together, stating, “Parents need to talk to their children.” Many suggested that loving and involved parents provide an essential foundation for dealing with community challenges.

Fathering was one of the most pronounced family concerns expressed. Leanne from Crow Creek recalled the value of her own father as a positive role model. Many others lamented the failure of positive fathering and lack of male role models in Native communities today. Many fathers abdicate those responsibilities, leaving single mothers to raise their children. Joe, an elder from Crow Creek, explained,



Part of that problem is, most of the time, there's only one parent. There's usually the mother, and she's frustrated 'cause she can't work, she's got to care for the children during the day . . . Dad, he's supposed to be caring for the family—out there providing food and shelter for the mother to be home cooking, you know. Today it's not like that. The mother's got to do all of it. The father, he's out doing his own thing. I hate to say it but it's true. It's a big part of our problem in our communities.

Shirley from Lower Brule explained a potential solution that embodies Vygotsky's (1978) call for societal mentorship. "I want our men to get up, to get together and to teach . . . tell each other things and reinforcement of their own selves and who they are as fathers and men." She optimistically continued, "It can be done because there's enough . . . there's a lot of sober men here. They just got to get together." The proverbial statement that there is strength in numbers is clearly applicable here. As fathers from across the community join in identifying the stressors in their community, families and individual lives, they will likewise be able to identify what resources and strengths their respective families and community can offer one another.

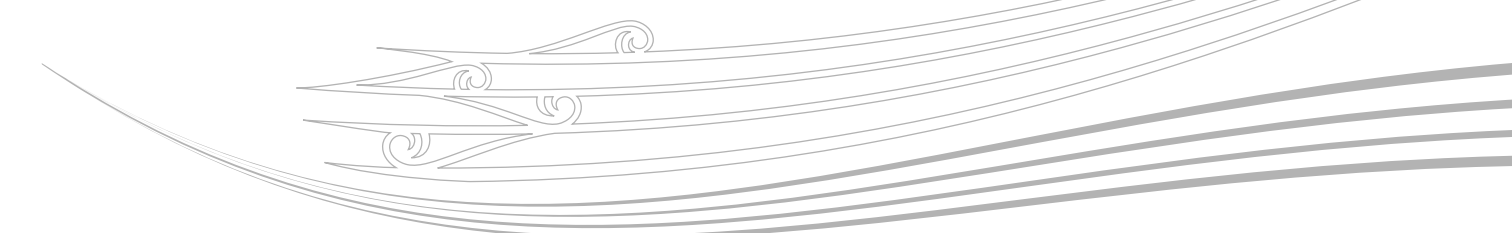
Another family issue revolves around the roles and responsibilities of relatives. Unlike modern European nuclear families, American Indians historically depended on a broader kinship network, and many believe it must remain an important factor today. This community-minded tradition has the potential to be a great resource for Dakota individuals and families. Individuals should provide and rely on the support of extended family, reintegrating traditionally wide kinship bonds, and in so doing strengthening the nuclear family and the broader extended family throughout the community. Jerry explained:

Somehow or other you've got to get grandparents, aunts, uncles, whatever, involved. Because, a young man growing up with just the mother, gonna have problems later on. Or a young girl growing up with just a father, gonna have problems. Gotta have that balance in life. Gotta have the nurturer, the mother and the father, both.

Kinship relationships once played a central role in child rearing and socialization. Uncles and aunts, for example, functioned in relationships that enabled them to fulfil the role of parent, if necessary. But more than that, traditional family systems endowed uncles and aunts with responsibilities comparable to today's fathers and mothers. According to many focus group participants, increased emphasis on extended kinship may help restore the good way of life.

Traditional Values

In addition to family health and parental stability, focus group participants explained the need to reinvigorate American Indian communities with "traditional" values. One elder said that cultural traditions should be each individual's backbone and the avenue



through which one learns to adapt and find the good way of life. Participants identified six traditional values beyond those encompassed in the aforementioned common 12 points.

One valuable coping tool is the tradition of balance. Dennis, from Sisseton-Wahpeton, shared how he learned about this from his grandfather's story about two horses pulling a wagon:

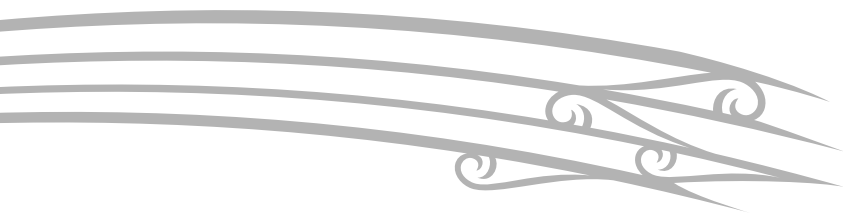
He says, "these horses are just like a marriage of a man and a woman—if they both work and they both pull evenly, you can get a lot of things done; if one of them doesn't want to go, you won't accomplish anything." So I imagine what he was telling me was there's a balance, you know, men and women, day and night, and all these other things.

This parable reiterates the traditional need for a husband and wife in Dakota families but it also provides an important metaphor about the need for a deeper balance in individual and community life. Participants suggested a proper balance stemmed from the veneration of the other five "traditional values"—identity, respect, work ethic, spirituality and gratitude.

Participants viewed identity as a "traditional" value. One participant explained that strength derived from identity: "I still believe our values are taught for our children, they will know who they are, self-identity. . . . They'll love themselves for who they are. They'll have the confidence in who they are and their self-esteem." A Crow Creek participant similarly believed that a broad cultural awareness existed, but that many Indians did not actively frame their lives around it. He shared an incident wherein some Lakota young men "were furious, angry, wanted to fight me. I said, 'You Lakota? Are you an Indian?' They stopped right there. It made them think." He concluded that many know their cultural traditions and have a degree of loyalty to them but that some troubled Indians do not actively employ them to define their identity. Broader community and cultural identity must be translated to the personal level, perhaps through aforementioned mentoring.

Respect is another fundamental value esteemed as traditional. Many felt youth today do not observe proper respect for their elders. Kathryn commented, "I definitely see it as a lesson to be put in today because it's something that we lost." Phyllis explained, "We were always taught that you had to be respectful to your elders no matter whoever it was." Shirley shared how she learned to respect and serve others.

I was taught a lot of things, most important thing was about sharing and I actually seen my grandmother do that, living up to her Indian name, which was "Helps Poor People" . . . and she would actually give up her own bed for visitors. . . . One of the things was sharing and just seeing, we were told to be respectful, be quiet when adults came. . . . She never scolded us, she talked to us, and we always listened and we never said how come or why; we just listened—me and my sisters.



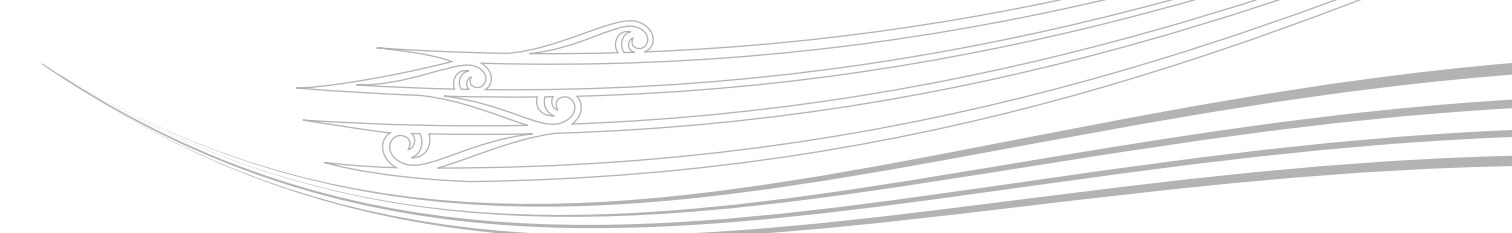
A strong work ethic is another readily noted “traditional” characteristic discussed by the participants. As an example of traditional initiative values, one participant pointed out personal gardens that many Native people once maintained. He explained that the Dakota were traditionally an industrious people. Several voiced concerns that that value is rapidly disappearing among the youth. A Sisseton-Wahpeton elder agreed that many youth lack the industrious spirit of the “traditional” ways. Another elder lamented that “the tendency and trend is to embrace that social side of [the reservation], to where if you run into trouble the district’s gonna help you. If the district can’t do it, you go to the tribe.” He continued, “In the real world, outside the boundaries of the reservation, that’s not life.” Renetta, from Sisseton-Wahpeton, suggested the solution was for each individual “not to expect someone to be there to push you, but to do it yourself on your own. You need to learn how to set your own goals and accomplish those and know what you have to do.” Dennis suggested that older ladies are the “backbones” of culture and tribal industriousness. “They’re the ones that instil industriousness in the kids and the grandchildren.”

Spirituality is another “traditional” attribute participants associated with wicozani. One elder explained, “I think spirituality is something that is sorely lacking.” Marlene from Lower Brule commented, “I think that a lot of our young people don’t have that.” Participants agreed that spirituality provides a valuable foundation and resource for life. Shirley clarified,

If they have that spiritual foundation, then I don’t think that they will turn to alcohol and drugs. But I strongly believe that they need to have that strong spiritual foundation and know who they are so they can love themselves and not turn to something else.

Participants felt that both Christianity and “traditional” spirituality were mutually beneficial, and that either could adequately provide the necessary framework for life. One elder explained, “Jerry is in the traditional one and I moved back into Christianity.” She continued, “I see that’s the key to anybody’s living a drug-free lifestyle, is that they have their spirituality—whether it be traditional or Christianity, or a combination.” Enore (Crow Creek) explained that in her childhood she learned respect for both systems of spirituality. Participants said spirituality (Christian or traditional manifestations) was a central part of their identity. They said a core tenet of spirituality is an awareness of a supreme being. Kathryn noted that awareness of the creator facilitated a reference point of knowing where you fit in the cosmos.

You see that you’re not so big and mighty, you know, as a human being. You need to learn how to walk humbly on the earth because the powers that be are greater than we are and we need to be in sync with those things.



Knowledge of the creator “gives us a perspective of who we are.” She lamented, “I think that’s probably one of the things really missing today.”

Participants also emphasized that prayer or communion with the creator is essential. “I depend on a lot of prayers,” a Crow Creek elder noted. Dennis remembered his childhood instruction, “The first thing taught to us was to pray together. We hold that in the morning. My grandma was always praying.” Social participation is the third spiritual attribute discussed by the speakers, particularly attending religious activities as a family. Leanne (Crow Creek) recalled her family’s dedication to attendance. “And we walked probably almost a mile and a half to church.” Church was a place for community interaction, cooperation and strengthening and provided a forum for community integration. Community-based cooperation is often limited by a lack of such forums. Increased social participation in spirituality will facilitate development, increase needed resources, and improve perspective for successful adaptation to Native stressors.

Gratitude also surfaced frequently as a “traditional” value for coping with stress. Fee (Crow Creek) explained, “If you don’t have the spirit of gratitude you miss everything else. I think our ancestors had this virtue—that it was prominent.” She said without gratitude individuals and communities self-identify with victimization. Elders always gave thanks in their prayers and that all Indians must have a spirit of gratitude regardless of their struggles. “Without gratefulness in my heart all my positiveness goes down the tube and depression starts to descend.”

Education

While participants agreed that good family health and traditional values are fundamental to a good life, several suggested education is increasingly important. Kevin argued that education and spirituality together provide the proper balance. Many commented that education was the key to a good job and a comfortable life. Brent (Lower Brule) told his children to get “an education so you can live comfortably, get a job where you can provide for your family, and you can have enough.” Martha said “schooling is the most valuable thing I think a person needs.”

Application and Outcome

Insight from focus group participants emphasizes the need to respect the old ways while adapting to changing environments. As we recognize (i) the strengths inherent in the “traditional” wicozani lifeways (“B” – resources) and (ii) recognize the necessity of adapting to changing environments (“C” – perceptions and interpretation), Dakota people are better able to transition from maladaptation to bonadaptations (“X” – positive outcomes). Important answers lie within the culture and within its inherent ability to adapt. Each theme identified by our focus group participants offers insights for living the good way of life. For example, dialogue related to the “family” theme suggests the need



to emphasize greater nuclear family support. This necessary “functional adaptation”, as expressed by many Native elders, is in contrast to traditional family structure where greater emphasis was placed on extended family. Many American Indian families continue to value and feel responsibility and commitment towards extended family but focus group participants acknowledged that support often comes at the expense of the nuclear family. Kinship ties are often strong but can obviate parental responsibilities. Many participants agreed that parental support and the instilment of parental responsibility is invaluable in helping youth learn the good way of life from both female and male perspectives. A re-emergence of “traditional” Dakota values in the future may well be the result of greater interaction between those who espouse those values and those who have yet to develop them through mentoring. Other themes related to traditional values (including balance, identity, respect, work ethic, spirituality and gratitude) have tremendous implications for helping youth revitalize cultural strengths while at the same time adapting those strengths to help them function within their current context. As youth begin to internalize these values, changes will occur that facilitate positive adaptation to stressors faced in Dakota society.

A variety of cultural, social, and financial resources are available to American Indian families and individuals as they cope with stressors. Unique and empowering community customs, institutions, histories, world view, accomplishments, religion, and language constitute valuable resources in stress management. A 1992 study by Phinney and Chavira demonstrated that ethnic identity, to some degree, predicts greater self-esteem among American youth. Others have documented this phenomenon in American Indians facing alcoholism (Wardman & Quantz, 2005). One participant explained, “My culture has always been there for me, and a higher power. When I straightened out, who I turned to was my creator, the ceremony, my traditions . . . [They] pulled me out of where I was.” Many American Indian communities are anxiously engaged in a revitalization of traditions to strengthen cultural heritage (Gross, 2002; McBride, 2002). Underutilized institutions such as “warrior societies” might stand as beacons of instruction, potentially setting healthy examples for tribal members. Unfortunately, many warrior society members do not live up to the honours once ascribed to the society. Among the Dakota, the Akicita (warrior society) aspired to fulfil many roles including caring for the poor and needy, bringing honour to the tribe and family, and serving those unable to care for themselves. A healthy adaptation for Akicita would serve as models for proper parenting (White, Godfrey & Moccasin, 2006). These and other societies are resurfacing as American Indians seek to reconstitute traditions that will better serve contemporary Native families and communities. Efforts to educate children in “traditional” ways are now flourishing in Dakota communities. The Tiospa Zina tribal school on the Sisseton-Wahpeton Reservation, for example, displays traditional values on murals, posters, and signs throughout campus and students study tribal stories. Many participants believe community programmes can assist with the declining transmission of values.

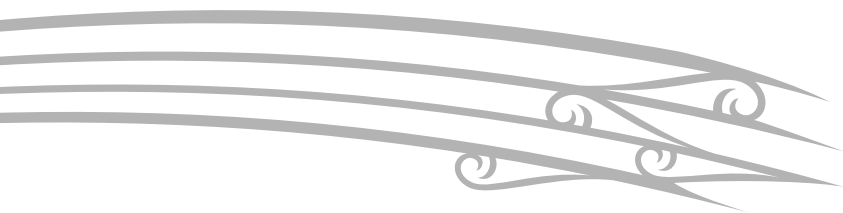


Summary

American Indian communities, families and individuals are facing unique challenges, many of which are extremely dangerous to family well-being. We have suggested the importance of American Indian values—resources within an individual’s zone of proximal development—as catalysts for functional adaptation when families respond to stressors. The family stress model emphasizes the important interaction between resources and perception in response to stressors and their mediating effect on promoting functionally adaptive outcomes to improve individual and family life. Four general themes emerged from focus groups to illustrate this model and point to a potential for improvement. This approach relies heavily upon community input and self diagnosis to develop a clear perspective of stressors and to identify resources that respect traditional values and help American Indian families adapt to a changing environment.

American Indian families continue to face crises, and the need for community-generated functional adaptations that identify healthy ways of promoting bonadaptation and maintaining cultural values will likewise continue. Such efforts have the potential to help Native families revitalize traditional cultural strengths and actively adapt them to new environments and stressors. It is imperative to emphasize the positive trends that exist in Native communities, including marked levels of intergenerational transmission of success and resiliency, family interest and involvement, interest in youth’s education and refusal to accept the victimized role that society often relegates to American Indians (Rousey & Longie, 2000). Just as the failure to adapt to changing environments can be transmitted along generational lines, successes in this realm can likewise be passed on: strengthening American Indian communities both vertically and horizontally as families and communities work together to identify and overcome stressors. The unique struggle of American Indian communities against internal and external stress necessitates cooperation to identify and overcome stressors. Traditional American Indian means of adapting to environmental changes exhibit millennia-proven resiliency.

Understanding functional adaptation in an American Indian context is crucial to identifying these strengths and overcoming the broader ubiquitous challenges faced by American Indian families and communities. Lakota headman Tatanka-lyotanka (Sitting Bull) once explained that he “would rather die an Indian than live a white man” (Utley, 1993, p. 260). Our changing world may require Native communities to flirt with that division, but ultimately Native communities can draw upon a long history of indigenous adaptability in order to survive and thrive. American Indians today can find valuable indigenous resources to reinterpret and overcome family and social stressors. For the Dakota, Lakota and Nakota people, wicozani represents one of the key inherent cultural resources that promote effective problem solving and healthy life skills for those who choose to follow the “good path in life”.



Glossary

Lakota

cantewasake
canteyuke
cantoknake
icicupi
unsiiciyapi
waunsilapi
wayuonihan
wicozani
woksape
wohitike
wowacintanka
wowicake
wowoohola

English

fortitude
generosity
love
sacrifice
humility
compassion
honour
the good way of life
wisdom
bravery
perseverance
truth
respect



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