

ALASKA NATIVE ELDERS' VIEWS OF ABUSE: THE TRADITION OF HARMONY, RESPECT, AND LISTENING

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ABSTRACT

This project queried Alaska Native elders from the five major Alaska Native ethnic groups regarding their ideas about the causes and kinds of elderly abuse and asked them to suggest ways to reduce and control such abuse. They preferred to discuss the topic in terms of respect and disrespect, emphasizing a holistic understanding of current disharmony that flows from the historical trauma experienced by Alaska Native people. Using a grounded theory approach in Part I, major themes are discussed regarding how harmony and balance are maintained through acceptance of one's own value and the value of all creation, including the natural world. The most prevalent kinds of elder abuse that they perceived, presented in Part II, are emotional disrespect of Alaska Native elders by well-meaning western institutions and Alaska Native youth and financial exploitation by family members.

KEYWORDS: Alaska Native culture, aging, gerontology

INTRODUCTION

The population of elderly in the U.S. is increasing dramatically. In Alaska, this trend among Alaska Natives is even more dramatic, with more people reaching advanced age compared to the past. Saylor and Doucette (2004) reported a 62% increase over the past twelve years of Alaska Native elderly who are eighty-five years and older, compared to 13.2% for the non-Native population. With an increasing population of elderly comes a growing concern for abuse of the elderly. In 2004, the National Indian Council on Aging reported that there is little known about the scope and nature of abuse and neglect among Native elderly in "Indian country" in the Lower Forty-eight. Buchwald et al. (2000) reported a rate of abuse for urban Native Americans in the Lower Forty-eight that ranged from 2% to 46%, with the probability that socioeconomic

factors are responsible for the variation. Segal (2004) suggested that studies are needed to determine how elderly abuse is viewed and defined by Alaska Native peoples.

In response to the above concerns about abuse of Alaska Native elderly, this project initially focused on understanding how elderly Alaska Natives view abuse, focusing solely on Alaska Native elderly residing in urban or hub locations. As will be explained below, we shifted to questions about respect and disrespect shown to Alaska Native elderly, then examined their perceptions of the causes and examples of elder abuse.

The urban location of respondents for this study is justified by the lack of health care in rural Alaska, which has resulted in an increasing influx of elderly to urban and "hub" centers such as Bethel and Barrow (Feldman

1980). In rural Alaska, fewer family members and others are, thus, available to care for the elderly within the community. Branch (2005) recommends expansion and improvement of personal care and community-based services in rural Alaska to lessen this influx of elders away from close family ties.¹ Until that occurs, more and more Alaska Native elderly will be forced to reside where services for them are available.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

Key informant interviews were conducted with fifteen individuals from Yup'ik/Cup'ik, Athabascan, Aleut, Iñupiat, Alutiiq, and Tlingit heritage, comprised of three Alaska Native elders from each cultural group, about their perceptions of abuse of elders in Alaska today. Directly addressing "abuse" with the respondents did not result in an open discussion of the issue because, quite likely, it was too direct a question for such a highly charged area of familial life. A team member suggested using the more culturally appropriate terms "respect and disrespect" rather than the term "abuse."² Each individual respondent was asked how they defined an elder, how respect was traditionally shown to elders, how they would define disrespect and how Alaska Native communities could address issues related to disrespect for Alaska Native elderly.

The participants were primarily from urban or hub areas of Alaska. Snowball sampling was used to locate and engage the respondents in the project. Snowball sampling relies on referrals from initial subjects to generate additional subjects. The ages of the respondents ranged from fifty-five to eighty-seven years. The minimum age of fifty-five years of age was chosen to follow guidelines for age limitations established for federally funded programs for the elderly.

Thurman et al. (1998) stated that there has been a history of mistrust for American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) people with regards to the government, health officials, and mental health providers. Issues of confidentiality, quality of care, and depersonalization are prevalent. Due to the history of mistrust, it is vital to use American Indian or Alaska Native recognized culture bearers, as were the respondents in this study, in order to receive the most open and perhaps useful information from Alaska Native research participants. The respondents engaged

in this project are valued within the Native community and have acquired advanced knowledge about their cultural norms and values. Some of the respondents have held highly visible political and directive positions in local, tribal, and health agencies. Several of the elders engaged in the project are often invited to speak at local, statewide, and sometimes international conferences and workshops and are viewed as leaders in their community of origin. Several of the respondents are known as Alaska Native storytellers, healers, and spiritual leaders and are involved in teaching indigenous knowledge to their tribe, community, and families.

Elders were given a brief introduction to the purpose of the project. Each respondent signed an informed consent form. The interviews were held either in the elder's home or in a public place. The duration of the interviews was approximately one hour, and each respondent received a \$50 gift. The interviews were semistructured with the same set of questions asked of each respondent. Each interview was recorded and transcribed at a later date.

The open-ended interviews were analyzed using a grounded theory approach to interpreting qualitative data (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Grounded theory allows for the hypothesis or major analytical themes to be derived directly from the raw data. As the coding process began, concepts emerged from the data and were linked together. The conceptual frame that emerged was refined into the hypotheses. These hypotheses were then validated and examples of direct quotes from the Alaska Native elders were used to support the conceptualizations.

The aim was to allow the elders to describe in their own words what respect and disrespect mean, how they are manifested, and how to address the issue of abuse. This approach allowed for a systematic analysis of the words, phrases, and concepts described by these culture bearers.

Three levels of analysis were used within the grounded theory paradigm (open coding, axial coding, and selected coding) to break down the data, conceptualize it, and put it back together. Open coding allows for broad themes from the data to emerge; axial coding allows for similar themes to be merged together into subcategories; and selected coding allows for refining, filtering, and integrating the data into an explanation or theory that is grounded in the data. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and downloaded into the qualitative software ATLAS.ti.

1. Branch stated that there has been an ongoing decrease in the number of state grants, as well as a lack of adequate Medicaid reimbursement, resulting in the unavailability of personal care services in many areas of the state.
2. Jim LaBelle, Research Associate, National Resource Center for Native American, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian Elders, Anchorage.

Cultural consultants from each cultural region were engaged to provide guidance in understanding concepts, cultural beliefs, historical events, oral stories, terminology, and rituals. The cultural consultants were selected for their advanced knowledge of Alaska Native cultural ways, their ability to speak their Native language, and their connection to the elder wisdom. When the final draft of the report was developed, the consultants were contacted once again to verify the accuracy of the analysis.

The cultural consultants were given \$100 for their participation in the project.³ In addition, to ensure inter-rater reliability, an independent reviewer analyzed a sample of the interviews and found results similar to the findings presented in this paper.⁴

EMERGENT THEMES

Several key themes emerged from the above data analysis methods. First, “elder” is a status not based primarily or solely on maturity in age. There are also traditional ways for asking for an elder’s assistance. Most importantly, there are culturally significant values involving what is glossed in English as “listening,” without which the harmonious cycle of appropriate interactions with all things is broken, resulting in disharmony that can be expressed as disrespect for/abuse of elders. Part I summarizes the functions of elders and what it meant traditionally to respect and listen to elders. Part II summarizes respondents’ points of view regarding how the breakdown of these traditional roles, respect for and holistic listening to elders has resulted in elder abuse.

PART I: DEFINITION AND TRADITIONAL ROLE OF ALASKA NATIVE ELDERS

Elders explained that there were things we need to know about traditional cultural values and how to define the role of “elder” prior to even discussing “elder abuse.” We present their background knowledge here before we present findings about how they experience being abused in Part II.

The respondents defined the role and function of elders within the community. Elders are known for maintaining a healthy lifestyle and a wealth of cultural wisdom

and good judgment.⁵ They explained the role of an elder in the following manner:

...elderly is when a person is old. But the elder is a wise person because they experienced life, they went through the mill...

I think elder sometimes can be young. Elder is the one that is mature, has wisdom to make right decisions, had experience in life...

...I think an elder is integrated in your tribe that’s older than you, or you have the great knowledge of your affiliation of dance and stories. We’d honor them...

Not all elderly Alaska Natives are viewed as elders, particularly when the individual does not live a healthy lifestyle and does not maintain a wealth of cultural knowledge. The chronological age of the individual is not necessarily connected with the ability to hold the role and status of elder within the community. When elderly Alaska Native people do not live their lives by these standards, they are not identified by their community as elders, as explained by participants in the following manner:⁶

...It doesn’t necessarily have to be a person who has reached a certain age...

Some people age and grow old and whatever happens, they end up dying...

...there’s elders (elderly) who people don’t show respect because they’re abusive, maybe they drink too much, they don’t do things right...abuse their family...

Athabascan elders usually do not offer unsolicited advice; elders need to be engaged and their advice requested. Elders will not interfere by imposing their knowledge on others but are happy to assist when asked. Alaska Natives traditionally learned that there are protocols in place whereby the elders are available for support when asked.

...It’s a curious way how it happens because the elders don’t come forward and start telling people what to do. They wait until they’re asked...

3. Cultural consultants: Floyd Guthrie, Tlingit; Rita Pitka-Blumenstein, Yup’ik; Anna Frank, Athabascan; Vickie Hikes, Iñupiat; and Larry Merculieff, Aleut.

4. Shelly A. Wiechelt, Ph.D., research assistant professor, University at Buffalo, Buffalo, New York.

5. Hamilton-Cannelos (1986) stated that chronological age alone does not necessarily make one an “elder.” For her project, the Elder respondents were identified by the community as Elders due to their advanced knowledge of traditional norms and values.

6. In the NRC report *Conferences of Alaska Native Elders; Our Dignified View of Aging*, Alutiiq elders stated that respect is based upon chronological age. Alutiiq elders are held in high esteem and given special treatment given their advanced chronological age.

... An elder in life is there and is willing to help and has a wealth of knowledge and natural education, is willing to pass it on, if they are asked. They are not going to intrude on someone's life. There's a triggering mechanism, I guess, you have to ask for help or advice or assistance...

An Athabascan elder explained that there is a traditional way to ask for help from elders. The respondent explained that instead of directly asking for help from the elder, a plate of food was offered, which served as an outward sign or symbol that the elder's spiritual help was needed. The non-verbal request for spiritual help was implicit in the action of offering the food to the elder. There was no need for words.⁷

You don't just go over and ask them... Bringing the food and then those elders would advise you on who to talk to... So we asked them in the traditional way, just bringing that food, taking a plate of food. You put food on it and bring it to an elder and you give it to them... So we asked them in the traditional way, just bringing that food.

... these outward signs or symbols that indicate a deeper knowledge and a deeper understanding of the social, spiritual needs of people. It's an interesting thing... our spiritual and social inquiries and needs. The outward sign in this case was just bringing that food on a plate and not saying anything... with that plate of food and put it down there and sat down. He looked at it, looked at me. We didn't say a lot. But it was a sign. After he looked at me a couple times he kind of got the message. I could see it.

While the above characteristics reflect the respondents' views of the role of the Alaska Native elder, this role requires a reciprocal role from the listener if the elder's role is to have an effect.

TRADITIONAL CULTURAL VALUES: EMERGENT THEMES FROM GROUNDED THEORY RESEARCH

"LISTENING"

Of the fifteen elders engaged in the project, thirteen mentioned the importance of listening. Three elders and several cultural consultants identified the tradition of listening as *the most important value of Alaska Natives*. This finding supports the research reported in Fienup-Riordan (2007) regarding

Yup'ik "words of wisdom." Further study of this emphasis on "listening" in all Alaska Native cultures is needed.

...listen...that falls into our number one value which is respect for young people and ourselves and our elders...

This...listening and hearing...this respect is deeply ingrained in all indigenous peoples, this respect.

Many elaborated upon the process of the oral tradition or listening, which involves intent, mindfulness, observation, expansion of intuitive knowledge, and immersion. The majority of the elders interviewed affirmed the importance of "the tradition of listening" as a highly structured system that holds an essential association to the relationship between respect and disrespect of elderly Alaska Natives.

...It is good to pay attention; it is good to listen to others.

...(elders) tell you something over and over long enough, it's gonna make sense. Grandpa said things over and over...he felt strongly in his traditional values...

Vital to teaching the tradition of listening is the discipline of the physical body and mind. Restricting body movements and giving exclusive attention to the elder storyteller is a component of the tradition of listening. Self-discipline and delayed gratification are strengthened in this process while the mind and body are quieted. During storytelling, children are strengthening positive thinking skills by connecting with the possibilities in life. Their cognitive ability for creative imagery is enhanced.

...[in the past]...when our elders are talking, we can't move [around], we don't whisper, we don't look around, we just stay [still] and listen. We did that because we first heard it in our home that was taught to us in our home. At that time, the elders, the grandpas and grandmas, used to talk to children including their own grandchildren, with their playmates, they would sit, no sound, no one gets up to drink water, no one goes out (leaves). That's how much they respected their elders...

While the above statements identify how the listener completes the reciprocal relationship between elder communicating knowledge necessary for the next generation and the listener, much more than a didactic relationship between

7. Sometimes Athabascan elders do offer unsolicited advice, but do so in a culturally appropriate manner. Such a culturally appropriate manner is to voice the advice indirectly with nuances that might be indiscernible to an outsider, but are usually loud and clear to other (younger) Athabascans (Phyllis Fast, personal communication, 2008).

wisdom giver and wisdom receiver surrounds the cultural construction of speaking-hearing among Alaska Natives.

STABILITY AND HARMONY THROUGH ANCESTRAL WISDOM

The elders provide balance and harmony within the community through their connection to the ancestral wisdom of the past. In the past, when harmony was lacking in a community, the entire community was at risk. The interdependency among the members of the community helped Alaska Natives survive in a very harsh environment.

Respect I think had much to do to enable all of us to live in as much harmony as possible.

Without this connection, there was an increased lack of equilibrium and constancy among people, which could result in an unbalanced earth, as explained by an Athabascan elder. There is an Arapaho proverb that states, "When we show respect for other living things, they respond with respect for us." This proverb supports the corresponding unbalanced nature of the earth, in response to unbalanced people.

We're all supposed to be balanced. And, if we aren't balanced then things start going wrong, they start going awry. People notice that things are out of balance...it's not only in your personal lives but it spreads out across the earth. The earth itself, if it's out of balance it will put its self back in balance through its own natural processes; governments, everything else, in all things.

The tradition of listening gives birth to respect of elders and vice-versa, which provides direction and strength to the community. Several of the Yup'ik elders used the likeness or analogy of a boat without an anchor as a metaphor for the connection and stability that one can derive from listening and learning to respect elders.

You're the one that operates that drifting all over; the boat and you learn how to anchor it. So if you don't listen to your elders, you're like a boat without a driver, without an anchor, and it drifts all over. That's why elders used to tell us to listen when they tell stories.

...This is what stability...; respect the elders like an anchor line on a boat. It keeps the boat safe; prevents it from drifting aimlessly all over the place; Likewise, the young people they drift aimlessly all

over the place, twiddling their fingers. Don't know where they've been and don't know where they are, where to go.

Thus, community harmony and balance cannot occur without the tradition of elders speaking and other members listening. But more is involved in this integrative view of community, authority, wisdom, and listening. What does "listen" mean?

LISTENING AS A CULTURAL PARADIGM

The skills related to the Alaska Native listening paradigm may be attained through repeatedly listening to the stories of the elders, which have been handed down from ancestors. The experience of listening to elder storytelling, or the oral tradition, allows for observation, development, and self-directed performance of required skills. Attainment of the skills involves a very mentally active process by which cognitive abilities are strengthened; and, if one doesn't listen to the elders, one learns painfully by trial and error. It is essential for elders to pass the traditional knowledge to the next generation so that the members of Alaska Native cultural traditions can have long, productive, and joyful lives.

...If I don't listen to my parents, my teachers, I won't have nothing. I won't have knowledge...

... They say that if I listen to my parents, I will have long life, longer life, happiness. Otherwise, I won't have a long life. This is what I experienced...

Self-discipline and delayed gratification are strengthened in this process. Repetition of the stories increases the probability of the ability to recall the story at a later time, and the meaning can be applied to the ever-changing situations, emotions, and needs of the listeners. Redundancy in storytelling and ritual actions, especially regarding sacred oral texts, is a way for the group to overcome "noise" that competes for the hearer's attention. In Alaska today, "noise" would include western notions of human value (individual, unshared wealth or harvested food), entertainment (television, radio, music, sports stardom, drugs, alcohol, etc.). When experiencing a time of difficulty, connecting with the teachings from the stories will support the healing process.⁸

...learned by listening to the stories by the elders. Go to storytelling and my mother storytelling

8. Hamilton-Cannelos (1986) described that for Yup'ik people the delay of gratification, self-discipline, and individual accountability are components of learning Yuuyaraq (becoming a human being) and are linked to the prevention of suicide.

every evening and learn to respect the elders by respecting them. We don't ask questions, we just listen. And these stories tell the same thing over and over...

That was our school by listening. They talk about the legends, myths, and the morals of the stories of how to have a good life. This is how to listen and pay attention.

... You just watch them and they never even watch you. If you make a mistake, you correct...

...the villages are dealing with a complex world right now...the elders completely understand...

So the elders always remind us. Like they point to me and say this man has eight great-grandchildren, maybe nine. They too have all the life skills, survival skills of the ancestors. They too have the answers, solutions that they would need to survive...

TRADITIONAL WISDOM IS EXPERIENCED OUTSIDE OF STORIES

The elders noted that, despite the historical disruptions to the dissemination of cultural knowledge experienced by Alaska Natives today, the wisdom has been protected and is available, not only in stories that elders tell but in the traditional food, songs, drumming, traditional language, and ceremonies of Native people. It is interesting to compare our findings with a recent reviewer's comment regarding how Yup'ik elders responded to viewing Yup'ik artifacts in a Berlin museum.

The Yup'ik delegation transformed anthropological material culture into moral teachings, ceremonial songs, hunting lore, dance steps, and vehicles for cultural pride...The enduring message of this book is to listen to the *qanruyutet* (teachings) of the ancestors and to return to a way of "living within the drum." This is a meaningful metaphor on which the elders linger: It is a way of living in harmony with one's community and being true to Yup'ik identity. (Fienup-Riordan 2007:111-115)

A Tlingit elder noted that the information is stored in the permanent memory of Alaska Natives in an almost mystical sense (that is, to be Native is to feel summoned when exposed to traditional values, drumming, etc.).

...when you eat Native food from your culture that you have never had before, your body knows and your spirit knows...

...That's what I hear, the Tlingits singing (Tlingit language). That's what it say, it all left us, they understand. It will be brought back again. So that's where I come in, is trying to remind the people. And let them listen to this song, when they open this box on knowledge and wisdom...

He [brother] said he could always hear the drums that called him and I told him the drums called me, too. Even if you're not raised around the culture, it's something in you that calls you and he felt it, too.

THE TRADITION OF LISTENING

The Alaska Native tradition of listening, as gleaned from these interviews, is holistic, balanced, and interconnected. The tradition of listening, which is crucial to cultures based on oral tradition, is connected with teaching through the stories, which have been passed from the ancestors through the elders. The stories contain the guidelines for the experience of living a happy life, enhancement of family cohesiveness, balance with the natural world, and ultimately survival. The tradition of listening is connected with the mental, spiritual, and physical balance within the individual, the community, and with the natural world.

LISTENING IS HOLISTIC

It is essential to take into consideration the interdependence among the parts, or a holistic perspective, when delving into the concept of listening from the Native worldview. The beliefs involved encompass the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the self. Balance and harmony with the natural world is maintained in this process. These interdependent quadrants of the being cannot be precisely separated.

From the western perspective, listening involves focusing on the cognitive act of hearing attentively, or the ability to hear and focus upon something.

... There is a real difference between hearing and listening...

...you should and you have to know the difference between listening and hearing. Hearing is just being able to hear noises, sounds, voices, whatever it is, and indicating that, yes, you hear something.

The tradition of listening goes much deeper than simply being attentive and hearing. It involves intent, mindfulness, observation, expansion of intuitive knowledge, and immersion. Listening involves opening your mind,

spirit, and heart so that the information becomes integrated into being.

Elders, they ask you to listen. The other thing is they ask you to open your mind. So what they're saying while you're listening will get to you so that you will put it in your mind in your memory to understand that you can reflect on later in life; it will come back to you.

The separation of the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects of listening is inappropriate, from the Alaska Native listening paradigm.

... Our (Native) school is for the soul. It's no different than physical and spiritual things. Their anatomy is the same way, how you treat it. ...

... I think that the traditional and cultural ways of dealing with a person is that they recognized that a person is comprised of mind, body, and spirit conducted their life. ...⁹

LISTENING INVOLVES INTERCONNECTEDNESS AMONG COMMUNITY MEMBERS

It is also important to keep in mind that the self is viewed as encompassing others into the self, with an interdependent self having permeable boundaries and less differentiation (Berzoff et al. 1996; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Roland 1996). The individual is not the focus, but rather the entire group is the focus and how the individual supports the family and the tribe, and their connection to all people and the natural world.

... Peace in the community is very important; that's a Cup'ik value. Stick together, help each other. Here's something bad, too, from individuals.

... we're all connected. And ultimately we do see that we are all connected either earlier or later.

ELDERS AND THE TRADITION OF LISTENING

Elders take on the role of instructors and leaders within the oral tradition, teaching values. The values are intrin-

sically connected with becoming a healthy human being and help with maintaining a positive life-path and balance and harmony with the natural world. The elders stress the importance of mindfulness and learning by observation, which are components of the tradition of listening. Elders intuitively know when balance is needed and they will restore the balance by singing a song and/or telling a story.

... When elders are talking to you, you listen to them. They are your teachers. ...

This is our traditional education. Traditional education is subtle and indirect. You learn by observation and listening by people telling their experiences or stories.

... The stories and legends were methods for teaching us how we should live and how we shouldn't live. ...

BODY LANGUAGE AND THE TRADITION OF LISTENING

Increasing knowledge about body language is a fundamental element of the tradition of listening, according to the respondents in this study, and can serve as a protective factor. By attentively observing and immersing oneself in the tradition of listening, one can know others through their facial expressions, gestures, and movement. A Yup'ik elder described the manner in which these tools help a person throughout life to understand others and assist with emotions and health issues.

... how you learn to today, I'm an elder so when I'm working with the people, I do exactly what the elders told me. I watch their expressions, listen to their voice and, ah... and, ah, their facial and their gestures in their body movements. And you'll know if they're not telling you real things. That's why I do the healing by listening.

TRUSTING INSTINCTS AND INTUITION IN AN ORAL TRADITION CULTURE

The elders in this study emphasized that learning to trust one's instincts and intuition are necessary elements of the

9. Indigenous words for "listening" seem to reflect the above perspectives. In the *Comparative Eskimo Dictionary* by Fortescue, Jacobson, and Kaplan (1994:346) one finds the word "*tusilaag*—be hard of hearing or disobedient," as spoken in among eastern Canadian Inuit. The Inuit dialect has the word as *tusilyhaq*—"to become deaf." Obviously these words are variations of the same word, and likely the Canadian Inuit meaning is the full meaning of the "become deaf" word found in northern Iñupiaq Alaska. That is, "to be hard of hearing" refers to the character of the listener—the listener is said to be disobedient. This is different among Alaska Iñupiaq than a speaker not being able to be heard, which is simply due to loudness in the speaker's voice (not to the disposition of the disobedient listener): *tusaqsari*—"be able to hear" (op. cit. p. 345) Likewise, "listen" in north Alaska Iñupiaq is *naalak*, and in the eastern Canadian Inuit the word is *naalag*, which means "listen, obey, be well-behaved" (op. cit. p. 206). There is something similar in Ahtna-Athabaskan, in the dictionary by James Kari (1990:547) where the word for "listen to, understand" is *O=d=i=Ø'+ts'al ts'aan*. This seems different than the physical act of "listening" in that "he is listening intently" is *dzitel'aa*, 'aa.

oral tradition, which can enhance balance and connectedness. One can then connect with her or his internal sense of knowing, which can guide the person through life's difficulties. When someone lacks the ability to listen and quiet oneself, there is lost the ability to recognize and trust one's instincts, or internal sense of knowing. In this way, the person becomes lost without an anchor. Without this connection, people are at risk.

We don't listen to our elders, our instincts. Instincts are our elders but we argue with our instincts. Yeah. So you question the instincts. That's the reason why elders used to tell us, "Don't ask questions."

Can you change the weather when it's bad? No. We are the natures. Our elders are nature. Our being is nature. Our instincts are our nature. But we learn to question: should I or shouldn't I? And when it says do it, we go ahead and don't do it. When our instincts says do it and we didn't do it then we feel I should've done it. I should've go ahead and do it, afterwards.

TRAINING IN LISTENING BEGINS BEFORE BIRTH AND DURING SLEEP

Elders thought that Native people begin teaching the tradition of listening before birth. The fetus, as a human being, is beginning to listen, observe, and connect with the feeling of love from the outside world. One of the Tlingit elders interviewed expressed it this way:

My mother used to sing this song while I was still inside of her. And she talks to the children, tells them the story. She's training the unborn child. So, she's a teacher. So when the baby is born, he already has a start....

It is the vibration of the love and compassion in the voice of the mother that has a positive effect upon the fetus, in the elder's view. The positive impact of the connection with the vibration from the voice can be connected with providing a safeguard for the unborn. An Aleut elder explains the process in the following manner:

And so the elders would talk to a fetus inside the womb because they know the vibration of their voice that is the most important aspect of what they're sharing. Especially when it comes from a place of love and compassion.

Elders noted that after birth the training continues, even while asleep. The elders will gently whisper the stories of the survival skills and ancient songs in the ear of the

slumbering child. A Tlingit elder told us that the child will retain the information in their unconscious memory or permanent memory:

I did not have grandparents. They died at an early age. So all I had was three great uncles. They conveyed all their skills, life skills, survival skills, answers, solutions. So I have it. They used to talk to me when I was asleep. Real quietly, talk in one ear then the other. So that's how they trained me.

... we grew up in an orphanage. ... They did not allow us to talk our language or sing songs, or tell stories. They forbade us. So we grew up without this knowledge. We do not know the songs, the stories... it's all in your memory, everything your great, great, great uncles all told you. It's lost in your memory. ... While the babies were asleep, the elders would be singing songs, ancient songs. They would tell stories while the children were asleep.

LISTENING AND RESPECT

There is a fundamental connection between the tradition of listening and the capacity to accept and express respect for the self and others. While the tradition of listening may seem simplistic on the surface, it is connected with a complex set of values and way of life. The multifaceted core set of behaviors, beliefs, and concepts are fundamentally interlinked with the development of respect and disrespect of Alaska Native elderly and the maintenance of balance and harmony with the natural world.

Respect toward an elder, to be able [to] listen to them. ... There is a real difference between hearing and listening. ... When you listen is when you take things inside of you, assess them. ...

The ability to listen in the traditional sense is ultimately connected to the ability to respect. When an individual lacks the ability to listen in the traditional manner, disrespect is present. Within this context, respect is intrinsically linked to the tradition of listening. From the Alaska Native paradigm, respect is understood to mean understanding, accepting, and following the ancestral wisdom as a guideline for the life-path.

Because I respect my grandmother, I learn from her. If I disrespected my grandmother from my father's side, I wouldn't listen to her, I wouldn't be gathering those things. Today, I still gather those, summer time for winter use; the sour docks, pond greens, and berries that grow. Because I respect my grandmother, I learn those things from her. She taught

me. If I didn't listen to her words; my late grandmother _____, I wouldn't be doing those things.

The Yup'ik, Iñupiat, and Tlingit elders and cultural consultants stated that the cycle of respect involves honor and love.¹⁰ The first component of the process begins with the external experience of being loved, honored, and respected by others. Next, the individual internalizes the experience. Finally, there is recognition and acceptance of those attributes by others. The cycle of respect begins by elders and adults giving love, honor, and respect to the young. The elders intrinsically know how to activate others and therefore recognize when the child is ready to listen and seize the opportunity to connect with the child.

...we [adults and elders] also need to listen to young people, they have challenges that we never had...we can learn from them too...

...Elders respect us first, before we learn to respect them...

Elders quietly discipline with honor and love toward children. Within this worldview, harsh words and physical punishment are inappropriate. When teaching children, elders speak from their heart, connect with the child, and project the vibration of love from their voice.

...grandfather...felt that was a very harmful thing to do to punish a child....

...my grandparents never hit me, they never jerked me...

RECOGNIZING INDIVIDUAL INTRINSIC WORTH AND VALUE

In order to respect others, elders observed that first one needs to recognize that people are valuable and worth love, honor, and respect. Without the recognition and acceptance within, one cannot engage in a reciprocal relationship with elders. When elders and adults treat the young with love, honor, and respect, the children can recognize and accept these things within themselves. They connect to it and ultimately begin the process of recognizing and accepting the natural world, elders, and others in a mutual, reciprocal manner.

How can you respect if you don't respect yourself?
Because you are very important person to yourself.

You come first. Then give your specialness [sic] to others.

It explains what the respect is. You have to learn to respect yourself; listen to you.

When an individual recognizes and accepts the love, honor, and respect internally, elders and others will intuitively recognize and accept these attributes. This is a reciprocal, cyclical process by which respect, love, and acceptance is shared, which creates harmony within, with others, and with the natural world.

...so respecting elders, things seemed to have harmony...

...the elders say that nothing is created on the outside unless it's created on the inside first...

There are exceptions to this process, which involve a caveat whereby the individual has experienced extreme disrespect for extended periods of time, either as a child or adult. When these individuals are given respect, they reject it because they have built up a defense of resistance and fear that protects them from the pain related to experiences of being disrespected. Disrespect involves lack of understanding and connection to the ancestral knowledge and traditions. The disrespectful person is separated and unbalanced from the natural world, ancestral wisdom, and the elders.

The elders gave detailed descriptions of the components of teaching the ancestral wisdom to the youth. Elders are concerned because some of these components of disciplining children have been forgotten or lost. When the children were removed from their homes during the boarding school era in Alaska, the cycle of loss of traditional parenting began. This cycle of loss continues today because many parents and grandparents do not know the ways of traditional parenting. Hamilton-Cannelos (1986) included this quote from a Yup'ik elder:

...They said to turn over the teaching of our children to them...Now look at our children!

TEACHING RESPECT THROUGH STORIES

Through the stories of survival, youth are taught how to respect the earth, the animals, the plants, the weather, and other people. The elders teach through the stories of ancestors and their own stories of survival. The oral tradition

10. The Aleut and Athabascan elders interviewed did not describe the respect in the same cyclic manner, yet this does not mean they do not hold the same belief. Follow up with the Aleut and Athabascan elders is needed to determine whether or not this is the case.

teaches about respect for all that surrounds us: the earth, animals, and families and communities.

That's the way. The reason why we have to respect the elders; they went through that path. They only tell you from their experience. They didn't go to school, they didn't write everything. They didn't write down instructions what their life is going to be. They only tell us through their experience how to survive. How to respect animal, plants, weather. That's the old world and now we're trying to go back to that old world and if it's a good path. Most of it is good path. . . .

Elders' narratives hold the sacred stories of Alaska Natives. The stories, told by elders that are handed down from their ancestors, teach how the world began, how to survive, social values, and cultural connections. The stories teach respect for the self, earth, animals, plants, and others. The stories comfort children.

...we figure things out through the stories; the morals to the stories. And they tell us not to make fun of people. Like story of the devil fish and the fox. And fox was telling you; you ugly, you're ugly. And cause of that. Fox turn red when he got embarrassed and then he went to somebody's campfire. That's why he got dog feet; when he got embarrassed, only one that's white is the end of the tail. Cause when she got embarrassed, she got red and then she got embarrassed, she put her face in the fire; charcoal and that's why he got black face, I mean dark face. So all those things like that is morals. It fires back when we do it to the human people. People, those elders are telling us stories and the morals are true. . . .

...Because it's comforting. Telling a preschool child of bedtime stories I think is the best time to remember things because you sleep through 'em; carry them in our sleep. In the world, the storytelling is biological instinct. I think it's same thing as building a campfire.

The survival skills are taught by listening, observation, and participation. Parents and grandparents teach the skills to the youth. Sometimes, grandparents take over parenting when alcohol and lack of parenting skills is involved within the family.

The Inupiat way; like I said my dad showed us by living it, 'course as a child growing up we didn't understand [that he was teaching us], we were participating. We went out hunting and fishing and then when there was somebody in need in the community he would go help that individual and so

we learned in a traditional manner by observing, participating, and listening.

The kids that I knew lost their parents due to alcohol. So it was the grandparents that raised them. So the grandparents conveyed, through their stories, conveyed all the life skills, survival skills to their grandchildren. They gave them life skills, survival skills. They gave them, conveyed all the answers, solutions that kids would need to survive in this era. Era that we call space age is still that way. So these are my teachers. They were not even thirty years old but they were raised by grandparents. So they had all the knowledge of the grandparents.

Teaching the traditions begins in the home, with parents and grandparents teaching children how to become "real human beings" (one who respects self, others, and the natural environment). The instruction needs to begin early in life to increase the probability of a positive impact upon the child.

Behavior is you start at home, how you treat your brothers and sisters and how you behave towards your mom and dad at home. At home that was first taught in the family; they teach their children. They don't want to teach their children until they get older. It's wrong, it's very, very wrong to teach them when they get older. It's now and the parents being example at home.

...I was so thankful that my first son caught a mukluk and also with my youngest son caught mukluk, the same thing happened. And those elder ladies and guys were so happy, they started teasing my boys that they were great hunters and my boys learn it from their father who used to love to hunt. Those things makes the elders spirit go up and make them happy. It also makes your children happy too, they have smiling face, they're happy. Little things like, put your family together more, I think.

The Yup'ik/Cup'ik elders mentioned that, in the past, males were trained in a community house, or *qasgiq*. The community house served as a place for ceremonies, singing, and dancing. When boys reached the age when they could leave their mothers, they moved to the *qasgiq* to be trained to become men. The community house served as a social and spiritual center.

[Traditionally] Eskimos do, they have what they call *qasriq*—a meeting place where elders are together, they talk to young people, young boys how they should hunt, respect the sea, respect the atmosphere, how it was made and watch the weather very closely. . . .

...Because Eskimos need to watch the weather very closely. Because the only way that time was by hunting; subsistence hunting. And when they are talking to young people, there are some boys that don't want to listen to elders are saying and when somebody, a young man steps out of [*qasriq*], try to go out, a guard, somebody stops them right there. And let them go back and listen to elders say about life. Okay, other things; let me see... and also they listen and follow the traditional Cup'ik teachings. They listen to the elders' fathers.

Traditionally, Yup'ik/Cup'ik girls were trained by their mothers, separate from the males. They were trained about becoming women, how to assist in the transmission of the culture, how to enhance their mates' hunting success, and how to preserve and prepare food for their family and community.

We [females] were taught at home and the boys were taught at *qasriq* [men's house]. And the boys would go to the *qasriq* and the men that were in there taught them also. As we know, *yuuyaraq*; the way of life.

It was my mother who taught me how to live life. What she taught me was about marriage life and how I should raise my children or how to prepare my husband when he's ready to go out to sea, out to land wintertime so he'll survive...

...And one thing; well this was what my mother used to tell me; now you're growing up and you have two brothers who are growing; this was when I started my menstrual first time. "Don't you ever step over your brother," because if you ever do that, "*jumajistullu-ggu*," that means that the animals that is to get will be so scared that he won't be able to get. That's what my mother used to tell me...

HELPING THE ELDERLY IS A RECIPROCAL PROCESS

The traditional training of children involves training them to help the elderly. This is a reciprocal process by which they will be helped when they become elderly.

They said this man next door is a friend of your uncle. So, you have to, he's way past fifty (years of age), so he can't do much by himself. So they always ask now you go help him. Pack water for him, cut wood, chop wood. Pack it in his house before it gets dark. So that's how they said. This is the old way. One day you are going to become an elder. If you don't help the elders now, so when you become an elder nobody is going to help. So that's how they trained us...

A Cup'ik elder told us that sharing resources with others is an essential value among Alaska Native people.

That way, sharing. I love sharing; sharing food or anything; something, even what I make with my hand like sewing. And from that I know that some of my children have learned and they do that.

...And my children; my six children were in school, if husband got some seal after hunting, then I would ask one of them [children] to bring one of them; an elderly woman and after I've cooked I would ask one of them to bring them to an elderly guy. Whenever they do something, they do that, they share and it makes my heart so happy because they've seen me doing this when they were growing up. Bring some food or some meat to elders...

A Yup'ik elder told us that learning from experience involves acceptance. When things are negative, one needs to learn to accept this experience. In the same manner, one needs to learn to accept the positive experiences in life.

...so, when elders tell you, learn from experience and things like that. The missing link to that is, you have to learn to accept. Learn to accept what's good and what's not good. They're the same thing.

PART I CONCLUDING COMMENTS

For Alaska Natives elders in this study, the primary emphasis traditionally was placed upon maintaining a balanced, harmonious, and interconnected relationship with others and with the natural environment, taught to the child as a fetus and fostered by learning as a child how to listen with one's whole being, not just with one's ears.

Definition of disrespect—not living correctly. Out of balance with nature or out of balance with other people.

The needs of the individual were secondary to the needs of the group. When there is a lack of balance, harmony, and connection with others and the natural world, disrespect or abuse occurs, which is the subject of Part II of our study.

PART II: ALASKA NATIVE ELDER'S VIEWS OF "ABUSE"

As described in Part I, Alaska Natives place primary emphasis on maintaining a balanced, harmonious, and interconnected relationship with others and with the natural environment, fostered by a cultural emphasis on "listen-

ing.” The needs of the individual are secondary to the needs of the group (Markus and Kitayama 1991). When there is a lack of balance, harmony, and connection with others and the natural world, disrespect or abuse is present. As explained by an Alaska Native elder respondent when asked to define “disrespect”:

Definition of disrespect: Not living correctly. Out of balance with nature or out of balance with other people.

The 2004 report of the National Indian Council on Aging noted:

Although little is known about elder abuse in Indian country, the existing literature and accounts by Indian elders and their families, tribes and advocates suggest that it is a serious and pervasive problem. *The experiences of Indian elders with abuse, however, and their attitudes about what should be done about it appear to differ from those of non-Indian elders, suggesting the need for new responses to prevention.* (National Indian Council on Aging, June 2004, emphasis added)

The emphasis of Alaska Natives on living in balance with nature and other people as fostered by a culture of listening demonstrates the accuracy of the National Indian Council on Aging report that Native elders have different attitudes regarding abuse compared to non-Indian elders and that different responses to prevention are needed.

It was difficult for the elders who served as respondents in our study to talk about disrespect of elderly Alaska Natives. Many of the elders interviewed grew up at the time when traditional structures, practices, values, and beliefs were systematically dismantled and were replaced by western social, political, economic, religious, and justice systems. In the past, there were time-tested Alaska Native systems in place that controlled unacceptable social behaviors. There were nonconfrontational methods of resolving conflict. Many of the elder respondents grew up with a system of justice that helped to maintain balance and harmony while healing the victim and allowing the offender to regain trust within the community (Mirsky 2004). As one of our respondents expressed it:

[Grandfather] mostly talked about how to get along... as Native people we're not conflictual [sic] people... in old Native communities, you use other people to resolve conflicts... things got worked out without anybody getting super angry... if things got really bad... the punishment was shunning, nobody talked to you... banishment...

The elders in our study were concerned that the Euro-American justice system causes further imbalance and disrespect. They are reluctant to put their families and communities at further risk by reporting abuse of the elderly. As a result, there is a pervasive reluctance to turn family members in to law enforcement and the Office of Protective Services, because of the goal of ensuring the longevity of the group. The elders were reluctant to directly address the issue of abuse, which appeared to be connected with a desire to protect the youth of their communities. Some expressed fear that directly addressing abuse of the elderly would trigger the epidemic of suicide among at-risk youth.

I think there might be a reluctance to put blame on a family member... They don't want to blame anybody...

...Elders will not knowingly say something that will harm a member of their family or even someone they don't know...

Other researchers in this delicate area need to be aware of why elders might be reluctant to discuss being abused. While some of the areas of abuse noted by the respondents in this study are likely similar to those experienced by non-Native elderly in the U.S., others seem particularly related to the colonialist experience of Alaska Native peoples. The devastation of traditional family values, of the subsistence lifestyle that bonded generations together because of the vast knowledge of elders regarding how to harvest, hunt, and fish in the challenging environment of Alaska, the replacement of traditional institutions by western institutions for health, education, and social well being, and the influx of alcohol and illicit drugs into communities were some of the destructive social impacts.

EMOTIONAL ABUSE BY NON-NATIVE INSTITUTIONS AND VISITORS

Most of the fifteen Alaska Native elder respondents in this study identified emotional abuse by non-Native institutions and visitors to their communities as one of the most widespread forms of disrespect experienced by Alaska Native elders. Emotional abuse is connected with elders' feeling as though the Native way of life and traditions are not respected by non-Natives who come into their communities. Native protocols, songs, stories, regalia, advice, and knowledge from elders are often disrespected. The non-Natives may be critical of the food they eat and the manner in which they live and may take an ethnocentric stance toward the elders' lifestyle.

Okay, they don't know nothing what goes on in our village but they come in and tell us how to live. They never experience our food, they never experience our life but they come in and try to change what we are. And that's disrespect. . . .

...And they have no secrets; everything is special there to them and when somebody comes and criticizes them, that's disrespect. And try to change their lives, how to live. . . .

Our respondents noted their numerous interactions with non-Native institutions, such as health care facilities, schools, churches, and non-Natives at conferences. The elders respect and maintain the protocols of the institutions. Yet, some of the respondents reported that the institutions do not follow Native protocols when Natives are invited to share their cultural knowledge.

So, all of us when we work in the office, we have to go under the protocols of that government, but we never follow the protocols of the elders.

Because we're living in two worlds. It's to respect them and respect ours. I'm talking Native way; Native protocol.

Some of the respondents reported that health care professionals treat them in a disrespectful manner because they assume they do not understand their own bodies.

...just 'cause you're Indian, they (medical staff) treat you like you don't understand. It's your body, you know what it needs and what's wrong with it! But they act like you don't understand.

Some elders reported that using the prescription phone-in system is difficult to manage when their eyesight is fading and they have arthritis. The also said that long waits for medical care are difficult for elders who are not feeling well.

The hospital, I moved back up because I didn't have any hospital coverage down there and here we get total care which is great. But for an elder after waiting to get this and that and get prescriptions, it's very tiring. They should hire more to get more help. They want us to use the phone-in prescription; now, to do that I can barely use the phone, I can hold it like this or that but all these numbers you have to put in and push—yes, no—and I have at least 14 different medicines I take. I can't do that on the phone. That lady upstairs, she's 80, she can't do that. Some of them can't even see the numbers to call in. It hurts to sit; a lot of us have arthritis.

...One time I went to get a blood draw every month so I called and just for them to take a tube

of blood out of my arm, I wait half an hour, 45 minutes and one time I was so sick with the flu or something and I waited and waited and waited and I found out that they didn't even sign me in. That happens a lot. . . .

Non-Natives often lack respect and understanding for Native traditions, songs, and regalia. Non-Natives sometimes view sacred cultural traditions as a form of entertainment. For Alaska Natives, the songs and regalia are connected to the spiritual belief system and it is offensive when the spiritual nature of traditions are not recognized and respected.

Nobody understand those lines [tattoos]. They look at them like decoration. They don't know the meaning of them. Or the earring here. Whatever. They think they're decoration. Our dances are not decoration. Our dances are not decoration. It's not entertainment. It's moral. If you want to know about respect and disrespect, you should figure it out from that. Which is respect and what is following.

It is the elder's role to pass on traditional knowledge to the community and family. They protect the culture by fulfilling this obligation. The elder respondents discussed that sometimes elders are treated by Natives as well as non-Natives as though they lack intelligence.

... when you don't pay homage to your elders, when you no longer view their advice as important. . . .

Disrespect; when you disrespect your elders, and they tell you what you ought to do as you grow up, if you don't listen to them, if you don't do what they tell you to do; the words, you forget and you don't use them; that's disrespect!

So it is important to respect our elders. They told us that if we don't listen to what our grandparents and parents say, then we are disrespecting our way of life; like *allerkutet* (what to do) and *inerkutet* (what not to do).

... well, the absence of respect in today's society, we don't listen to our elders. . . .

DISRESPECT FROM NATIVES, FAMILY, AND YOUTH

Others mentioned that another form of emotional abuse is to place elders in extended care facilities and not visit them (a complaint that is not limited to Native elders).

They don't even take the time to smile... recognition of their presence. . . .

...Like in the store and the kids are rowdy and you're behind them and they don't care if they could knock you over. They don't say excuse me and a lot of them forget to say please and thank you.

A lot of times we lock them up in old folks' homes, pioneer homes, you know we don't encourage our young ones to spend time with them... Instead of utilizing their knowledge and their willingness to help us, we ignore them...

When caregivers, family members, and friends either consciously or unconsciously communicate to elders that they are a burden, elders are emotionally hurt. It is the traditional role of the elder to pass on knowledge to the next generation. When they are viewed as a burden or an imposition, instead of being respected as a leader with knowledge to share, cognitive dissonance occurs within the elders.

They treat them like they're nuisance. Like they're children that they don't really know what they want, what they're saying. I think that's the saddest part, you know... I think the people think of them as a burden, or an old fool that doesn't know what he's talking about. Yes, he's still kind of stuck in the past but he has a lot of wisdom... They have the history, which is not written. The kids used to disregard... We didn't bother listening to the stories, which in essence gave us our history. Today we know we should have listened. 'Cause it's not written down anyplace.

...When you leave them out of your life then when you are doing that then you are truly disrespecting them...

VERBAL ABUSE

Verbal abuse was frequently mentioned as experienced by Alaska Native elders. This of form of abuse is difficult for the elderly to discuss, as was noted by this respondent: "It's hard for them to talk about it, verbal abuse."

The significance of verbal abuse from family members is emphasized by this respondent:

But it's the verbal abuse that they suffer. And you know your self, physical abuse you can take; it's the mental and verbal abuse that's really devastating for the elders.

ELDERS ARE OVERBURDENED WITH CARING FOR YOUTH

In Alaska Native culture today, many grandparents take care of their children's children or their great-grandchildren, a

phenomenon that has not been studied in detail but should be investigated. When elders are overburdened with caring for youth, they may experience physical, emotional, and financial strain. Many elders are providing full-time care for their grandchildren and great-grandchildren while the parents are unavailable due to substance abuse or lack of parenting skills. In the past, there were strict roles, boundaries, and responsibilities for each stage and age of the Native lifecycle. Due to colonialism, the roles and boundaries are not being taught and practiced today. Many children and grandchildren unknowingly, or sometimes knowingly, violate the role of the grandparent and great-grandparent by leaving their children for extended periods of time.

...and some are saddled with great-grandchildren... not because they don't want the children but they are challenged with vibrant active young children for long periods of time which is a hardship for them.

PHYSICAL VIOLENCE AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Alaska Native elders are at risk of physical abuse when their family members or other caregivers are engaged in substance abuse.

Some of children don't want to help them but give them a hard time by drinking alcohol excessively or not listening to them...

... They were taught in living helping each others but then this liquor spoil the families and the family always been drinking and she was the one that told me that, beat her up when they're drinking. And that thing started when they're drinking.

Today the families they are all drinking. Raising hell and Cain. So the elders, sometimes they beat them up, throw him out. That's because the alcohol is in charge.

FINANCIAL EXPLOITATION OF THE ELDERLY

Financial abuse of Alaska Native elderly was the most frequently mentioned form of abuse reported by the respondents and was reported as a problem for Native American elderly by 63% (N=19) of the Title VI directors surveyed in the National Indian Council on Aging report (2004). The poverty rates among Alaska Native families could be a contributing factor in the financial exploitation of Alaska Native elderly. Half of Alaska Native families have incomes below \$30,000. In rural areas, where Natives make up 60% of the population, income is especially low. Rural

areas also have a higher cost of living than urban areas. Alaska Native poverty rates are at 20%, compared to 7% for non-Natives.¹¹ For some families, the elder's social security check is the only source of income.

...taking advantage of them...elders say that the only time that the grandkids come is when they know my social security check is here.

...the time some of the families start changing. You know, some of the families' children start depending on their folks to living there with them.

Money-wise I used to see kids take their parents' money just for their own use and they'd have to do without, not a whole bunch 'cause it's a small town. I've seen it happen, take their social security check because a lot of them didn't speak English, so sign it with X and they'd keep part of it without asking. I saw it a couple of times.

ANALYSIS BY ELDERS: THE DISRUPTION OF THE CYCLE OF RESPECT

Elders in our study voiced concern about a "spiritual sickness" related to the history of Alaska Natives that is being transmitted from one generation to the next.

I think we would do well if we would ask ourselves in introspection about why we treat the elders that way we do. If it's negative and abusive, it's because there's a legacy of spiritual sickness that's been transferred from generation to generation and the elders understand that. That legacy we have to make the decision to stop with our generation. To the extent that we don't, the next generation is going to suffer that legacy and they're gonna go through their stuff.

The elder respondents thus have a profound awareness of how the cycle of respect has been disrupted due to historical trauma, rapid acculturation, and present-day trauma.

LOSS OF LANGUAGE HAS DIMINISHED THE CONNECTION BETWEEN ELDERS AND YOUTH

Loss of language has impacted the harmony and connection between elders and the youth. Elders reported that the loss of language is connected with the loss of culture, identity, and direction in life. Without the knowledge of their language, the learning process is altered and there is a disconnection between the youth and elders today. They

were "forbidden to speak their language...severely punished by school superiors."

One elder reflects on her decision not to teach her language to her children. She regrets her decision, yet she made the decision with the intent of helping them have a better life.

Today, I realize I have made a big mistake by not talking to my children in Cup'ik but only in English all the time. This was my mistake. I wanted them to be able to converse well in English so that they could have good jobs... My father did not care much for school and my having to hide and read perhaps affected the way I decided the fate of my children's speaking in English rather than Cup'ik. I wanted my children to be competent in English speaking...

TRADITIONAL SPIRITUAL BELIEFS WERE LOST OR WENT UNDERGROUND

Because missionaries often misunderstood the spiritual practices of Alaska Natives, the practices became taboo. The practices that survived during this time period often went underground.

When the missionaries came up, my father become a Christian...they do the Eskimo dancing there...used to go across and watch when they were doing that. They catch the time they were still doing this, shaman. And while they were dancing, a man they see through the wood, there was a little tiny hole, it go through and ever since then it wasn't good to become Christian to watch. So that's why our family never teach us all that, just to go to church.

Yeah, it was more like underground. The churches had some say about it. But we began to realize that they could no longer stop us from potlatches and so on. We discovered somehow the church system lost their divine power and authority. They can't stop us. Even to this day...

THE ROLE OF HISTORICAL TRAUMA

Disrespect today of Alaska Native elderly can be, in part, explained by focusing on the history of Alaska Natives. A common slogan of this time in American history was "Kill the Indian but save the man" which resonated with the dominant culture's policy of assimilation. The literature

11. Poverty rate statistics for Alaska Natives were retrieved from the Alaska Federation of Natives website on October 25, 2005 at: <http://www.nativefederation.org/ance/purpose.php>.

defines this experience as cultural genocide, historical trauma, and multigenerational grief.

During the colonization of Alaska, a loss of cultural transmission as a whole occurred (Lehrman et al. 1991). Alaska Natives have experienced a history of cultural losses, such as loss of language, extended families, subsistence lands, spiritual beliefs, and parenting of their children. They have experienced a history in which the basic foundation of the social life that bonds their culture and communities together has been damaged. The holocaust that the tribes of Alaska Native peoples experienced resulted in trauma that has been handed down to the next generations. The cultural holocaust has affected the psychology of Alaska Native cultures, communities, families, and individuals across generations (Graves and Shavings 2005).

Many believe that the soul and the psyche of generations of Alaska Native peoples have inherited the pain, loss, and frustration of their ancestors. As a result of loss of cultural patterns, identities, relationships, and unresolved massive psychic traumas, many Alaska Native people are experiencing chronic social problems today (Graves and Shavings 2005). The culture was severely damaged and Alaska Native people have endured multifaceted cultural and historical distress, which has been associated with many chronic social problems such as substance abuse, suicide, family disruption, community and interpersonal violence, and mental health issues (Graves and Shavings 2005). Bigfoot (2000) stated that Native families have a collective history of trauma and abuse. This trauma and abuse can be connected to the abuse of the elderly. The history contributes to a higher proportion of disrespect among Alaska Natives.

Peter (1988) studied the loss of the context that gave meaning to the lives of the Gwich'in Athabascan people of Alaska. Peter stated that there is a human response to the processes of disruptive social change. There is an initial numbness, confusion, and despair when people are uprooted from the context that gives meaning to their lives. The loss of context impairs the ability to attach meaning to events and the ability to heal from the experience. The loss of context feels threatening and, unless the individual learns to understand the situation and cope with it, he/she will experience a sense of helplessness with regards to the future. A disorientation of purpose will result in anxiety and despair.

EXAMPLE OF HISTORICAL TRAUMA: THE UNANGAX

Unangax elders on the Aleutian Islands have been profoundly impacted by colonialism and historical trauma.

Many experienced evacuation and relocation during World War II. When they were returned, they discovered their community was devastated by the military's destruction.

They didn't prepare for us. They just, the Navy came one day, you know. They said they bombed Dutch Harbor and the Japanese captured Attu... Then they chased us out of the village 'cause they were afraid the Japanese would bomb the village. While we were in the camps they burned the village... The Navy burned the village...

...I went back home to Atka, like I said, in '81 to live... But I wasn't really accepted. It took me a good two years to fit back into the community...

Peter (1988) provided three principles for helping people reconstruct a meaningful system after a severe loss experience:

1. The process of reformation will entail conflict. Allow expression of anger, frustration, and hostility.
2. Stage of differentiation: groups who have experienced loss will need to organize their own patterns on their own terms without outsider interference.
3. Time is needed. Decolonization is a time when the structure of meaning is developing within people and can connect them to the land.

TOWARDS SOLUTIONS: PREVENTING ELDER ABUSE

Because elders are reluctant to discuss issues of abuse for reasons described above, identifying solutions to prevent elder abuse is a sensitive, complex, and problematic issue and must be approached in a culturally appropriate manner. Because elders viewed the western system of justice as one of the causes for the breakdown in Alaska Native traditional values and modes of conflict resolution, solutions to abuse issues should likely come primarily from within Alaska Native organizations. The issue should likely be framed, as the elders in our project preferred, in terms of a holistic understanding of respect, disrespect, and listening. These understandings could be emphasized at the highest organizational levels of Alaska Native political and social identity (such as the Alaska Federation of Natives, regional health corporations, and the Alaska Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood) down to regional and village councils. Educational materials could be prepared about these issues for relevant western federal and state organizations, Alaska Native families and youth, religious and educational organizations, and other relevant groups and individuals, re-

flecting the views and wisdom of elders as identified in our research. In our research report, upon which this paper is based (Graves et al. 2005), we recommend several modes of cultural resilience which might holistically re-establish some of the harmonious integration recommended by our respondents. These included an emphasis on the culture of Alaska Natives as a source of protection and positive health in general, and renewed emphasis on storytelling and developing listening skills for youth. Specifically we recommended re-establishing rites of passage for both boys and girls in becoming members of their cultural groups (Pingayak 1976), continuation of the naming of infants tradition based on ancestral names and identities (Hamilton-Cannelos 1986), smudging,¹² and the Potlatch Partners Athabaskan tradition (for Athabascans),¹³ among others.¹⁴ How these or other approaches might increase the tradition of respect and lessen elder abuse within the Alaska Native community would only be known after discussions about elders and abuse occur at significant levels within Alaska Native organizations. Clearly, educational efforts are needed both within Alaska Native communities and as the latter interface with western peoples and institutions, including elementary, high school, and postsecondary institutions.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Traditionally, Alaska Native people had systems in place to restore justice that were mechanisms for handling the absence of respect. These mechanisms need to be recognized, accepted, and reinstated by Native leaders and elders. The system of justice involves traditional teachings, in particular maintenance of balance and harmony and respect for others and the natural world (Gray and Lauderdale 2006). A holistic approach to this issue, as identified by our Alaska Native elder respondents, is required.

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12. Smudging is a common practice for Natives and is used to cleanse energy. The smoke is seen as carrying the thoughts and prayers. Negative energy that is being held inside can be released and replaced with a sense of peace and purification.

13. The Potlatch Partners ceremony of Athabascans is one of the several profound celebrations that instilled a mindset of respect for mankind and creation at an early age. A family of a young child picks a partner, typically someone not related to the family. A person had one or more partners for life, usually of the opposite gender. The women in the village would honor the men for three days with Native dancing, sharing of food, and gift-giving. The following year or so the men would reciprocate or "pay back" the women. Potlatch partners not only celebrated relationships within the community, but strict Native protocol was essential when invitations carried by two male runners were extended to outlying villages. Sharing, caring, and humor were important values ingrained by these celebrations throughout one's life. But above all, respect was the most important traditional value that strengthened relationships for the individuals, families, and communities. Information provided by project team member Pat Frank.

14. Other ceremonies, rituals, and cultural systems may include grieving ceremonies, medicine lodges, counsel of elders, family support systems, wailing songs, belief systems about the journey of life, tea partners, etc.

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