

## **Suicide and Soul Wound: Stress, Coping, and Culture in the American Indian and Alaska Native Youth Context**

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*Suicide, the second leading cause of death for American Indian and Alaska Native (AI) youth ages 15 to 24, raises a critical issue for social work research and practice. This paper argues that AI youth suicide is a contemporary manifestation of “soul wound” and expands the definition of soul wound to include present stressors and coping mechanisms for youth that are characterized by a legacy of colonization and cultural oppression. While AI youth come from diverse communities, this paper will demonstrate the importance of examining youth suicide as part of the overall AI experience in the United States. Using an indigenist stress process model framework, it will subsequently examine four forms of stressors informed by the marginalization of the AI population: psychological strains of historical trauma, environmental stressors, quotidian stressors arising from socio-economic factors, and adversity from personal and relational role conflicts. AI youth mediate these stressors through coping mechanisms around social support and collective mastery. This paper will conclude with a call to develop an anti-oppressive, culturally relevant social work practice that supports meaningful identity development and collective efficacy.*

On December 21, 2012, members of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation gathered for a candlelight vigil outside the Rushmore Plaza Civic Center in Rapid City, South Dakota. Bringing pause to the Lakota Nation Invitational Tournament of the same night, the vigil aimed to create awareness of and demand attention to the youth suicides of Pine Ridge. Three years earlier, South Dakota State Senator Theresa Two Bulls declared a State of Emergency when the suicide rate of the area reached over 10 times the national average. One hundred and twenty years earlier, the Massacre of Wounded Knee took place at Pine Ridge, where soldiers of the U.S. 7th Cavalry Regiment killed over 150 Lakota Sioux. From the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota,

to the Mescalero Apache Reservation in New Mexico, to the Northern Plains of Alaska, American Indian and Alaska Native (AI) youth navigate a complex web of history and reality.

Suicide, the second leading cause of death for AI youth ages 15 to 24, raises a critical issue for social work research and practice. The alarming constellation of AI youth suicide statistics complicates and problematizes current operational understandings of suicide in the U.S., highlighting the fundamental role of cultural marginalization in self-injurious behavior. Suicide, defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; 2012) as a “death caused by self-directed injurious behavior,” is largely regarded by the mental health profession as a complication of a psychological disorder (Oquendo, Baca-Garcia, Mann, & Giner, 2008, p. 165). This individualistic and pathological perspective ignores the socio-political and cultural dimensions of youth suicide. This paper argues that AI youth suicide is a contemporary manifestation of “soul wound” (Walters & Simoni, 2002, p. 520). Native scholars (Brayboy, 2005; Evans-Campbell, 2008; Walters & Simoni, 2002) describe soul wound as the accumulation of unresolved grief stemming from colonization. Using Pearlin and Skaff’s (1996) stress model within an indigenist framework, this paper expands the definition of soul wound to include present stressors and coping mechanisms for youth that are characterized by a legacy of colonization and cultural oppression. Understanding suicide as an expression of soul wound captures the complex relationship between the private and public spheres, allowing for an acknowledgement and opportunity to engage with the deep imprint left on a person and community by our historical narratives.

Although AI youth come from diverse and distinct communities, the paper will demonstrate the importance of examining youth suicide as part of the overall AI experience in the U.S. Using an indigenist stress process model, the paper will subsequently examine four forms of stressors informed by the marginalization of the AI population: psychological strains of historical trauma, environmental stressors, quotidian stressors arising from socioeconomic disparities, and adversity resulting from personal and relational role conflicts. Next, the paper will explore how AI

youth mediate these stressors through coping mechanisms around social support and collective mastery—the ability of youth to understand their ability to confront hardships and marginalization. In conclusion, the paper will demand the development of an anti-oppressive, culturally relevant social work practice that supports meaningful identity development and collective efficacy.

### **Who Are American Indian and Alaska Native (AI) Youth?**

The AI youth behind the statistics come from a heterogeneous population comprising distinct tribes across the U.S. In the 2010 Census Bureau results, 5.2 million people identified as American Indian/Alaska Native (Norris, Vines, & Hoefel, 2012). There are currently 565 federally recognized tribal nations across the country, and another 200 recognized within individual states (Kenyon & Hanson, 2012). The majority of AI communities live on federal- and state-recognized reservations and in low-income sections of metropolitan areas across the U.S. (Freedenthal & Stiffman, 2004). Such diversity manifests in dynamic cultures experienced uniquely by individuals and groups of different geographic and historical landscapes.

Current AI youth suicide statistics comprise a birth cohort of the current adolescent and young adult generation ages 15 to 24 that spans the distinct tribal nations. Census figures estimate that there are over 1.1 million AI people between the ages of 15 to 24, making up approximately 20% of the total AI population (Dorgan, 2010). While the AI youth population is a small percentage of the overall population in the U.S., they are over-represented in the welfare system. AI children constitute 1% of the U.S. child population; however, they make up 2% of children in foster care, and over 50% of the children in foster care in select states (Lawler, Laplante, Giger, & Norris, 2012). Living in communities with chronically underfunded federal programs, AI youth live in households with an income less than half the national average and often without healthcare coverage. The disproportionate challenges experienced by the AI youth population due to conditions of poverty necessitate the attention of the social work profession.

## Defining an Indigenist Stress-Process Model

The conjunction of a stress-process model and a critical indigenist framework allows for an anti-oppressive, strengths-based analysis of cultural identity and realities in relation to stressors and mediators experienced by young people. The stress process model, first introduced by Pearlin, Menaghan, Liberman, and Mullan (1981), contextualizes varying life strains in a movement between exposure, mediators, and outcomes. Compared with an event produced from a single pathway, suicide sits within a more holistic and heuristic framework. Differentiating between stressors and coping mechanisms, the model highlights the complex interactions between converging life dynamics.

The danger of studying suicide as an outcome of stress exposure and response is the heightened possibility of oppressive, deficit-based analyses of cultural structures and human agency, particularly in application to ethnic minorities (Stiffman, 2007; Walters & Simoni, 2002). As stressors are “traced to the very boundaries of societies, their structures and cultures” (Pearlin et al., 1981, p. 338), they can quickly slip into analyses of pathologies or cultural essentializations, instead of being placed within distinct socio-political and historical contexts. Walters and Simoni (2002) suggest applying an indigenist perspective on stress-coping studies of populations to “acknowledg[e] the colonized or fourth world position of Natives in the United States and advocat[e] for their empowerment and sovereignty” (p.520). This perspective recognizes that indigenous populations have been targeted by federal policies embedded in imperialism and “intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 429). The indigenist framework orients its analysis within Tribal Critical Theory. Evolving from Critical Race Theory work, Tribal Critical Theory places the connections between colonization and contemporary experiences of socioeconomic and political marginalization at the center of its analysis (Brayboy, 2005; Yosso, 2005). Using a critical indigenist paradigm to re-frame the analysis of the stress-process model allows for a deeper analysis of the intimate relationship between suicide and soul wound.

## The Stress Universe

Stressors, according to Pearlin and Skaff (1996), are events, conditions, challenges, or experiences that adversely affect an individual or group's interactions with their environment, their understanding of self in relation to community, and their strategies for everyday life. Within the realities of AI youth, stressors are multi-layered and interconnected. The following analysis looks particularly at how indigenous cultural identity and experience characterize the "stress universe" (Walls & Whitbeck, 2011, p. 417)—the amalgamation of primary eventful, ambient, and quotidian stressors, as well as secondary "role strain" stressors (Pearlin & Skaff, 1996, p. 239). Examining the various stressors within the stress universe facilitates an analysis of how cultural marginalization informs and produces multiple life strains.

Pearlin and Skaff (1996) define eventful stressors as unscheduled life events that cause adversity in an individual's life. At the core of culturally influenced eventful stressors for AI youth is historical trauma. Historical trauma, as defined by Braveheart (1999), is the "cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations emanating from massive group experiences" (as cited in Walls & Whitbeck, 2011, p. 416). Youth experience historical trauma as a chronologically nuanced example of Pearlin and Skaff's (1996) "nonegocentric" (p. 240) eventful stressors. While past colonization of AI lands, subsequent tribal displacement, and punitive federal policies of cultural repression were not directly experienced by present day AI youth, the effect of such trauma from their ancestors, families, and communities remains strongly felt. A process that "extends through time" (Pearlin & Skaff, 1996, p. 239), stress spans across historical generations. Inherited collective experiences and narratives derived from a deep legacy of colonization influence youth's individual exposure and reactivity to stress (Ong, Burrow, & Fuller-Rowell, 2009). In a study conducted by Walls and Whitbeck (2012), AI youth reported daily thoughts of historical and cultural loss. The events of European-American imperialism created a status of disequilibrium, which led to an extended "period of readjustment during which the system strug-

gles to reestablish a homeostasis,” (Pearlin, 1981, p. 339). Such events left young people vulnerable to secondary stressors and stress proliferation, where the strains from multiple stressors accumulate to produce more drastic effects.

Historical trauma refers to primary psychological stressors related to legacies of colonization; however, AI youth also directly experience a host of environmental stressors defined by Pearlin and Skaff (1996) as chronic “ambient strains” (p. 241) arising from years of federal neglect and abuse. Current figures cite 28% of AIs living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (2012), an estimated 33% of all AI individuals are without health insurance and are entirely reliant on Indian Health Services (IHS), one of several chronically underfunded programs established as part of the federal government’s trust responsibility to protect AI treaty rights, lands, and resources (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2013). As members of the U.S.’s poorest population of color, AIs are at a greater risk for psychological distress due to heightened exposure and reactivity to environmental stressors (Ong, Burrow, & Fuller-Rowell, 2009). AI communities have an overall lack of ready access to healthcare services, full-service grocery stores, resourced schools, recreational facilities, and other amenities (Fleischhacker et al., 2012). These deficiencies in social infrastructure foster disheartening realities of soaring crime rates, high rates of substance abuse, extreme prevalence of obesity, and other stressors involving and/or affecting young people.

Social and economic disparities produce adversity in AI youth’s daily strategies and routines, labeled by Pearlin and Skaff (1996) as “quotidian stressors” (p. 241). Depending on their particular locale, young people may confront challenges on a regular basis, such as getting to school, feeling safe at home and in their neighborhood, obtaining access to necessities such as food, and participating in enrichment and/or support services. Socioeconomic disadvantages manifested in the local neighborhood affect the everyday levels of functioning and satisfaction of AI youth (Silmere & Stiffman, 2006). Increased neighborhood instability and material deprivation contribute to depression (Matheson et al., 2006). These hardships look different within each distinct

community due to local manifestations of poverty. The disparities realized within daily life are the social determinants of youth's stress exposure, reactivity, and their ultimate health outcomes.

Historical trauma and socioeconomic disparities intersect with adolescent development processes to produce "role strain stressors" (Pearlin & Skaff, 1996), which are defined as strains arising from the demands of one's individual status and relationships. A fundamental element of adolescence is the formation of a self-identity and recognition of role expectations within varying environments (Wexler, 2009). AI youth struggle with the process of self-actualization in the face of cultural loss and discrimination.

Multiple scholars have documented the struggle youth undergo as they encounter cross-cultural contradictions between the normative values of their tribal cultures and those of the dominant European American society (Brayboy, 2005; Johnson & Tomren, 1999; Kenyon & Hanson, 2012; Walters, 1999; Wexler, 2009). Public schools and wider communities outside of reservations expose young AIs to systems of Eurocentric knowledge that devalue general tenets of indigenous beliefs, such as the dominance of individualist over collective modes of thinking and the depreciation of holistic conceptions of health and well-being (Kenyon & Hanson, 2012). These experiences of cultural disconnection strain relationships between youth, older family members, and non-AI peers, ultimately nurturing internalized oppression and hindering positive notions of self-worth and support.

Between childhood and adulthood, Eurocentric and Native contexts, AI youth find themselves within a fragile and complicated web of expectations. Role strain stressors arise from the biological and cultural liminal spaces that youth occupy. Struggling to balance opposing systems of knowledge and visions of success, youth become vulnerable to a cultural anomie, a loss of a sense of personal identity and life purpose (Johnson & Tomren, 1999; Walters, 1999). Self-incoherence leading to relational conflicts establishes cultural identity as a burden and source of overall life dissatisfaction and disappointment (Pearlin & Skaff, 1996; Wexler, 2009).

## Healing Soul Wound: Developing Meaningful Coping Strategies

Individuals and communities operate numerous interdependent and multidimensional coping mechanisms to navigate the stress universe. The stress process model identifies coping as an individual's cognitive ability to adapt to adversity (Pearlin & Skaff, 1996). Social support and mastery are two crucial mediators for young AI individuals in moderating the experience of soul wound stressors. "Shaped by the values the person holds as a consequence of social group membership" (Pearlin & Skaff, 1996, p. 242), coping repertoires are intimately intertwined with the social fabric of many collective-oriented AI communities (Brayboy, 2005; Wexler, 2009). Successful mobilization of community resources and cultural capital is crucial to cultivate relationships and structures that encourage positive identity development and tribal unity.

Coping as a "management of meaning" (Pearlin & Skaff, 1996, p. 242) must rely on building a relevant and coherent cultural identity that reinforces agents of social support. Scholarship around the development of AI youth identity documents how relationships with extended kin networks led youth to actively find ways to integrate AI identity into their lives, using indigenous values, traditions, and spirituality as positive sites for incorporation (Lucero, 2010; Strickland & Cooper, 2011). Youth narratives around cultural ceremonies and conversations with relatives facilitated the development of a meaningful identification with their tribal nation and the AI community at large.

Having a strong connection to cultural identity, particularly within a framework of one's network, returns power to the individual and community at large. Pearlin and Skaff (1996) describe this "global sense of control" as "mastery" (p. 243), a crucial mediator for harmful stress exposure. While mastery refers to the individual youth's ability to understand their competence in facing difficult situations and internalized oppression, it also holds a strong potential for the tribal community in building collective efficacy. In building strategies for suicide prevention, it is essential to capitalize on the collective orientation of AI commu-



nities. For many suicide prevention programs in the U.S., the emphasis is on individual power and a singular sense of future (Gould & Kramer, 2001). Strengthening AI identity through collective meaning-making and management can communicate “an empowered and empowering image of Indianness, and provid[e] Native Americans, particularly Native youth, opportunities for action and participation in the larger Indian cause [toward self-determination]” (Wexler, 2009, p. 267). Revitalization and resistance movements such as the Keetowah Society and the Red Power movement have provided tribes with a vehicle to combat cultural subjugation and to participate in linking historical and contemporary experiences of AI peoples (Walters, Simoni, & Evans-Campbell, 2002; Wexler, 2009). Community mastery cultivates a rich and nuanced cultural experience that utilizes multi-generational realities and manifestations of cultures, and supports an individual sense of purpose and life-satisfaction.

### **Conclusion**

Today, AI communities are actively engaging in grass-roots-based suicide prevention measures. It would behoove social workers to connect with this work and reflect on how suicide and soul wound affects praxis with youth. Ultimately, this analysis calls for the development of anti-oppressive, culturally relevant programming that mobilizes the necessary resources to mediate stress exposure. These programs must mediate youth realities of historical trauma, social disparities, discrimination, and bicultural liminality through a cultivation of meaningful identity development and a celebration of individual and collective mastery. Understanding suicide as a contemporary expression of soul wound relocates the phenomenon beyond an individual pathology and into a broader, more complex schema. With an eye on the individual in relation to systems, social work benefits from an engagement with the realities of soul wound, allowing for a richer practice able to traverse past, present, and future socio-political narratives.

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