Identity Formation and Cultural Resilience in Aboriginal Communities

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The program of research that I and my colleagues[1] have been engaged in, and that I will go on to describe in the pages that follow was never meant to be about resilience. Nor was it meant to be about children in care. It began with studies of identity formation, moved on to encompass studies of youth suicide, and has increasingly come to focus on youth suicide in Aboriginal[2] cultures. Having admitted to all of that at the outset, the reader might feel in need something by way of assurance that this chapter actually belongs in the current volume. First, I really do have data to report on children in care. Second, the research that we have been engaged in—while not expressly about resilience in the usual sense—actually addresses issues of resilience at a cultural rather than individual level.

Getting from here to there, that is, from our work on identity formation and Aboriginal suicide to our data on children in care, will demand stretching the concept of resilience to try to explain not individual coping in the face of adversity, but the ability of whole cultural groups to foster healthy youth development. There are some who harbour strong doubts about the value of the concept of resilience, however, and it is best to put these doubts on the table before we begin tugging at the concept and testing its elasticity for the job at hand.

The concept of resilience has, of late, found itself living in an increasingly rough neighbourhood. The early excitement—prompted by the work of Garmezy (1970) and Werner

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[1] The program of research described in this chapter has a long history and has included a shifting set of contributors all of whom are (or were) graduate students working with Michael Chandler at the University of British Columbia. These include: Lorraine Ball, Michael Boyes, Suzanne Hala, Darcy Hallett, Bryan Sokol, and myself.

[2] The term "aboriginal" refers to indigenous people in general, while "Aboriginal" is meant to reference specific groups within Canada. The Aboriginal peoples of Canada consist of three distinct groups: First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. The First Nations were once termed "Indian." The Inuit were formerly referred to as "Eskimo." The Métis trace their origins to marriages between the First Nations and European settlers.

(1971)—about the prospect of identifying and studying those "resilient individuals who have defied others' expectations and survived or surmounted daunting and seemingly overwhelming dangers, obstacles and problems" (Leshner, 1999, p. 2), seems to have lapsed somewhat. As Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000) put it, there are "growing concerns about the rigor of theory and research in the area, misgivings which have sometimes culminated in assertions that overall, this is a construct of dubious scientific value" (p. 543). Liddle (1994), for example, asks: "Does resilience qualify as an organizing concept with sufficient logical and emotional resonance to yield systematic theoretical and research inquiry that will make a lasting contribution?" (p. 167). For Tarter and Vanyukov (1999), the answer is clear: "based on both theoretical and practical considerations ...it is becoming increasingly evident that this construct not only lacks denotative meaning but has obscured thinking about the etiology and prevention of psychopathology, behavior disorder, and substance abuse" (pp. 100). If Tarter and Vanyukov pull no punches, for Bartelt (1994), the gloves are off:

> "Frankly, I feel that we are imbuing resilience with the same overarching powers that early chemists attributed to phlogiston, the mystical substance that was ostensibly released during combustion and, being contained within the object being consumed enabled it to successfully burn, Resilience, as a psychological trait, that is seen as a component of the self that enables success in the face of adversity, and may either be consumed or, paradoxically, reinforced by adversity.
>
> In short, I make the case that resilience, as a concept is difficult, if not impossible to empirically specify, and is too easily conflated with measures of situational success or failure. It suffers from its roots in subjective interpretations of biographical events, and it is too closely dependent on observer-imputed stresses and resources for dealing with stressors" (pp. 98-99).

If resilience really does live in what is quickly becoming the dodgy part of town, we might all wonder, along with Tolan who asks in the title of his 1996 article "How resilient is the concept of resilience?" Taking the two-part definition provided Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000), it meets the test of being exposed to "significant threat or adversity" (p. 543). The open question is whether it can go on to achieve "positive adaptation despite major assaults on the developmental process" (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000, p. 543). Perhaps I am predisposed to root for the underdog, but I believe the concept of resilience will, to use Garmezy's words, "manifest competence despite exposure to significant stressors" (Rolf, 1999, p. 7). There is much to do, of course, to improve the neighbourhood (if I have not pushed this metaphor too far already), and the work needs to begin with an examination of what might be called 'the trait trap.'

A common criticism of research on resilience is that it aims to identify those "at-risk" children who, when their peers are falling by the wayside, are seen to have "the right stuff" to shoulder the weight of adversity, if not with a smile, then at least without buckling to the pavement. The search for such "resilient children" who remain standing in the most crippling of environments fosters the mistaken and dangerous notion that resilience is a characteristic located somewhere within the child. This view of resilience as a trait was understandable given that early research reports that referred to "invulnerability" (Anthony, 1974), or "stress resistance" (Garmezy, 1985), or "hardiness"—all of which have been taken to mean that some children "possess the phenotype of high resilience" (Tarter & Vanyukov, 1999, pp. 87). This 'trait trap' view is mistaken because even those researchers who were 'first on the block' understood resilience to be a process rather than a trait (e.g., Werner & Smith, 1982, Werner 1984), and whole armies of researchers have worked to establish the fact that resilience is not a feature of

children, but a process that involves interactions between attributes of children, their families, neighbourhoods, and wider social and cultural environments. And it is dangerous because traits are rarely taken to be malleable and if resilience can only be identified but not fostered (you either 'have what it takes' to overcome adversity or you don't), and if risk factors are ubiquitous and inevitable (poverty will be with us until the meek inherit the earth), then we are left with little in the way of real motivation or useful tools to design prevention and intervention strategies for children facing adversity. For those interested in the welfare of whole populations of children who are, almost by definition, taken to be "at-risk of adversity"—children growing up in care, Aboriginal children—the shackling effect of this narrow view of resilience is simply intolerable.

And here is where I want to begin. At the interface of child and culture and with our own attempts to better understand the interplay of risk and protective factors in development. My purpose will be to frame our research in a way that speaks to the issue of resilience in indigenous communities in Canada. I scrupulously avoided the phrase "resilient indigenous communities" both to steer myself clear of the trait trap that I have just warned against, and also to emphasize the point that, just as it is dangerous to imagine that resilience is a feature of children, so too, it would be ill-advised to use a phrase that implies that only some indigenous communities are resilient. Still, I will be presenting results from an ongoing program of research that shows that within the "context of significant adversity" that faces all Aboriginal communities in Canada, differences between communities regularly appear in what resilience researchers would call "positive adaptation." Some communities seem to be "adapting to" or overcoming adversity better than others. As our data show, some First Nations communities have exceedingly high rates of youth suicide, for example, while in others suicide is entirely absent. Some communities have no children and youth living in care, whereas in others, almost 1 in 10 children are placed in

care each year. It would be tempting to label some of these communities 'resilient' or to talk of

differences in 'levels of resilience.' That is, we have what appear to be similar levels of risk or

adversity but large differences in outcome—the same phenomenon that continues to fuel

research on resilience in child development—but expressed here at a cultural or community

level.

If this is the same phenomenon, and if the detractors are correct, then we have every right

to wonder whether the embattled concept of resilience is up to the task of explaining variability

in rates of youth suicide or in rates of children in care across diverse groups of Aboriginal

communities. In other words, can a concept developed for explaining individual differences be

made to work at the level of whole cultural communities? And if resilience can be bumped

upstairs to this higher level of analysis, can it be done in ways that avoid the trait trap—that

resist the application of global judgments about whether or not a particular community is or is

not resilient? Of course, I believe that it can, and if the task of stretching the concept is done

carefully enough, I believe there is some potential theoretical clarity to be gained that can better

capture the influence of culture on youth development. The sort of care that will be required

comes in two forms. First, I will need to be careful to avoid what is sometimes called "The

Psychologist's Fallacy"—a kind of category error in which one applies psychological causes and

explanations to every event in sight. My attempt to use the psychological concept of "resilience"

at a sociological or cultural level, if not executed properly, threatens to become just this sort of

embarrassing error.

The second kind of caution concerns, not the folly of *attempting* to use resilience in this

way, but the dangers of actually *succeeding*. If the similarities between individual resilience and

cultural resilience are more than just analogous, then (theoretically at least) all of the promise

and all of the problems that have attended the history of resilience research will be seen to apply

more or less directly to the study of entire cultures. The most pointed dangers—but also the most

promising benefits—will come from applying the lessons of research on resilience in children to

intervention efforts meant to minimize the effect of risk factors and maximize the effect of

protective factors for whole cultural groups. In the current case, our work has identified a set of

cultural or community practices and forms of indigenous knowledge that are associated with

"better" youth outcomes. These findings threaten to set in motion a well-intentioned, but

potentially disastrous, application of the standard 'knowledge transfer' model. What I have in

mind here is a variation on the 'trait trap' that would see these findings taken as license to begin

a strip-mining operation bent on extracting some set of cultural "best practices" from beneath the

feet of "resilient" communities for processing at some central plant and eventual export to those

poor "non-resilient" communities. Though that may seem a harsh characterization, in the context

of research and policy as it has been applied "to" indigenous communities in Canada and

elsewhere, it is a well-founded fear.

          These long-winded introductory remarks—largely a list of doubts and dangers—though a

necessary part of mapping out the terrain, have done little to point the route ahead. Belatedly,

then, here is how I plan to proceed. Part I begins with a set of definitions common to research on

resilience in childhood, and an attempt to show that the situation of contemporary Aboriginal

cultures in Canada meets what will amount to the twin conditions of risk and competence that

constitute the concept of resilience. This will be accomplished in two steps. The first examines

the level of risk faced by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal persons in Canada—and works to

establish the fact that a higher burden of risk is borne by the Aboriginal population. The second

step will focus on outcome rather than risk and, as noted above, will include the presentation of

data on rates of youth suicide that illustrate wide variability in community-level 'adaptation' or 'success' within a shared climate of heightened risk.

Having established at least a prima facie case for using of notion of resilience at this higher level of abstraction, I will go on in Part II to describe how our studies of individual identity formation have led us to use measures of cultural identity as the key to understanding variability in suicide rates and the issues surrounding children in care within First Nations communities. This will, again, be accomplished in two steps. Step one will open with a brief discussion of the concept of 'self-continuity' and will be devoted to making the point that acquiring a working sense of one's own personal persistence in time, an understanding that, despite all the changes that life and time has in store, you can claim confident ownership of your own past and feel a strong commitment to your own future is a crucial part of the identity formation process. In fact, as I will go on to show, failures in the process of constructing or maintaining this sense of self-continuity are strongly associated with the risk of suicide.

Step two—and this is the tricky part where the threat of committing the psychologist's fallacy looms large—will concern the 'levels of analysis' problem that arises whenever one attempts to use a concept developed at one level of analysis (in this case, at the level of individual persons) to explain phenomena at some higher level (communities, or cultures). The case that I will present involves drawing parallels between the continuity of persons and the continuity of cultures. The essential argument is this: In our day-to-day experience, both selves and cultures are commonly understood to both change and yet remain the same. We experience ourselves and others as temporally stable or continuous, yet we also expect people to change— and often strive to bring about change in ourselves and others. In much the same fashion, we understand that cultures must change and yet, if they are to survive pressures of assimilation, or

colonization, or conquest, must somehow remain 'the same.' Both persons and cultures, then, are obliged to find some procedural means of preserving identity (personal identity and cultural identity) across time and through change. Just as threats to personal continuity are associated with individual acts of suicide, our research has shown that threats to cultural continuity are associated with rates of suicide within cultural communities. More importantly, efforts to promote culture are associated with increased resilience as evidenced by data that will be presented on the relation between rates of children in care and rates of youth suicide.

The point to be made in all of this is that, if one is as careful as I will try to be, one can sometimes commit the psychologist's fallacy and get away with it. The concept of resilience *can* be applied at a group level. But more than that, the conclusion that I will work toward, is that the process of creating and maintaining a strong sense of collective cultural identity not only promotes the continuity or resilience of the culture itself, but also acts to support and protect young persons in their efforts to build a commitment to their own future that is able to withstand and overcome periods of adversity.

Part I: Applying definitions of resilience to Aboriginal communities

In everyday usage, the term 'resilient' can apply to almost anything. Militias and markets can be said to 'recover quickly after a setback,' and everything from contortionists to camisoles can 'spring back quickly into shape after being bent, stretched or deformed.' In the social sciences, however, a more precise meaning is intended. Here the term is reserved for those cases (i.e., children) in which exposure to risk or adversity fails to produce the usual or expected degree of negative effect, or the magnitude of recovery is greater than anticipated. In studies of child development, one can refer to a general hardiness in response to adversity—"manifest competence despite exposure to significant stressors" (Rolf, 1999, p. 7)—or to a more distributed

and "dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000. p. 543). Common language and scientific definitions of resilience both refer to a relation between risk and outcome but differ in the way this relation is characterized. In social science, risk is typically defined as that which commonly produces (or is statistically associated with) a negative outcome. Poverty, abuse, illness, etc. are all said to be risk factors in childhood because the population of children exposed to these factors is known to have a lower average score on some outcome measure than the average score for the population of children who were spared such adversities. The term 'resilient' is used to describe any at-risk child who exhibits an outcome score that is higher than expected. Just how high one needs to score is a matter of serious scholarly debate. The score can be measured statistically relative to one's at-risk peers (e.g., scoring somewhere above the at-risk mean = resilient), or to scores in the non-risk group (scoring within the non-risk range = resilient), or to the total population (scoring in the top 10% = resilient). Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990), for example refer to three forms of resilience: (1) positive outcome despite adversity, (2) sustained competence under stress, and (3) successful recovery from trauma. Resilience can also be measured by the presence or absence of certain conditions—at-risk children can be judged resilient if they graduate high school (presence of positive outcome) or if they fail to develop a mental illness (absence of negative outcome).

My purpose in rehearsing all of this is to highlight the key elements of the concept of resilience as it is commonly employed and to point out the fact that risk and outcome are often conflated. To determine whether or not the concept can be applied to the Aboriginal population, we will need to show that there is a special burden of risk or adversity within this population. This much is relatively straightforward. In a history that is shared with aboriginal people across

the Americas, following contact with Europeans, the Aboriginal peoples of Canada have endured

a series of sustained assaults upon their cultures. Communities have been forcibly relocated,

access to resources and lands has been blocked, and traditional ways of living have been

rendered all but impossible to sustain. In Canada, this history has included the official

prohibition of religious practices and traditional forms of government, as well as the systematic

removal of children from their parents care to be "educated" in residential schools. Such policies

(as the Canadian government now admits) were "intended to remove Aboriginal people from

their homelands, suppress Aboriginal nations and their governments, undermine Aboriginal

cultures, [and] stifle Aboriginal identity" (Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal

Peoples, 1996). And these policies were undeniably effective: Aboriginal groups continue to

struggle to maintain the "matrix of stories, beliefs and values that holds a society together, allows

individuals to make sense of their lives and sustains them through the trouble and strife of mortal

existence" (Eckersley & Dear, 2002, p. 1592). While no one, perhaps, needs to be especially

reminded of this shameful history of "colonial entrapment" (Carsten, 2000), the point of my

recounting it is that the difficulties faced by contemporary Aboriginal communities need to be

understood within this historical context. The legacy of these policies can be found on any

number of indicators of risk status—from infant mortality, injury and disease rates, to life

expectancy, school performance and drop out rates, and almost any measure of health, economic

or social disadvantage one cares to choose.

For our present purpose, however, establishing a higher burden of risk satisfies only first

part of the preconditions for cultural resilience. If it were the case that rates of ill health, or social

disadvantage were uniformly high in each and every Aboriginal community or group, then there

would be no hope for demonstrating resilience. That is, where risk and outcome are conflated,

one needs to demonstrate that risk and outcome varies not by individual, but across communities. Because resilience requires a positive outcome amid a climate of increased risk, we need to locate a community, or a set of communities, that have somehow managed to 'beat the odds.' The odds to beat that form the focus for this example will be rates of youth suicide.

Since 1987, we have been monitoring the suicide rates within all of the 196 First Nations communities located in British Columbia. These monitoring efforts reveal two clear trends. First, the rate of suicide for First Nations youth is much higher than for non-Native youth. By our calculations, the risk of suicide (i.e., the burden of risk) is 5 to 20 times higher for First Nations youth as a group. Within this climate of increased risk, however, there is huge variability in the rates of suicide at the level of communities. This might be expected given that suicide is a rare event, and that many of these communities have small populations. For that reason, it is important to measure suicide rates over larger populations and for long periods of time. To date, we have data covering the years 1987 to 2000. With the names of particular First Nations communities (or bands) removed, the rates of youth suicide for this time period are displayed in Figure 1 below.

While it might be natural for the eye to linger on those especially sharp spikes in Figure 1, on those communities that exhibit tragically high rates of youth suicide, it should be noted that the line also touches the axis at the zero point. That is, there are communities with youth suicides of zero. To highlight the importance of this phenomenon, the same data are sorted in Figure 2 from lowest to highest. As can be clearly seen in this figure, more than half of all communities suffered no youth suicides during the 14 year study window. By this reckoning, the heaviest burden of risk is borne by a tiny fraction of the communities.

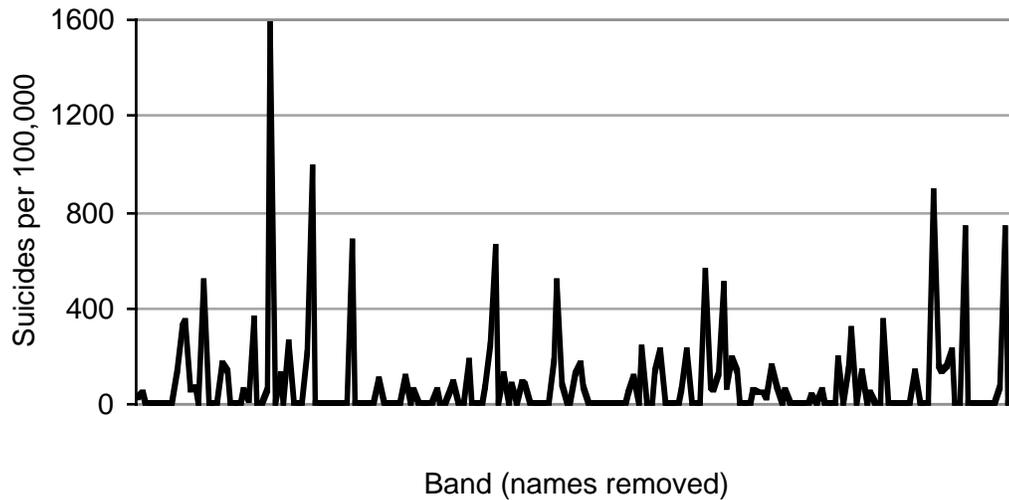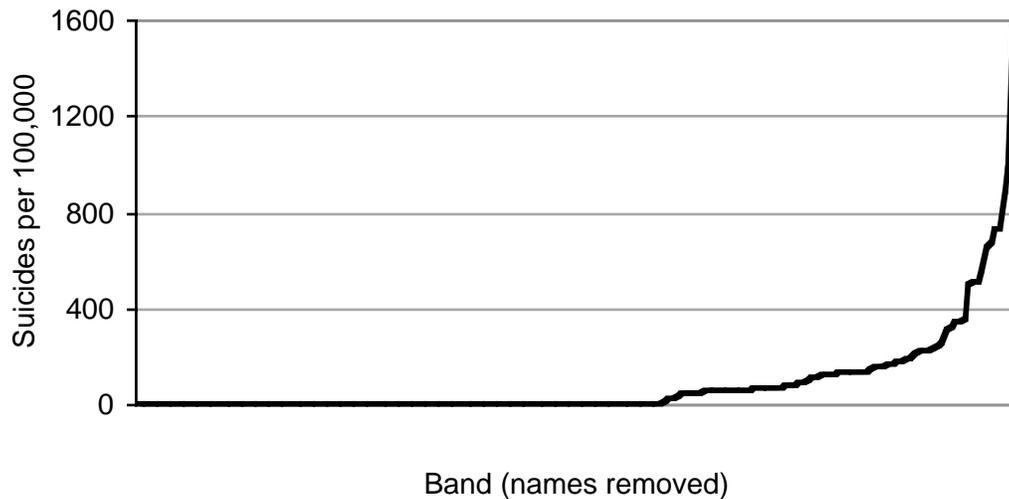Figure 1: Youth Suicide Rate by Band (1987-2000)

Figure 2: Youth Suicide Rate by Band (1987-2000)

It might be the case that these differences in community level rates of suicide, while dramatic and apparently stable across time, are nonetheless essentially random. That is, even though the differences between communities persist, there is nothing that would help us distinguish high suicide communities from their low suicide neighbours. But our work has shown that there are ways of making sense of this variability and indeed of predicting which

communities will have the lowest (or highest) rates, not just of suicide, but of other good and bad youth outcomes. The business of explaining why some communities manage to thrive in an environment of general adversity—why some communities are 'resilient—is taken up the section to follow.

Part II: Personal persistence and cultural resilience

For more than a decade, my research colleagues and I have been struggling to understand how it is that young persons—first of different ages (Chandler, Boyes, Ball & Hala, 1987), and then of mental health statuses (Chandler & Ball, 1990; Lalonde & Ferris, 2005), and, most recently, of different cultures (Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003; Lalonde & Chandler, 2004)—differently comprehend their own personal persistence in the face of inevitable developmental and social change. The problem—the paradox—of personal persistence arises from the fact that our ordinary understanding of the concept of "person" or "self" contains two fundamentally contradictory features: selves "embody both change and permanence simultaneously" (Fraisse, 1963, p. 10). On the one hand, we understand that persons change— often dramatically so—yet, on the other, persons must somehow persist as continuous or numerically identical individuals, and be understood, as Locke (1694/1956) famously put it, "as the same thinking thing in different times and places." If persons were not understood to persist in this way, then the concept of self would be stripped of its usual meaning. Routine matters of everyday life—such as identifying individual persons at different moments in time—would become impossible, and any hope of maintaining a legal and moral order would collapse if persons could not be held responsible for their own past actions or compelled to follow through on future promises. A conception of the self that did not encompass personal persistence, or that

failed otherwise failed to meet Flanagan's "one self to a customer rule" (1996, p. 65), would be unrecognizable as an instance of what we ordinarily take selves to be (Cassirer, 1923).

Though persistence or continuity is foundational to any workable definition of self, we are not born with arguments at the ready concerning how we ourselves (or anyone else) ought to be understood to change and yet remain "the same" person. It seemed clear enough to us at least, that there is a developmental story to be told here—a story about how young persons come to defend notions of their own continuity in the face of inevitable change. Before going on to briefly outline some of the findings or our own research on this topic, however, a few words need to be said about how it is that adolescents can be prompted to seriously consider matters of self-continuity and to offer up their own best solutions to the paradox of sameness in change.

What does *not* work (or more rightly did not work for us) is to outright ask young people how it is that they should be understood to persist through time. The more roundabout and more productive method of engaging adolescents with the problem is to begin by asking them to discuss instances of particularly dramatic personal change in the lives of fictional story characters. We managed this by presenting them with various "Classic Comic Books" (e.g., Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* and Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*), that depict examples of persistent identity in the face of personal change, and then pressed them for their own reasons for believing that, despite dramatic transformations, Jean Valjean or Ebineezer Scrooge still deserve to be counted as the self-same continuous and numerically identical person. We followed this by asking them to describe themselves at some time in the past (typically 5-10 years in the past, depending on the age of the participant), and then to describe themselves in the present. Drawing out their thoughts on continuity in their own life involved pointing out the contrasts between these two self-descriptions and repeatedly asking them how such different descriptions

could apply to the same person. In following these procedures with upwards of 600 young

persons we have found that even the youngest of typically developing adolescents can be

counted on to engage the problem of personal persistence with serious attention and to work hard

to construct what they take to be convincing arguments in favor of self-continuity.

Before recounting some of the details of our findings, it is important to consider the fact

that, although we must each find *some* means of understanding their own persistence in time,

there is no reason to suppose that everyone would arrive at precisely the *same* solution strategy.

Developmental psychologists, for example, have every right to suspect that persons of different

ages would process this problem differently. We might even predict that something like a

developmental sequence of solution strategies would emerge. In some similar (though perhaps

less clear-cut) fashion, cultural psychologists or anthropologists might predict that even if the

problem of self-continuity turned out be one of those rare universals of human development, the

procedural means for accomplishing personal persistence might still be free to vary considerably

from one culture to the next. As it happens, both groups turn out to be right.

In brief, what we have found is that, as young persons themselves become more complex,

so too do the arguments they offer up. In late childhood, for example, most employ simple

physicalistic arguments concerning aspects of themselves that have managed to withstand the

ravages of time: "My name/appearance/fingerprints are still the same." By the end of their teen

years, the form of their reasoning has typically become almost excruciatingly abstract: "I am the

ship that sails through the troubled waters of my life." Changes in the sophistication of their

reasoning are associated (as every developmentalist has a right to expect) with increasing age

and level of cognitive development. Between the ages of 12 and 18, our research suggests, the

average young person can be expected to step through a series of up to five different and increasingly complicated ways of warranting their own persistence in time.

In addition, cutting across the different levels of reasoning, we have identified two general strategies for approaching this problem that appear to be associated with participants' cultural background. One of these aims to preserve continuity through time by denying that real change has taken place and by seeking sameness in those features or aspects of the self that have managed to endure despite surface change in other quarters. These "Essentialist" strategies range from simple claims about physical features remaining the same (my eye colour, my birthmark) to increasingly abstract notions of personality traits and enduring souls. Though such claims can be made at different levels of abstraction, they all share in the idea that beneath a changing surface, more enduring aspects of self can remain untouched by time and change. The second strategy is more "Narrative" and fully abandons the idea that change can be denied. Instead, these "Narrative" accounts find continuity by creating a followable story that stitches together the various and changing parts of their life. Of course, some of these stories are more sophisticated than others. Young adolescents, for example, typically offer a simple chronology of events that rarely amounts to anything like a real plot. Older adolescents can express the more poetic conviction that the only real 'plot' to one's life is that of an endless series of attempts to interpretively re-read the past in light of the present.

Understanding why some adolescents choose the Essentialist approach and others are more Narrative turns out to depend on matters of culture. Some 80% of the culturally mainstream Canadian youth we have tested employ an Essentialist view of personal persistence. Among Aboriginal youth, more than 70% are Narrative in their view. This dissimilarity results from certain deep-seated differences between Euro-American and Aboriginal cultural and intellectual

traditions. Where contemporary Western culture routinely sees truth as hidden beneath an obscuring surface and where hidden essences need to be separated from mere appearances, Aboriginal cultures see a need for interpretation and the creation of meaning. Polkinghorne (1988) contrasts these views as a "metaphysics of substance" and a "metaphysics of potentiality and actuality." What adolescents drawn from these groups have to say about personal persistence largely reflects these contrasting cultural traditions.

In arguing that continuity or persistence is constitutive of what it means to be a person, I noted that without it, no one could be held accountable for their own past actions nor obliged to carry through on future commitments. Without this, no society could hope to maintain law and order and good government. But on an individual level, what would it mean to somehow fail or falter in the process of developing a persistent identity? What would it mean to lose a sense of personal persistence? If you had no way to weave together your own remembered past with any anticipated future, what would give you any sense of enduring identity worth caring about? If we are invested in our own well-being precisely because we understand that we persist, or, if Flanagan is right that, "As beings in time, we are navigators. We care how our lives go" (1996, p. 67), then without a sense of self-continuity, what would stop anyone from acting on those transient thoughts of self-destruction that occasionally haunt us all?

All of this would suggest that the costs of failures in personal persistence can be measured in individual acts of suicide. And this is precisely what we have found in our studies. Of the nearly 600 individual young people we have tested to date, the only ones who come up empty-handed when asked to defend notions of persistence in themselves and others are patients in psychiatric settings whom we know to have been actively suicidal at the time of the interview. Unlike all of our other participants—and unlike their non-suicidal ward-mates—those who are

without a working sense of self-continuity are marked by being suicidal. Read in the opposite direction, roughly 85% of suicidal participants utterly fail to produce reasons for personal persistence.

As compelling as such data may be, we are not, of course, free to conclude that losing a sense of self-continuity *causes* one to become suicidal. Other explanations are possible. But the kernel idea that we have been exploring is that the same natural developmental process that drives young persons forward through a series of different solutions to the paradox of their own persistence also works to create the possibility of awkward transitions between earlier and later ways of framing this problem and so threatens to leave them, if only temporarily, in the dangerous position of having no working conception of their own enduring identity and no ready care and concern for their own future. One of the special merits of this approach, at least in our own view, is that it provides the basis for a developmental account of why it is that adolescence should prove to be the fraction of the lifespan with the highest attendant risk of suicide.

If the usual course of development can be seen to put adolescents at higher risk of suicide, then what would explain the fact that Canadian Aboriginal youth suffer rates of suicide that are 5-10 times higher than the already elevated rates of the their non-Aboriginal peers (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998)? Two possibilities immediately present themselves. First, it might be that the usual constellation of socio-economic and psychological risk factors (inadequate income, education, housing, health care, etc.) simply cluster more tightly around Aboriginal communities. That much is true enough of many Canadian Aboriginal groups—but is not especially true of those communities in Figure 2 above that are marked by high suicide rates. Alternately, and in keeping with my earlier claim that Aboriginal youth tend to take a different approach to the problem of personal persistence, it might be that their preferred Narrative

strategies are somehow inherently defective and fail to adequately sustain self-continuity, or otherwise operate to more often put them in harm's way. There is nothing in our data to suggest that a Narrative approach is any less effective than its Essentialist counterpart and actually solving the problem of personal persistence. Both yield solutions that preserve a sense of connection to one's past and present, and a reasoned commitment to one's future. In fact, it is only among those who have entirely lost the thread of their own continuity that we find increased suicide risk. If one can mount an argument of any kind—whether Essentialist or Narrative, simple or complex, one is insulated from risk.

To understand why suicide risk seems to be so unevenly distributed across communities, we need to look more carefully at the relation between personal and cultural continuity. Our claim is that just as the loss of personal continuity puts individual young persons at risk, the loss of cultural continuity puts whole cultural groups at risk. Given the history of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, no one could seriously doubt that the continuity of Aboriginal culture has been compromised. Indeed, this is part of the climate of adversity argument outlined in Part I. Still, although all Aboriginal cultures have suffered and had much of their culture stolen from them, they have not all responded to these assaults in identical ways. Some communities have been able to rebuild or rehabilitate a connection to their own cultural past with more success than others. Perhaps differences in suicide rates between communities are associated with differing levels of success in their struggles to resist the sustained history of acculturative practices that threaten their very cultural existence.

To test this idea, we needed some way to measure the extent to which these communities have taken active steps to preserve and promote their own cultural heritage and to regain control over various aspects of their communal life. Our measures of cultural continuity include efforts

to regain legal title to traditional lands and to re-establish forms of self-government, to reassert

control over education and the provision of health care, fire, and policing services, as well as

steps to erect facilities within the community devoted to traditional cultural events and practices.

More recently, we have added measures of the participation of women in government, and

control over the provision of child and family services. Though this handful of items might not

be among the first to leap to mind when searching for indexes of cultural continuity, they do

reliably capture concrete steps that communities can take to wrestle control of their lives from

the hands of government overseers, and to reintroduce their own culture into their children's

schools and their own communal spaces. The balance of my remarks will (as promised) focus on

the relation that these measures of cultural continuity have with rates of youth suicide and the

number of children in care.

What we have consistently observed, using suicide data that now covers a 14-year period,

is that success on each and every one of these measures is associated with a decrease in the rate

of youth suicide. For example, within Aboriginal communities that succeed in their efforts to

restore systems of self-government, the relative risk of suicide among youth is 85% lower than in

communities that have not. The risk is 52% lower within communities that control education—

and the list goes on like this for each one of our measures. More important than the effect of

these single variables, however, is the cumulative effect of such successes. When one counts the

number of factors present in each community and then calculates the suicide rates separately for

those communities with 0, 1, 2 … etc. factors present, a clear step-wise pattern emerges. When

none of these marker variables are present, the youth suicide rate is 10 times the provincial

average; when all six are present, the rate falls to zero (see Figure 3 below). As this figure clearly

shows, investing in activities that further cultural goals pays dividends in dramatically lower

rates of youth suicide within these communities.

Figure 3: Youth Suicide Rate by Number of Factors Present
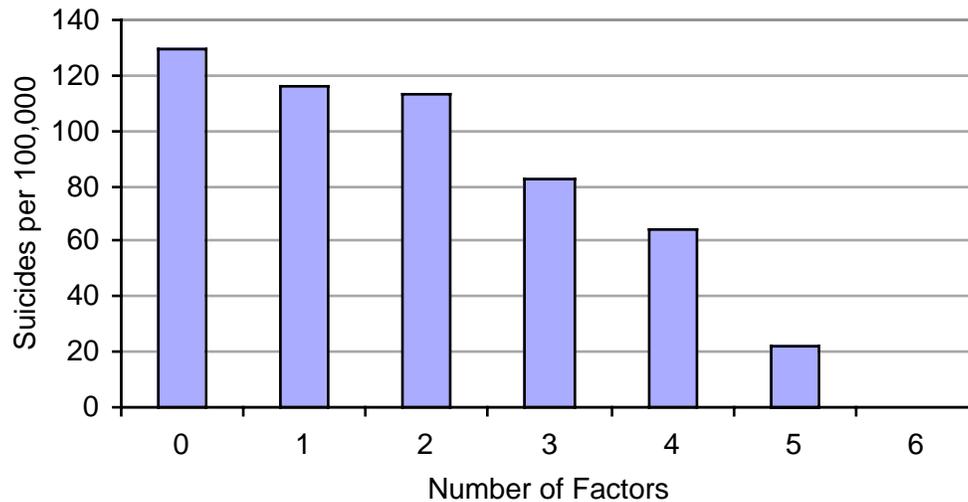
This same relation between cultural continuity and youth suicide holds when one

examines the level of control that communities exert over the provision of child and family

services. As with suicide, a disproportionate number of children in care are Aboriginal. Just as

with suicide rates, there is wide variability from one community to the next in the number of

children in care. And, just as we have seen with suicide, this variability is not random but instead

attaches itself to community efforts to promote culture and regain control of services. As part of

a continued 'devolution' of power, provincial agencies are in the process of returning control of

these services to First Nations communities. Some First Nations are farther along in this process

than others. Within those communities that have assumed control and implemented plans for

their children in care, the youth suicide rate is 25% lower than in communities that still lack

control over children and family services. Although when one casts an eye across the whole of

the province, there is no direct relation between youth suicide and the number of children in care

(see Figure 4, r= .115), a closer inspection of the data reveals that, within the group of

communities that experience no youth suicide, the number of children in care is 25% lower.

Figure 4: Youth Suicide and Number of Children in Care
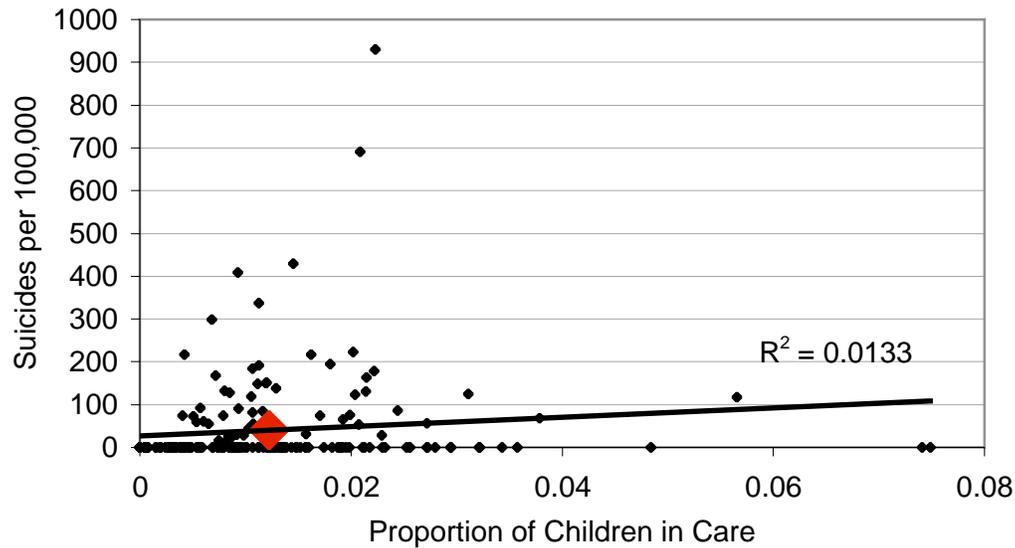
Resilience implies transcendence. While there is perhaps no happy ending to be found in

the story told by these data, there is hope. Within a population that suffers the highest rate of

suicide in any culturally identifiable group in the world (Kirmayer, 1994), and that even after the

"60's scoop" continues to see a disproportionate number of children taken into care, there is

evidence of resilience. The surprising outcomes—the transcendence—is not found in the single

'hardy' or 'invulnerable' child who manages to rise above adversity, but in the existence of

whole communities that demonstrate the power of culture as a protective factor. When

communities succeed in promoting their cultural heritage and in securing control of their own

collective future—in claiming ownership over their past and future—the positive effects

reverberate across many measures of youth health and well-being. Suicide rates fall, fewer

children are taken into care, school completion rates rise, and rates of intentional and

unintentional injury decrease.

In contrast to the critics, this cultural resilience is not simply a "situational success or

failure" (Bartelt, 1994). The association between community efforts and outcome shows that

instances of success are not random. And rather than working to "obscure thinking about the

etiology and prevention" (Tarter & Vanyukov, 1999), the success that these communities have

achieved has clear implications for policy makers and service providers. The most important

implication follows from the source of the success: the First Nations themselves. If there is any

take-home message to be found in our research efforts, it is that some communities have

evidently already found solutions to the problems faced by Aboriginal youth. As we have argued

elsewhere (Chandler & Lalonde, 2004), the parachuting of solution strategies into Aboriginal

communities from far-off university campuses or government offices, is not just disrespectful but

also bound to fail. What is needed instead of the usual top-down forms of 'knowledge transfer',

is some way to facilitate lateral 'knowledge exchange' and the cross-community sharing of those

forms of indigenous knowledge that have already proven their worth in First Nations

communities. If the concept of resilience can be stretched to apply to First Nations, as I believe

that it can, then the best chances for success lie in the efforts of First Nations to reassert cultural

sovereignty and to expand the indigenous knowledge base that has allowed them to adapt to, and

in some cases, overcome the climate of adversity.

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