

# Multimethod Research on Stress, Trauma, and Mental Health in American Indian Families

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# Stress and Trauma in American Indian Families

- **Poverty is endemic**
- **Services often underdeveloped or non-existent**
- **Health literacy levels are likely quite low**
- **Rates of alcohol dependence can be quite high**
- **PTSD exceeds national rates**
- **MDE actually occurs at significantly lower rates**



## What Methods Are Appropriate to These Issues and Contexts

- **Available epidemiological tools and developmental assessments are never developed for American Indian or Alaska Native families**
- **Patterns exist in stories and discourse as much as (or more than) they do in survey data**
- **Much that is of interest may not be explicitly cognized**



# Our Developmental Research

- **Funded by ACF and NICHD, we have sought to embed ethnography in psychological research**
  - **to develop new tools, e.g., approaches to reservation “neighborhoods”**
  - **to explore areas for which good measurement may be lacking**
  - **and to move beyond self report**



# Community Consultation

- **Research in tribal contexts requires tribal approval**
- **Accordingly, there are well-developed principles for community engagement at the front end of research**
- **Ethnographic sensitivity to the native's point of view and openness to local direction are essential**



## Review of Measures

- **Our research on stress and young children's development underscored the needs for measures of environmental perception that fit reservation communities**
- **Stimulated by the discussion of social dynamics in reservation communities (the area where you live), consultants added items on chemical contamination and problems with animals**



# New Insights Into Perceived Community Stressors

- **Chemical and biological stressors emerged as distinct factors**
- **Biological stressors had unique associations over the HOME and PHDCN scales**
- **Of particular interest in this regard is a growing level of concern with the welfare of dogs in tribal communities, which is sometimes taken as an index of community function**



# Historical Trauma

- **The impact of historical trauma and loss is of intense local concern in many tribal communities**
- **Existing measurement approaches have only begun to explore these issues**
- **Much of what is hypothesized to impact children would not be amenable to survey approaches**



## Our Ethnographic Work on Trauma Across the Generations

- **In our previous work on infant and toddler development, parents spoke poignantly about their own traumas, their hopes to avoid exposing their children to the same, and their concerns that they had**
- **Open-ended interviews allowed us to elicit these accounts in the absence of well-validated survey tools**
- **Pursuing connections often elicited quite powerful emotions, which surveys seldom did**



## Our Observations in the Home

- **Our developmental research used the NCAST to understand interactions that may support cognitive (language) development**
- **Patterns in this data proved perplexing**
  - **was the absence of verbal interaction a product of cultural values for observational learning**
  - **or did it reflect a lack of engagement with the young child's development?**



# Parent-Child Interaction

- **Our protocol for ethnographic home visits provides a rich dataset for interpreting specific parents**
- **We sent two visitors to the homes of 1/3 of our sample**
- **One as an observer and assistant, one as the lead interviewer**
- **Following the visit, the observer dictated reflections of interaction and environment**



# A Broader Perspective on Parent-Child Interaction

- **While talking to your infant is certainly culturally patterned, our observations point to disengagement in the context of stress and trauma**
- **Intervention needs to be rooted in terms that make sense given understandings of infancy**
- **But also needs to appreciate parents experiences with poverty, substance abuse, mental health, and trauma**



# Multiple Methods in the Context of Trauma

- **Home visits are quite possible, even in families with complex needs**
- **Open-ended interviews allow us to explore the patterns that people perceive in their own experiences, especially across generations**
- **Observations in real-life contexts provide important information for understanding the deeper impact of trauma and loss**



# Meaning and Trauma

- **Approaches to discourse allow us to understand how meaning can emerge from trauma and loss**
- **Approaches to meaning are also central in thinking about what messages may resonate in particular communities**
- **Explicit measurement is needed, but not always available**
- **And not always interpretable when naively used**



## Moving to Intervention

- **Interventions require engaging parents in terms they understand**
- **in ways that are respectful of where they come from**
- **and what they want**
- **that can be sustained into the future**



# Spirituality and Coping

- **Most parents in our research feel estranged from cultural traditions**
- **Many turn to early childhood interventions in the hopes that their children might be restored to cultural integrity**
- **Our research on alcoholism underscores the vital role that spiritual involvement can play**



## A Word About Intervention Research

- **All interventions need to recognize who can help and what parents are open to receive**
- **Community engagement is essential**
- **But so too is good science**
- **Our broader discussions of evidence-based practice make clear how research has failed to provide evidence on matters of the deepest importance to AI/AN communities**