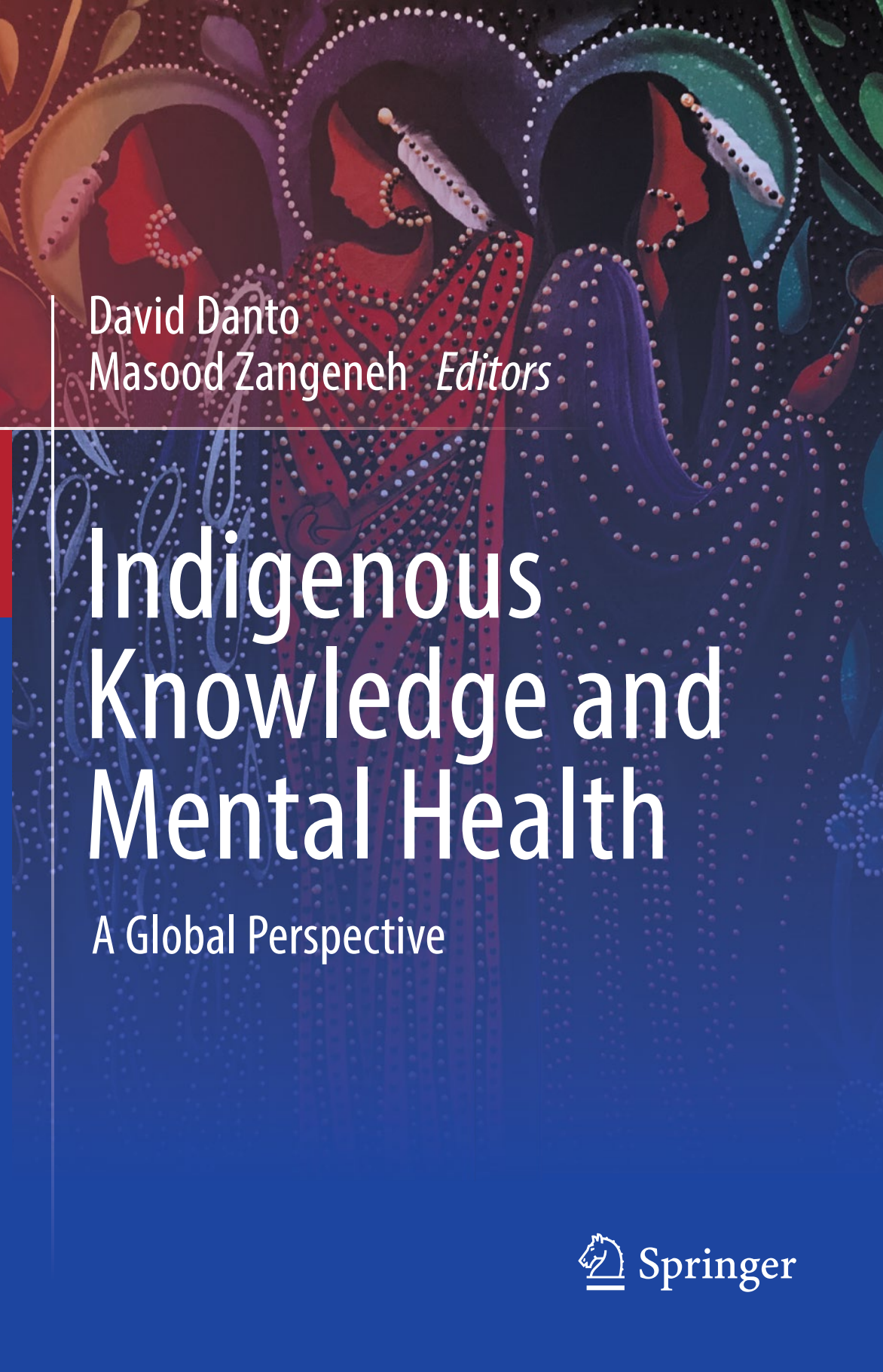

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Reclaiming Our Identity Through Indigenous Cultural Generative Acts to Improve Mental Health of All Generations

Jordan P. Lewis

From 1762, when Russian ships first arrived at what is now known as Alaska, the purchase of Alaska by the United States in 1867, and statehood in 1959 [1], and as a result of colonization, including boarding schools, missionaries, and Western practices, Alaska Natives have lost their land, cultural values, and traditional spiritual practices. These losses have resulted in negative self-perception, diminished sense of pride, and the development of maladaptive behaviors (drinking, violence, depression, suicide) used to numb the pain of their lost identity [2]. These behaviors have a negative impact on younger Alaska Natives and change families and community relationships. Despite the history, a segment of Alaska Natives experiences "cultural motivations" to "become who they are meant to be" and age successfully by transmitting these motivations to others to ensure they age well and become who they wish and are meant to be. These cultural motivations, which are introduced to us as youth through the teachings of our Elders, remain present consciously or subconsciously throughout our lives living as Indigenous peoples. It is not until later in life, when we approach Eldership, that these lessons reemerge and become the foundation for our own lives as well as what we pass on to youth.

My impetus for this chapter stems from the groundbreaking work by the late Gerald Mohatt and his team at the Center for Alaska Native Health Research. This work is referred to as the People Awakening Study, which explored life-history narratives looking for factors that helped Alaska Native Elders to quit drinking, maintain their sobriety, and remain on their journey to recovery. It was found that what contributed to long-term recovery was filling expected roles as an Elder in their family and community, sharing their wisdom and experiences gathered over a lifetime, and being willing to pass on these stories of recovery, strength, and

J. P. Lewis (✉)
University of Minnesota Medical School, Duluth Campus, Memory Keepers Medical Discovery Team, Duluth, MN, USA
e-mail: jplewis@d.umn.edu

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compassion for their cultural values, beliefs, traditions, and families. These acts fit within Erikson's notion of "generativity," where adults and older adults are concerned about future generations, sharing their knowledge and skills, and leaving a legacy that improves society.

In this chapter, grounded in generativity and Indigenous theories, I discuss the cultural motivations Alaska Native Elders used to replace unhealthy behaviors that lead to improved mental health, stronger sense of self, and "becoming who they were meant to be." When engaging in Indigenous cultural generative acts [3], Alaska Native Elders share experiences to encourage others to learn from their experiences and avoid similar challenges, discover their cultural motivations to live the life they imagined, and reclaim their identity as healthy Alaska Natives. This journey, of becoming who you are meant to be, to heal future generations, is depicted in Fig. 1.

Figure 1 outlines the journey for Indigenous Elders and how early life experiences, while difficult, are lessons on how to live life to the fullest, take those lessons to improve their daily life, and also pass those lessons along to others who may be struggling. I discuss this journey, starting with the adversities faced by many Indigenous peoples, with a focus on Elders, and how those adversities led to Elders reaching a turning point in life, and through motivations and supports, they reconnected to their cultural, familial, and community identity. Reclaiming their healthy Indigenous identity, and not keeping those lessons to themselves, has enabled them to achieve Eldership through Indigenous cultural generative acts.

A segment of the Alaska Native population has struggled, or currently struggles, with adversity throughout their lives, including substance misuse, trauma, racism, relocation, and other challenges that may continue to impact their lives, preventing them from achieving their idea of Eldership based on what they witnessed growing up among their Elders. Some of the struggles may also prevent them from engaging and teaching cultural values and practices, which we refer to as Indigenous cultural generative acts. These acts can include teaching younger people cultural practices, and, on a deeper level, the underlying values and worldview of their culture, as well as sharing their experiences with adversity and how they overcame those challenges. We can learn from those who share their lived experiences of recovery [4] because they have lived through the challenging times and gained personal insight and lessons they can pass down.

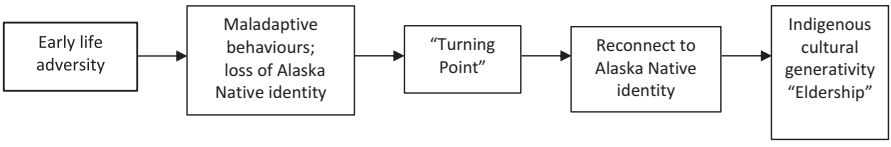

Fig. 1 Journey of "Becoming who I am meant to be" to heal the Seventh Generation through Indigenous cultural generativity

Need for a Paradigm Shift

Indigenous community research partners, including those working in partnership with Alaska Natives, advocate for a shift from a pathology-based to a strengths-based approach to serving Elders and communities, as well as developing programs and services to address mental health. Rather than focusing on problem behaviors and highlighting deficits, a strengths-based approach instead highlights individuals and subgroups that exemplify successful treatment outcomes or who have been protected from active mental health problems [5]. This approach has been similarly emphasized for more than two decades by Alaska Native and other Indigenous community leadership [6, 7]. A shift in focus to those who are successful contributes to our understanding of the protective factors from adverse mental health outcomes [8] and can guide Indigenous communities and providers in efforts to develop programs and services built upon individual, family, community, and spiritual and cultural strengths. In particular, it is important to highlight these cultural strengths that exist in Indigenous communities; these strengths include values based on family, clan, tribal affiliation, and spirituality, as well as engagement with and support from the community [5], and they also serve as cultural motivations for Elders to step into Eldership roles and mentor the Seventh Generations to live healthy and productive lives.

Turning Point

Alaska Natives, and other Indigenous peoples, have lost their land, cultural values, and spiritualty, resulting in negative self-perception, a diminished sense of pride, and the development of maladaptive behaviors (drinking, violence, depression, suicide) used to numb the pain of their stolen identity. These behaviors negatively impact younger Indigenous Peoples and change families and community relationships. Despite the history, a segment of these populations experiences a turning point in life to "become who they are meant to be" and they age successfully through the transmission of these experiences. Turning points vary for each person, but they have included the birth of a grandchild (and becoming a grandparent) or being asked by the community to fill the role of Elder, serve on Tribal Council, or work with youth; these roles are not compatible with poor health behaviors and choices.

When Elders, and others, after reaching their turning point, reconnect with their cultural values through engagement in personally and culturally meaningful roles and activities, they begin to heal and become who they are meant to be. In addition to the family, other sources of social support include friends and others in the wider community who provide opportunities to be engaged [9–12] in meaningful activities and events.

Paul Spicer [13] found that American Indians and Alaska Natives understood their role of teaching and helping others in their family and community, which

supported their desire to overcome and avoid challenges they experienced in the past. Sondra Burman [4] found that, in addition to wanting to strengthen relationships with family and community members, a majority of American Indians and Alaska Natives want to be role models and share their experiences to ensure others do not face similar challenges. Spicer's [13] study explored recovery as a cultural process, involving the restoration of the cultural self, concluding that drinking is incompatible with a proper way of life for Indigenous people; through abstaining, people in recovery have been able to restore themselves to this proper Indigenous way of life and serve as role models for others. As we partner with Indigenous Elders and communities, this focus on strengths will build trust and open the dialog for them to share their journeys of recovery; we are asking them to share what they are doing right, what has enabled them to overcome adversity through reconnection to their culture, community, and family, and, when they feel ready, to share their experiences with others. This sharing is important because it enables Elders to share lessons learned, mentor others, as well as heal themselves through sharing.

Concept of Generativity and Its Role in Mental Health

A key element of a psychosocial development theory by Erik Erikson (1997) is the concept of generativity, which is defined as the urge to contribute to the well-being of other people, particularly the younger generations. John Kotre [14] defines generativity as the desire to invest one's substance in forms of life and work that will outlive the self. Although already identified as a topic associated with successful aging (in, for example, [15, 16]), generativity has not received much attention in the mental health or Indigenous literatures. Very little research, if any, has been conducted with Indigenous populations and their understanding of generativity and its role in well-being and mental health. Yet the concept can be applied to most Indigenous Elders with their desire to be involved with their family, teach, and engage in cultural practices, and pass on their knowledge and language to others to ensure they have the tools, stories, and wisdom to become healthy Indigenous peoples. Baltes and Baltes [17] discussed generativity and wisdom as important elements of a standardized definition of an ideal state of growing older. Achieving generativity, along with good health, should be considered strong indicators of successful aging [18] and mental well-being. George Vaillant [19] stated, "The mastery of generativity should be strongly correlated with successful adaptation to old age, for to keep it, you have to give it away" (p. 220), which is the same sentiment expressed by Indigenous Elders in their desire to pass on what they know to the younger generations. Through this sharing, Indigenous Elders grow stronger and healthier, and the stories they share grow; from sharing about overcoming adversity and what that has taught them in life and also being able to share stories of how life has changed after reconnecting with culture and becoming who they were meant to be.

In his later years, Erikson expanded the concept of generativity one step further to encompass caring for the wider community, social institutions, and the environment, which he labeled as "grand-generativity" [20]. This concept is thought to allow Elders to express care, to be engaged and valued by others, and to leave a legacy of themselves [21, 22], which directly applies to the cultural values practices of Indigenous Elders. According to Kotre [14], there are four types of generativity (biological, parental, technical, and cultural), and this study focuses specifically on cultural generativity, which is another form of grand-generativity. The importance of a wider concern with passing on social traditions, morals, and cultural values (as opposed to practical skills passed on through other forms of generativity) has been recognized with the concept of cultural generativity [14, 23, 24]. Expressions of cultural generativity are practiced and encouraged by the older adult's awareness and acceptance of being connected to their relatives and community members who have passed on and the younger generations (Seventh Generation) who will continue on and carry the legacy they learned as recipients of the cultural generative acts of their elders [25]. Kotre [14] states that generative cultures, communities, and individuals must be concerned not only with the physical (biological) survival of their children but also with their psychological and moral development, which is a major focus of why Indigenous Elders take on roles to pass on their knowledge and wisdom.

According to the literature, cultural generativity does not happen all at once; it is an ongoing process throughout one's life. To begin, you need a sense of belonging to a culture in order to feel responsible for passing it on [26]; the individual must experience a sense of belonging to that culture or feeling wanted and needed by their family and community (that is, meaningful engagement). Research has consistently demonstrated that self-reported generative concern shares a significant, positive relationship with measures of life satisfaction, self-esteem, happiness, and a sense of coherence [24, 27, 28]. Generativity is a complex stage of development that involves cultural demand, inner desire, concern, belief, commitment, action, and narration [29]. All of these actions focus on individual and community-based goals of caring for, and contributing to, the well-being and advancement of future generations. Indigenous Elders share their stories and experiences to serve as role models and teach others how to successfully navigate difficult life situations, but also how to live a healthy and productive life and serve as a role model in their family and community [30]. Hong Kong's older adults, aware of the gap between their knowledge and current social and technological developments, transmit moral and behavioral attitudes mostly by sharing stories of hardship in the old days and being a model of character, as a way of creating a more lasting influence [31] on the younger generations.

Indigenous Elders tend to be considered "keepers of the meaning," which is a term coined by psychoanalyst George Vaillant to define a person who is located between the seventh and eighth stages of Erikson's stages of development (between generativity and ego-integrity). These individuals are concerned with preserving a culture's traditions in order to preserve their way of living and being for future generations and to teach them how to live a life according to their cultural values. In a

study by Ronald J. Manheimer [26], his subjects demonstrated a capacity to transform an experience of failure or personal agony into a morally instructive account that functions to redeem the past and throw light on the present and future. What makes the narratives of his subjects redemptive is the way a source of pain, anger, vulnerability, trauma, or humiliation becomes a vehicle leading to pleasure, satisfaction, strength, solace, and pride; what Kotre [14] himself calls the "transformation of defect" (p. 263). Through a lifetime of experiences, reflection, and teachings, Indigenous Elders were able to transform their past misfortunes, hardships, and personal challenges because they could place their personal experiences in a broader context, which enabled them to find common words for their struggles and provided a community with whom they could share their experiences (that is, family members, community members, others in recovery). Not only were they willing to share these experiences, but they grounded them in the cultural values and customs of their family and community and used them as vehicles to teach lessons and appropriate behaviors through storytelling.

According to Kotre [14], when a person practices cultural generativity, they share a story that draws from a system of symbolically encoded meanings (for example, language, tradition, concepts, cultural values, foods) to formulate and pass on a story that has psychological power and a moral message. These stories are not only recalled for the teller, reminding them of where they have been and how far they have come but also memorable and a lesson for the listener. From Kotre's [14] account, it seems that it is in the passage of story from teller to listener that "outliving the self" takes place. It is in the movement between one person who has shaped an account in the context of a sharable culture and the recipient, who understands how to receive this account, that the communal self is born, freed from the private self of inner reflection or even the social selves of family and community life [26].

While cultural generativity is a term discussed in the generativity literature, it is not often associated with Indigenous Elders or referred to as a way of preserving an Indigenous culture, passing down cultural values, or teaching lessons to the youth. I believe this chapter is unique highlighting how the act of passing down cultural values, life stories, and traditional practices provided these Indigenous Elders with an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and share lessons learned, which has a positive impact on their mental health and well-being. These acts also enable Elders to share stories that preserve their history, language, and cultural practices and values. A second unique aspect is that Indigenous Elders share all of this with others, not as a way to preserve their own legacy, but to ensure the health and well-being of their families and communities; they wish to leave the world better than they found it and ensure their families and communities have the tools, stories, and values to live a healthy and productive life through engagement in activities that are meaningful and enable them to be proud, despite previous challenges or adversity. Elders share their stories of adversity, not as a way to bring up the past and feel shame, but to take the experience as a lesson to learn from to ensure we avoid similar situations in the future and continue to do the best we can with what we have. As we think about mental health and overcoming challenges, such as addiction, these Elders reflect back on their last drink, when they were at their lowest, or what they

lost connection to others, not to talk about how bad life was, but to highlight the dangers of mental health challenges, but also share how wonderful life is when sober and well. Elders remind us that our past does not define us, nor should we relive those memories as a punishment or be ashamed, but to reflect on those moments that defined us and put us on a new path of healing and recovery. Everything happens in life for a reason, and we need to reflect on those experiences to learn the lesson, apply it to our lives, and, when the timing is right, share our own journey on how we became who we were meant to be.

Generativity Mismatch and Poor Mental Health

One of the challenges facing Elders across the globe, but particularly Indigenous Elders, is the receptivity of younger generations to these stories and lessons shared by the Elders. Youth today are raised in a technological society, and many younger children have never lived without a cellphone, computer, or television in their home. Indigenous Elders grew up in a very different world, some without electricity, growing up in sod houses, and living completely off the resources of the land. Their stories of childhood are not the same as children's today, so we are beginning to see a gap between Elders and youth and common topics of interest. What Elders wish to share and pass down does not align with the interests of our Indigenous youth, and we need to continue working collaboratively with Indigenous Elders and communities to address the generative mismatch and technological gaps. Without common interests, where Elders feel heard and appreciated, they will disengage and discontinue their sharing, resulting in poorer mental health outcomes and disengagement, which can also lead to poor health.

Sharing Your Journey Heals Everyone

Indigenous Elders witnessed positive changes in their own lives once they changed their lifestyle and began their journey toward the Elder they are meant to be. These changes are motivated by cultural factors I have grouped under four thematic categories: family influence, role selection and socialization, cultural activities and community engagement, and spirituality. In the following discussion, I do not describe Elders' reasons for quitting drinking, but rather their motivations for their changing their drinking behaviors and sharing what has enabled them to heal and begin their journey of recovery and Eldership.

Growing up, we interact and spend time with Elders in our homes and communities, and they are sober, leaders in the community, and always happy to share. As we grow up and experience the world, some of us venture into unhealthy lifestyle choices or experience mental and physical health challenges. Elders become Elders in their families and communities, not by self-nomination, but because others notice

their wisdom and experiences. As a result of this external recognition of their status as a respected Elder, they make choices to change behaviors and begin to live a clean and healthy life, so they can begin to live the life expected of them, a role they envisioned since they were children. Moreover, as Elders, they can pass on their traditional knowledge, teach how the Native ways of living used to be, and work with the community to ensure a healthy and productive future grounded in these cultural ways, including a strong sense of community. These Elders wish to pass on their traditional culture and the values that played an important role in their own lives, as well as share how spirituality played a critical role in their lives and becoming healthy.

Reclaiming Our Identity to Become the "Elder You Were Meant to Be"

Alaska Native older adults beginning their healing journey say that they are assisted by cultural motivations such as family member influence and learning from the experiences of those who came before them. They also recognized their desire to become a role model and having a spiritual/religious presence in their lives as important factors in their recovery. A primary reason why these factors served as motivations for recovery was that, when present in an older adult's life, they appeared to have enabled them to age successfully and to teach, guide, and give back to others. Elders will share the specific moment they made the conscious decision to stop drinking, and they viewed this as a healthy step toward fulfilling their personal dreams as they age. They were also able to develop a sense of purpose and become a healthy Elder to serve as a role model for their family and community.

Family Influence

Family support and its role in Elders' journey to wellness may be even more pronounced for Indigenous families [32], including Alaska Natives. Consistent with earlier research [33], Alaska Natives have a desire to create a safe and healthy environment for their family; they discussed their pride in improving their mental health and working toward disengaging in poor health behaviors before their children grew up thus allowing them to live in a healthy home.

Sondra Burman [4] found that in addition to wanting to strengthen relationships with family members, American Indians and Alaska Natives wish to be role models for their family and other community members, which includes not just talking about past experiences with alcohol, but learning and growing from these experiences, and sharing their stories to prevent others from suffering similar experiences. Indigenous Elders also receive support from family and community to engage in

meaningful activities [34], such as subsistence activities (hunting and gathering, fishing, berry picking, preparing traditional foods), Native arts and crafts, and tribal leadership, which would not be possible if they were still drinking or suffering from poor health as a result of poor health behaviors.

Role Selection and Socialization

The relationship between becoming an Elder and lifestyle changes are typically understood in terms of role selection and socialization. Role selection occurs when behaviors influence the roles Elders adopt; role socialization occurs when characteristics of the social role adopted influences one's behaviors [35, 36]. For example, an individual will reduce or abstain from drinking while in recovery; however, secure, long-term abstinence requires assuming a role (such as respected Elder) the person believes is incompatible with substance use [35, 36]. Alaska Native older adults also take on socially acceptable roles and acquire responsibilities expected of them by their family and community, paralleling findings of Quintero [37], through a process of role socialization [35] and becoming productive and engaged members of their family and community.

Community and Cultural Engagement

Herzog and House [38] noted the benefits to the broader society from the increased participation of Elders, which is directly related to Indigenous communities and includes engagement in community and cultural events and encouraging the involvement of others. Engagement of others not only improves the overall health and well-being of the family, but also the community. Through these activities, families and communities are able to interact with their Elders, and learn about their own history, language, and culture, which can improve the overall health and well-being of each family member. Also, when Elders are encouraged to engage in these rewarding community-wide activities, and they feel respected and heard. When they are engaging in rewarding activities, these activities and expectations of others replace the unhealthy behaviors that once took priority and encourage them to stay healthy. This engagement is a key predictor of protection from remission [34].

A useful strategy for facilitating health and well-being among Elders is to encourage Elders to participate in activities based on their preferences [38] and interests. For American Indians and Alaska Natives, these preferences can often involve teaching language, Native arts and crafts, volunteering with the school, or serving in a leadership position [39, 40]. A factor enabling Elders to become and remain engaged in their community and assist others is their spirituality, relationship with God, or connection to a higher power [3, 30, 41].

Spirituality

The role of culture and spirituality in sobriety is defined more broadly than religion alone [2, 33, 42] in much of the Indigenous literature. Dustin A. Pardini et al. [43] stated that spirituality and religion may be effective components of mental health treatment because of the positive outcomes associated with spiritual and religious engagement, which can include increased coping, resilience to stress, an optimistic outlook on life, greater perceived social support, and lower anxiety levels [43]; all of these contributed and supported individuals' decision to become healthy.

Mental Health, Indigenous Cultural Generativity, and Successful Aging

Indigenous Elders find meaning and joy when provided opportunities to give back to their family and community, to teach the youth, and leave a legacy to be passed down that will help the families and communities heal and live meaningful and productive lives. These Elders are engaging in generative acts that have clear cultural elements, patterned on being a role model for future generations and, through this, passing on one's culture to the next generation. Elders pass on their knowledge, not as a selfish way to ensure they are not forgotten, but as a way to ensure their family and youth will continue to live with tools and wisdom needed to achieve Eldership.

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the types of generative acts, and how they are relevant to Indigenous populations. Building upon the literature, James Allen and I have created a term that highlights this unique component of generativity whereby Elders engage in cultural generativity but turn an Indigenous lens on the world. We call this Indigenous cultural generativity.

Indigenous cultural generativity can be defined as "any act of an older adult where they pass on traditional values, subsistence practices, language, beliefs, and any other activity that preserves and passes on the culture of the family and community" ([3], p. 213). Generativity has a focus on individual legacy for the next generation, whereas Indigenous cultural generative acts preserve the history, language, and cultural values and beliefs of an entire, family, community, culture, and way of being for seven generations. Indigenous older adults engage in these acts to ensure their way of life, Indigenous Ways of Knowing and being, the environment, and their family and community are healthy for their children and the children seven generations from today.

In this chapter, I have highlighted the experiences of Alaska Native Elders who maintained sobriety and recovery (physical and mental) by exploring and determining their cultural motivations, also known as engaging in Indigenous culturally generative acts. They are motivated by their desire to care for family and community members, and their wish to be role models and pass on their wisdom and

experiences to the younger generations. Families and communities also facilitate opportunities to share and engage with family and community, which are possible through recovery and mental health.

Implications for Research and Practice

I believe this exploration of Indigenous generative acts, or cultural motivations, and their role in mental health among Indigenous Elders, is a first. In this chapter, I have examined what it means for Indigenous Elders to disengage in unhealthy behaviors and establish a pathway to age successfully in order to live the good life [37] and become who they were meant to be. Spicer [13] states that we are "forced to revise our understandings not only of what it means to change behavior, but, indeed, of what it means to be restored to wholeness" (p. 238). By highlighting the lifetime of stories, experiences, and motivations of those who have begun their journey of recovery and the importance of sharing their experiences and motivations with others, I have suggested ways to move Indigenous Elders forward.

These findings and work with Indigenous Elders suggest that mental health research needs to expand from a focus solely on individual recovery to other areas of the individual's life, including their respective roles in family and community life [5] and how shifting the healing from an individual benefit to a family and community benefit may prove beneficial. Both the increasing awareness of mental health problems plaguing American Indian and Alaska communities, and the shift to a positive focus on recovery factors, highlight strengths and resiliency within our Indigenous communities. This heightened consciousness and spirit of self-determination in improving one's health and well-being is a positive force for Indigenous mental health movements rebuilding healthy families and communities.

Further research is needed regarding these initial findings, which can potentially guide treatment approaches focused more directly on strengthening protective resources, promoting recovery [34], and encouraging Elders to share their stories and work in partnership with others to discover their cultural motivations and begin their journey of becoming who they were meant to be.

I view this chapter as the beginning of a discussion I hope can influence future work and research in understanding motivating and maintenance factors that protect the mental health of Indigenous Elders and Peoples and assist them in filling their expected roles and becoming healthy Elders and role models. Figure 1, the journey of "Becoming who I am meant to be," points out that many Indigenous Peoples experience early life adversity, which impacts their lives to some degree. As they age, these early experiences may result in maladaptive behaviors, including substance misuse, abuse, or self-harm, all of which prevent them from fulfilling role expectations or achieving Eldership. As Indigenous people age, they experience turning points in their lives, which can include the birth of their first child or grandchild, being treated as an Elder in their community, or near-death experiences. Or

they may realize their current lifestyle will not enable them to become an Elder and have the opportunities their Elders did with them when they were young. Many reach a turning point, and, through these motivations and learning from others, wishing to share their knowledge, they are able to reconnect to their Indigenous family and community, resulting in a healthy and positive identity that was lost earlier in life due to adversity. Reconnecting to Indigenous identity, sharing that journey, and seeing their experiences helping others overcome challenges and find meaning in life, as well as engaging in cultural activities, gives Indigenous Elders their generative acts and behaviors, and thus they attain Eldership. This knowledge can guide development of culture-specific mental health treatment approaches, and more broadly, prevention strategies for all ages. This intergenerational healing can result in pride and improved mental health for Indigenous Peoples of all ages.

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Jordan P. Lewis is Unangax (Alaska Native) and an enrolled member with the Native Village of Naknek, Alaska. As a cross-cultural community psychologist, his research explores the role of culture in the aging process and how it impacts whether or not individuals are able to age successfully despite sociocultural challenges in rural Alaska. His research links issues of Alaska Native aging and community health and the current cultural dynamics of Alaska Native communities.

Dr. Lewis is a Fellow with the Gerontological Society of America, and he received the Rural Health and Aging Research Award from the American Public Health Association. He has received research funding from the National Science Foundation and National Institutes of Health. Jordan has contributed to *The Gerontologist, The Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology,* and the *International Journal of Circumpolar Health.* Jordan is a faculty member at the University of Minnesota Medical School, Duluth campus, and the Memory Keepers Medical Discovery Team.