“It's like having strong roots. We’re firmly planted.”: Cultural Identity Development among Alaska Native University Students

*Transcultural Psychiatry*

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Abstract

Cultural identity is associated with positive emotional and behavioral health. However, colonialism and its forces, past and present, have led to cultural loss in many Indigenous communities, contributing to health disparities. And yet, Indigenous peoples actively resist colonialism and work to maintain and revitalize their cultures around the globe. This study sought to understand how Alaska Native university students from diverse cultural backgrounds are presently developing and constructing their cultural identities. Transformational grounded theory methods were used to analyze seven focus groups with 20 Alaska Native university students from diverse cultural regions, now living in an urban center. Results revealed that identity was constructed as a series of nested and intersecting identities that centered on relations, place, and time across cultural groups. Cultural practices and values were often drawn upon to understand identity. Cultural identity was developed through storytelling, experiential learning, connection, personal exploration, and sharing with others. Relatives, particularly grandparents and Elders, and communities played a critical role in shaping cultural identity. The construction of cultural identity and its development diverged by setting of upbringing (rural, urban). Results have implications for modification of structures and the development of cultural identity promotion programming to support Alaska Native young peoples’ identity development in an effort toward emotional and behavioral health.

Keywords: identity, identity development, enculturation, Alaska Native, Indigenous, qualitative research.

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Cultural Identity Development among Alaska Native University Students

Cultural identity, one’s psychological connection between their sense of self and culture, is associated with wellbeing and protects against a myriad of emotional/behavioral health problems (e.g., Burnette & Figley, 2016; DeCou et al., 2013; Vedder & van Geel, 2017; Walters et al., 2002). However, colonization and its forces, past and present, have depicted Indigenous peoples as culturally inferior and have sought to commit cultural genocide, making efforts at destroying the identities of Indigenous peoples (Kingston, 2015; Kirmayer et al., 2014; Poupart, 2003). Displacement from land; removal of children from families; forced practice of religions; and establishment of new educational, economic, and governmental systems have inflicted harm and served to force assimilation and marginalize Indigenous cultural identities (Kingston, 2015). Such marginalization has deleterious effects on emotional/behavioral health and other psychosocial outcomes (e.g., Bird, 2002; Harris, 2002; Hartmann & Gone, 2013; McNeil et al., 2000; Roubideaux, 2002). Indigenous peoples around the globe actively resist colonialism, maintaining and strengthening their cultures. In Alaska, where Alaska Native (AN) peoples have experienced colonialism from the 1700s on, AN peoples have sought to maintain their cultural identities and worked towards cultural revitalization across settings. While research has demonstrated that cultural identity supports coping and resilience (e.g., Wexler et al., 2014), wellness (e.g., Burnette & Figley, 2016), and protects against emotional/behavioral health issues (e.g., Brown et al., 2016) among AN peoples, little research has examined how AN peoples across cultural groups are currently constructing and developing their cultural identities.

Cultural Identity

Cultural identity can be conceptualized as a matter of both “being” and “becoming”, to paraphrase Hall (1994), reflective of one’s ties to collective groups as they transform over time.
Cultural identity is multidimensional, including subcultures that enculturate a person into their identity, such as families, communities, and tribes (Oetting et al., 1998; Trimble et al., 2003). The few studies that have sought to capture the construct of Indigenous cultural identity suggest that it is multifold. Markstrom (2011) organizes American Indian identity into three overlapping components: identification with clan/tribe, self-perception, blood quantum; connection to kinship/clan/tribe, genealogy/ancestors, and land/place; and culture/spirituality, including language, history/origin stories, worldview, values, beliefs, and practices. Weaver (2001) characterizes Indigenous cultural identity as being composed of not only self-identification and community identification, but also external identification, recognizing that identity constructions come from within a person and their culture, and are also imposed by nonnative definitions of Indigeneity and laws that attempt to constrain it.

**Indigenous Peoples of Alaska**

Peoples indigenous to the place now called Alaska have lived on the land for thousands of years. Comprised of diverse cultures, AN peoples can be organized geographically: Southeast is home to Eyak, Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian peoples; Southwest is home to Yup’ik and Cup’ik peoples; North and Northwest is home to Iñupiaq and St. Lawrence Island Yupik peoples; Interior and Southcentral is home to Athabascan peoples; and the Aleutian Islands are home of Alutiiq (Sugpiaq) and Unangax peoples (Lewis et al., 2014). There are 231 federally recognized AN tribes across Alaska, and others not formally recognized by the U.S. government (Roderick, 2010). A Yup’ik leader, Napoleon (1996), characterized AN peoples as “one tribe of many families” (p. 4). AN peoples have distinct cultures across and within regions; however, they share core values and beliefs common among Indigenous peoples around the globe (Kirk & Starn, 2009). For example, AN cultures hold holistic worldviews that recognize the interconnectivity, complexity, and ever-changing nature of the world (Roderick, 2010); believe
that health stems from physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual components (Poonwassie & Charter, 2001); value an extended kin network, collectivism, and connection to land (Barnhardt, 2014; Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005; Sarche & Spicer, 2008), and respect Elders as wisdom bearers and keepers of knowledge and culture (Poupart et al., 2000). Such values and practices are apparent in cultural identity.

It was not until relatively recent history that AN peoples’ lives were upended by colonization, an ongoing extractive process that gives colonizers control over land, laws, education, language, family structures, health, and culture, and takes from those indigenous to the land (Maldonado-Torres, 2016). While AN cultural groups have had different experiences with colonization, all AN peoples have been impacted by colonial systems. Since the mid-1700s, AN peoples have faced exploitation of the land’s resources and death due to disease epidemics brought by colonizers, with estimates of one-quarter to one-half of AN peoples dying in the mid-1800s (Wolfe, 1982). Colonizers sought to stifle the cultures of AN peoples through narratives that their beliefs, languages, and practices were inferior, shameful, and even ‘evil’ (Napoleon, 1996). For nearly a century, forced assimilation was systematically undertaken through removal of children from families to boarding schools where children were forced to assimilate and made to feel ashamed of their own cultural values, practices, and identities (Lewis et al., 2014). At the same time, colonizers set up a system in which blood quantum was used to determine identity and related access to resources, denying some AN peoples and their descendants access to their Indigenous identity in the view of the colonizers’ government that continues to this present day (Lewis et al., 2014).

While forced assimilation efforts may not be as overt today, colonialism is insidious, continuing to marginalize AN peoples, cultures, and identities through its many structures and systems that shape daily life; in other words, historical trauma is not so historical (Kirmayer, et
AN cultures continue to be portrayed as inferior and history continues to be ‘white-washed’ in educational curriculum (Lewis et al., 2014; Williams, 2009). Until less than a century ago, AN peoples made up the vast majority of Alaska’s population; today, only about 15 percent of Alaska’s population identifies as AN (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Many AN peoples have migrated to urban centers where many non-AN and AN peoples from diverse cultural backgrounds live and are directly subjected to the cultural institutions of colonizers rather than the small, tight-knit communities with the cultural practices of their ancestors. As a result of colonialism, some AN peoples have distanced themselves from their cultural identities while others do not feel that they are ‘Native enough’ (Lewis et al., 2014; Napoleon, 1996). Such cultural loss has been associated with emotional/behavioral health disparities; AN young adults experience high rates of anxiety, depression, substance use, and suicide (e.g., Allen et al., 2011; Bagalman & Heisler, 2016; Castor et al., 2006; Gone & Trimble, 2012).

**Identity Development Among Alaska Native Peoples**

Place, time, history, and power all shape identity, and yet such uptake of cultural identity is not passive; a person actively constructs and develops their cultural identity in the systems in which they are embedded over time (Hall, 1994). Multiple scholars (e.g., Atkinson, Morten, & Sue; Cross; Helms; Herek; Jones & McEwen; Worthington & Mohr) have theorized stages of identity development across cultural, ethno-racial, gender, sexual orientation, and social groups, recognizing that development is neither linear nor sequential, not every person will experience each stage, and no stage is inherently positive or negative. While stages diverge to some degree across theories, all recognize the importance of the systems in which someone is embedded in the shaping of identity. While colonialism may disrupt and marginalize cultural identity, the multitude of other systems a person is embedded in may develop and strengthen it.

**Ecological Systems Theory**
Individuals are embedded in multiple systems, as delineated in Bronfenbrenner’s (1974) *Ecological Systems Theory*, and each can be seen to enculturate the individual into their identities. The *microsystem* is made up of small systems that immediately surround the individual, such as families, peers, schools, neighborhoods, and faith communities. Elders, for example, are often looked to as culture-bearers to enculturate the next generation into who they are (Wexler, 2014). These systems interact in the *mesosystem*, sometimes concordantly and other times discordantly. For example, a Yup’ik child’s family may share cultural values and practices with others in their community; however, their teachers and school may ascribe to Eurocentric values and practices, potentially causing discordant enculturation. The *exosystem* includes the indirect environmental systems, such as friends of friends, media, social and legal systems, which may or may not share the culture of one’s microsystems. For example, federal laws shape tribal and corporation membership, based in concepts that are not indigenous to AN peoples themselves, shaping identity (Lewis et al., 2014). The *macrosystem* then involves the norms, values, beliefs, ideologies, and attitudes of the broader societal culture. While the macrosystem may reflect the many cultures within it, often the most pervasive, impactful norms reflect those of colonizers (Maldonado-Torres, 2016). Finally, each person is embedded in the *chronosystem*, or the pattern of sociohistorical and personal conditions and events over their lifetimes. Cultural identities are shaped by changes that have occurred over centuries, generations, and one’s own lifetime, leading to the way in which one may understand oneself and articulate one’s identity. Discontinuities within and across systems present challenges to cultural identity development (Trout et al., 2018; Wexler, 2014).

**Current Study**

Given the importance of cultural identity to emotional/behavioral health and challenges to its development presented by colonial forces, it is important to understand how AN peoples...
currently construct and develop their cultural identities. However, contemporary research in this area is very limited. University presents a unique time and setting in which identity is shaped due to students’ developmental stages, opportunities to encounter people from diverse backgrounds, and universities’ own cultures situated in their contemporary and historical sociopolitical contexts. Therefore, we sought to glean what AN university students saw as relevant to their cultural identities and understand how they developed their cultural identities. Given diversity in cultures and contexts in which AN young peoples are raised and enculturated, we examined whether patterns in identity construction varied across settings of upbringing. We also sought to understand the ways in which universities impact AN students’ identity development; the results from that study aim are detailed in [REDACTED (2021)].

**Method**

**Design**

The current study utilized transformational grounded theory methods, a community-engaged method of research focused on power-sharing, positive social change, systematic awareness, and the exploration of both psychological and social processes (Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015); based within a decolonizing, Indigenous framework (Chilisa, 2011; Kovach, 2009; Yuan et al., 2014). We partnered with a university campus resource for AN students to develop and conduct the research. The research team was comprised of a White, female European American assistant professor of psychology who studies the enactment of culture and its relation with emotional/behavioral health among peoples who have had their cultures oppressed, and an AN female graduate student in a doctoral psychology program who studies cultural identity and internalized oppression. A Community Advisory Board (CAB) of AN stakeholders – all AN peoples diverse in their age, gender, tribal membership, place of birth, and upbringing – provided input on all aspects of the research process. The CAB included a faculty member, a director and
staff member of a university resource center for AN students, three undergraduate students at different stages of their studies, a graduate student, an Indian Child Welfare Act worker, and a high school counselor in Indian Education. The research team and CAB identified our strengths, skills, competencies, and areas for growth to share leadership; we developed shared norms, objectives, research principles, and agendas. This community-engaged research process helped develop trust; strengthened our capacities; and enhanced the quality, relevance, and usefulness of our research (Mikesell et al., 2013). We incorporated the knowledge and experiences of the CAB into study design and they oversaw and approved the research, including results presented here. The study was also approved by the [REDACTED] Institutional Review Board.

Participants

Participants were eligible to participate in the study if they self-identified as AN, were registered as an undergraduate student at the university, were at least 18 years old, currently lived in the urban center in which the university was situated, and agreed to have the focus group audio-recorded. Sixteen women and four men who ranged in age from 18 to 51 ($M = 26.1, SD = 9.94$), consistent with the AN student population on campus, participated. Participants were from diverse tribes and contexts; due to potentially identifying nature of tribal affiliation, only cultural region affiliation is disclosed here (see Table 1).

Procedures

We partnered with the aforementioned university resource center for AN students to recruit participants. They distributed an invitation to all eligible students to participate in the study via their email listserv. Participants were told, “Small groups will meet to share information about their cultural identities and strengths, and their experiences at [the university]. We want to know what aspects of university life have matched with and supported your identity. We also want to know what aspects of university life have clashed with or
challenged your identity.” Interested students contacted the research team directly or submitted a form to the resource center to indicate interest. Participants were provided the primary focus group questions to consider a week before their group was scheduled. Seven small two-hour focus groups (n = 2–4) were held in private on-campus locations. We chose focus groups to privilege a diversity of perspectives, to allow for participants to build on each other’s responses, and to support participants to feel more comfortable being open and frank with the facilitator in company with other AN university students. To ensure saturation, we held focus groups until no new information emerged for two consecutive focus groups (Fusch & Ness, 2015). When they arrived, participants spent time getting to know one another and the research team while eating. Participants were provided informed consent in written and oral formats, given an opportunity to ask questions, and thanked with a $25 gift card. The first author facilitated the discussion and the second author took field notes. Participants also completed a demographic questionnaire. Results were shared through presentations, discussions, and handouts.

Measure

A semi-structured interview guide was used. Primary questions were: (1) Has anyone taught you what cultural identity is? (2) Please take a few minutes to reflect on who you are and where you come from. How do you describe yourself? (3) What strengths does your cultural identity provide you? (4) What aspects of university life help support your cultural identity? (5) What aspects of university life clash with or challenge your cultural identity? The facilitator used additional sub-questions and probes to follow up on emergent information, clarify responses, and gain divergent and convergent perspectives on the topics at hand so themes were not limited to initial conceptions (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The notetaker made observations of nonverbal behaviors to enrich transcripts (Weiss, 1994). To establish trustworthiness, dependability was enhanced by posing the same primary questions across the groups; credibility
was increased through member checking and negative case analysis; and confirmability and transferability were supported through the neutral, open-ended questions posed across groups, which allowed themes to emerge spontaneously and be rich in detail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Data Analysis**

We followed transformational grounded theory methods (Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015) to analyze the data. Specifically, we analyzed data concurrent with collection to assess for saturation and follow up on emerging themes. Audio was professionally transcribed and we reviewed it for accuracy, de-identification, and addition of field notes. We then labeled each idea or segment of data within transcripts to capture its essence (i.e., ‘open coding’, Moghaddam, 2006). As a team, we discussed, sorted, split, and grouped these open codes into focused codes. We developed a codebook, consisting of each code’s name, definition, guidelines on its application, and examples of its use (MacQueen et al., 1998). We then independently coded each transcript using the codebook, compared coding, reviewed divergences together, and came to consensus on which code(s) best captured each segment of data. New information not captured with existing codes was recorded in memos and added as a new code in the codebook if it emerged in more than one focus group. Previously coded transcripts were then reviewed with the updated codebook. Individual memo logs/journals were also kept to capture our reactions, emerging findings, and novel information. Finally, our team engaged in theoretical coding by examining associations between codes and fleshing them out in memos, which were presented to the CAB for feedback. We used multiple procedures to increase the trustworthiness of our analytic method. Credibility was increased through peer debriefing and negative case analysis. Confirmability was supported through triangulation and audit trails. Transferability was supported through rich description and dependability was enhanced through external audits and reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Results

Aspects of Identity

Participants described nested and overlapping cultural identities from which they drew strengths. Their constructions included personal, family, community, tribal, regional, and historical aspects, connecting past to present. They rarely constructed identities in segmented ways, however, usually intertwining aspects. Relations and place were embedded across identity constructions, and cultural practices and values were drawn upon to characterize identity.

Personal

Participants frequently first referred to what could be considered ‘personal’ aspects of identity – qualities, characteristics, and roles they used to label themselves. Characteristics were numerous and intersecting, as Walter’s (M, 31, Iñupiaq/Yup’ik, Urban) comments illustrate:

“An Inupiat, Latino, nerd, uncle, grandson, nephew, student, millennial, Alaskan, veteran, old.”

Agnauruq (F, 38, Iñupiaq, Hub) shared, “I’m a Christian, but I’m also Bahai, but I’m also Interfaith. I’m a grateful, recovering alcoholic. I’m a grateful, recovering drug addict. I’m a social, political activist. I’m a student. I’m an employee.” Like many, Ali (F, 18, Yup’ik, Rural/Hub) used values and practices to construct identity: “My motivation is found in education. I wanna be a secondary education teacher in science, math, and Alaska Native studies. ... I like working out. I did Native Youth Olympics for five seasons. So I'm an athlete.” Likewise, Tutma (F, 18, Yup’ik, Rural) used values and connected past, present, and future to describe cultural identity, “I am a villager, not really used to the city. ... I set goals. My values are very important. I'm a Christian, and basketball player, and hopefully soon I will be a nurse.” Indeed, values and

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1 All participants are described by a pseudonym they chose, along with their age and gender (F = female, M = male), the AN regional cultural group with which they identify, and the location(s) where they were raised (Urban, Hub, Rural; see Table 1 for operational definitions of categories) the first time they are quoted.
beliefs were frequently drawn upon to characterize identity; Kathryn’s (F, 20, Inupiaq, Urban) response when asked important aspects of her cultural identity was typical: “I would say probably my values. I think it’s important to have good values, like good morals.”

Less than half of the participants referenced religious or spiritual beliefs as they described their identities. Those that did cited their beliefs in relation to their values and less frequently tied them to family or community identities. Approximately half of the participants who referenced religion/spirituality labeled their faith as “spiritual” or “traditional”, but rarely unpacked beliefs connected to those labels. While only four participants referred to currently identifying as Christian, almost all participants who referenced faith described growing up in Christian households. A few reported turning away from identifying as Christian when they learned about the history of Christianity in their communities, particularly missionaries’ roles in cultural oppression. Napaaqtuq (M, 19, Inupiaq, Hub) shared: “I grew up in a religious household ... I steered away myself from religion because of the forced religious conversion of the Inupiat people.” A couple indicated melding faith traditions. Faith (F, 25, Yup’ik, Rural) described, “It's been a struggle ... looking at what it looks like to be Native and a Christian. Because back then you have to be one or the other when the missionaries came. ... Now we can be both. It's kinda healing – how we can make gospel songs with Native dances now.” Two participants used the label of Christian without further unpacking what it meant for them and only one noted another faith tradition (Bahai, indicated above).

Appearance was occasionally referenced, with participants reporting concern over assumptions others made about their identities based on appearance. A couple of participants who believed they appeared AN through “dark complexion, the Native features” as Oyondaoo (F, 51, Tlingit/Haida, Hub) put it, described concern over how non-AN peoples identified them and ascribed negative stereotypes to them. Conversely, participants who believed they did not
appear AN remarked about assumptions AN peoples made. “I know a lot about the culture that I'm a part of but my appearance may seem otherwise. So people mistake me as just being white and they shame me for not looking Native,” shared Sou-ut with a resigned tone (F, 20, Tlingit/Haida/Unangax, Hub). Having identities assumed based on appearance was a significant source of stress for all who spoke about them, always in relation to being made to feel ‘other’.

While some based their identities in characteristics, hobbies, and careers, participants’ responses tended to be relational in nature, highlighting roles and memberships they held. As Onyondaoo explained, “Everybody wears many hats. You’re a mom, you’re a daughter, you’re a student, you’re also Tlingit, you’re also Haida. Just all part of your identity.” Aspects of self-narratives were often tied to other relational aspects of identity. For example, Kathryn tied her values to her family role: “I’m number three of ten siblings, so there’s a lot of eyes on us. ... I've already seen my little sisters picking up after me. ... Having good goals, being motivated, good, strong values, I think that's really important.” In this way, although most described aspects of themselves that could be conceptualized as personal, participants more deeply referred to identifications with family, community, region, and history when describing cultural identity.

**Familial**

Family was at the core of many conceptualizations of cultural identity. Many participants, like CJ (F, 23, Iñupiaq, Rural/Hub/Urban), pointed to families as being at the heart of who they are:

*Identity is just who you are. ... It's like your family and this is where you're from. ...*

*Growing up with a Native family, that was something I didn't come up with myself. ... It's my family and my culture that told me that ‘this is who you are.’*

As with personal identity, values and practices, along with past experiences, were drawn upon to characterize identity. Morning (F, 23, Iñupiaq, Urban/Rural) described familial identity:

*What my parents have gone through, that’s who I am too. If you think about it, how many*
times do people hear, ‘Oh my god, I’m becoming my parents,’ because it’s true... that’s where I come from, why I hold the values that I do and that’s why I am the way that I am and I think the way that I think. Our parents, even our grandparents, our ancestors.

Familial identity involved not only nuclear family systems, but all relations across generations, past, present, and future, as Sou-ut’s multi-faceted self-label makes clear: “A daughter, niece, grandchild, a girlfriend.” When asked what piece of identity was most important, Butch (F, 19, Yup’ik, Rural/Hub/Urban) centered practices and connections with grandparents: “Just going home to my grandparents. My other home. Being around my grandparents and spending time with them. Doing chores for them, I guess. That's a lot of me.” Family set the stage for intergenerational transmission of knowledge related to identity, which participants found challenging when this information was not available to them. Bun (F, 51, Inupiaq, Hub) stated:

A lot of [identity] has to do with knowing who my family is, my parents obviously and then their parents, and then my great-grandparents. I know their names but I really don't know their lived story, their lived experiences. That's kind of hard to pass down to my children without really knowing family history.

One’s place in one’s family across generations was core to many conceptualizations of identity.

Community

The communities from which participants’ ancestors originated and the communities where they grew up (which sometimes, but infrequently, coincided) were also described as foundational to identity. Sunshine (F, 20, Yup’ik, Rural/Hub/Urban) reflected:

I was raised in [a hub community] and identity is important to us. ... I moved around a little bit. We lived in Anchorage for a while when I was younger, and [rural villages]. ... These different things help me to be who I am.”
Most described connections to multiple communities and the communities’ ways of life as central to identity, including Algu Girl (F, 31, Haida/Tlingit/Athabascan, Hub):

*I was kind of split, because I have different types of Native identities on both sides of my family. My grandmother ... was from [southeastern village]. So, with her, I’m mostly from Southeast Alaska. It’s definitely a different lifestyle down there. Very small knit. ...
Then from my grandpa I am Athabascan. I’m Dena’ina, from [interior hub community]. ...
... What I learned there with all the moose hunting, the fishing, and everything. ... So there’s a lot of different aspects of where I came from, plus my youngest siblings are Tlingit, from [southeastern hub community]. Their clan adopted me."

Many participants constructed identities to include not only communities where they were raised and currently live, but also their ancestors’ communities, regardless of whether they had lived in or visited the community, such as Yeesh Ka (M, 22, Inupiaq/Tlingit, Urban): “My family is originally from different parts of the state. ... I still identify with those communities...” Minnie (F, 26, Athabascan, Urban) shared, “I have like a sense of connection and a sense of belonging, however small that might be. I do have this connection to the place where I’m from here in Alaska.” In this way, community identity often transcended time and physical presence.

**Tribal and Regional**

Identifications with cultural regions, and sometimes particular tribes, were important components of cultural identity. Faye (F, 19, Athabascan, Rural/Hub/Urban) described:

*We are proud Gwich’in, everybody says that, Gwich’in people anyway. It’s in the Athabascan community, in the interior. Everybody who has an idea of Gwich’in people, they know that we are proud. ... My mom would remind me a lot. She would just throw it out there. ... ‘Remember that you are Gwich’in.’*

As noted earlier, here again participants centered cultural practices in their description of
identity, such as Tun (F, 22, Yup’ik, Hub):

I identify myself as a Yup’ik from the Yukon-Kuskokwim region. Both of my parents are Yup’ik. I appreciate my cultural background. I'm doing bead-work, I appreciate my culture. I'm doing sewing and connecting to my culture. I still speak in my Native language.

Some, including Walter (M, 31, Iñupiaq/Yup’ik, Urban), reflected on their evolution of identity as they obtained new information throughout life, “Just recently I learned I’m part Yup’ik, so that’s taking on new identity. Oh, I didn’t think I was part that.” Like they did with communities, participants often identified with multiple tribes and/or regions. “That’s funny that you mentioned being half Tlingit and half Haida. My grandparents, my grandpa was full-blood Tlingit and my grandma was Aleut,” exclaimed Sou-ut after another participant described multiple tribal and regional identities. Participants raised in urban settings nearly always spoke to larger regions to which they belonged, whereas participants raised in rural and hub communities more frequently named specific tribal identities.

**Historical**

Finally, participants located themselves in the chronosystem, grounding their cultural identities in the histories of their families, communities, tribes, and regions to understand who they are in the present. They spoke to traumas they and their ancestors had faced, and the ways they and their ancestors had prevailed to describe their identities. Walter, reflected on the history of AN peoples, “‘What do you have to be so proud about?’ ... Well, we survived ... It’s like generational trauma. ... We had epidemics ... boarding schools ... but we’re all still here. And we’re reviving our stuff.” Morning similarly placed herself in history to explain her identity:

This modern Alaskan Native culture comes with a lot of baggage, with colonization, with all of the social injustices that are still being pushed onto Alaska Native people right
now. That’s also what I come from. ... We are the people we are, from who we were raised by, and the values they hold and the things they believe and things that are outside of our control a lot of the time. ... outside of our parents, even our grandparents, our ancestors. History ... is completely reflective of who we have become now.

While oppression, injustices, trauma, and their impacts were often central to identity, so too were resilience and resistance. Bun shared, “For 10,000 years of generations, generation upon generation after generation, whatever they lived through, they lived and died so that I could be here today. That is a lot of strength in numbers.” Participants frequently harkened back to ways of life prior to colonization and maintenance and revitalization of culture despite its suppression.

Development of Identity

Cultural identity developed through storytelling, particularly from grandparents and community Elders; experiential learning with family, friends, and community members; connection with diverse AN peoples; personal exploration from inquisitiveness that led to asking questions and seeking out resources; and sharing understanding of identities with others. Overall, those from rural areas indicated earlier and stronger identity development from multiple aspects of their communities whereas those from urban areas indicated identity development occurring later via exposure in particular settings, often education.

Storytelling

Grandparents and Elders frequently used storytelling to share cultural practices that taught about cultural identity. Sunshine shared, “My grandma would tell us stories of back then. ... My Opa, my grandpa ... if we’re out berry picking or out on the tundra, he would tell us what we should do if certain things happen.... like how to notice tundra carrots. ... Once they get hungry, some people could just dig them up.” Agnaruq similarly described experiences of learning through stories, within and outside her family: “When the Elders would talk to us. When
my Grandma would talk to us. Everything we learned, it was always verbal. A storyteller taught me just using oral traditions and I learned so much more from him. ... It felt more natural.”

Family and respected leaders were key in cultural identity development through storytelling.

Agnaksraq (M, 26, Inupiaq, Hub) shared how his identity developed:

> It started off with family members. My uncles definitely were a big part of it. And my aunts, too. They were really trying to develop me at a young age in the culture. ... Once I started to get to know of who the figure heads in our community were, then they would start to approach me later on, and just teach me what our people have been through in the past. And, sort of give you that viewpoint as to where we fit into the world, and how we are so unique.

For some raised in urban settings, access to storytelling was limited. Yeesh Ka explained:

> For me it was a little bit different. I grew up here in Anchorage. I was born and raised here. Lived here my whole life. I wasn't really taught exactly what identity was. ... My parents just kind of told me, well that's who you want to be. And that was anything. It wasn't specific to any particular culture. They just said, ‘You're Native.’ And, that was it for a long time. They kind of just left it up to me to figure out what I identified as.

Ways of learning about cultural identity came later for some in urban settings, often through educational settings (described further below).

**Experiential Learning**

Participants across contexts described engaging in cultural practices, such as subsistence, as supporting identity development. For those raised in rural and hub communities, experiences came from immersion throughout daily life. Napaaqttuq commented:

> Growing up north, I was all immersed to the culture because there was always the language being spoken around the community, the dancing and the cultural activities
such as whaling and hunting. I was so immersed into that, that it still sticks to me, that it's a reminder of who I am.

Those raised in urban settings also described experiential learning supporting cultural identity, but more often it came specifically from family. Yeesh Ka shared:

_Even though I lived more of an urban life, [my family] still kept the cultural values that [another participant] was talking about. About sharing, respecting elders, helping others when they need help. My family has learned to fish and hunt in this area. They just been teaching me everything that they know. ... Before I didn't really think much about it, but now that I actually look at it, and I know more, it's interesting to see how much of the culture they passed on unknowingly to me. ... So much of our Native culture was ingrained in them. That's how I know I'm Native._

Other times, learning opportunities came from programming developed to facilitate cultural identity development. Morning described:

_The only real connection to culture I've had is through this summer camp. ... It's a culture camp. It's for all ages, families, all descendants can go there. It's a little pop-up village in the summertime for two weeks. That's my connection to that part of my cultural identity. ... Skin sewing and beading ... how to make a traditional kayak. ... It's just like being back and connected with the land, which is really cool. ... Everyone is related. And we're all there for the same purpose. ... There's a pretty good effort out there to teach the kids dancing, songs, and they take the young boys out, go and catch seals._

Morning was the only participant to name her church as a primary way she developed and maintained her cultural identity through practices like language, traditional dance, and connection with other AN peoples (described further below): "Church actually is where a lot of my culture is maintained, which is kind of strange if you think about it. It's kind of
counterintuitive, that through a church that was established by colonizers is how we are maintaining our culture now.” For those with limited cultural engagement in childhood, experiences in adulthood supported identity development, such as in Onyondaoo’s case:

*I reconnected with one of my cousins. ... She's 100% Haida and so she's wanting me to get into the button blankets. ... ‘When you're ready, we'll do the weaving.’ This summer she showed me how to jar fish and we got 100 pounds of Coho. ... We jarred jam on top of that because we went berry-picking. ... She speaks a lot of Haida to me so I'm learning words.*

Experiential learning was thus key to the formation of identity, either through immersion in daily life for those with access or purposeful time and space for engagement for those without access.

**Connection**

Connections were also central to cultural identity development. In rural communities, cultural identity was frequently developed through entire microsystems that allowed for connections with other AN peoples, as Ali’s (F, 18, Yup’ik, Rural/Hub) comments illustrate:

*In the village, you have random strangers come up and hug to you, saying like ‘Oh, I'm your auntie from so and so's side,’ and you never met them. ... I can go to whole villages and just find family. Like if you're a Native, you're family.*

Sou-ut continued, “If you run across another person who is Tlingit, where you're from and who your relatives are play a big aspect of identity.” CJ (F, 23, Iñupiaq, Rural/Hub/Urban) likewise reflected: “Even my brother and my cousins, people that are younger than me. They're like, ‘You're Athabascan, this is your family.’ ... It is really important – knowing your tribe and who you’re related to ... everybody knows, everybody tells me.” Identity was also developed through connections with AN peoples outside of one’s tribe or village. For urban participants, connections came through organized activities, such as Native Youth Olympics, the Alaska
Federation of Natives Convention, and the Elders and Youth Conference. Morning shared:

“There's so many different parts that contribute to my cultural identity. My family is very involved in NYO, Native Youth Olympics. ... NYO has been a huge, cultural impact in my life. ... Growing up those are like huge memories, a place where I was exposed to a lot of different Alaska Native cultures besides just mine. Seeing the dancing, the tables, the art, and the games. The different people that were there.

Therefore, connections that fostered identity development were not solely restricted to one’s own community, tribe, or region, but included Indigenous peoples from across Alaska.

**Individual Exploration**

Particularly for those raised in urban areas with limited access to identity development in aforementioned ways, cultural identity developed from personal interest sparked through exposure to AN culture through friendships or educational programming. For example, Yeesh Ka, who indicated, “I wasn't really taught exactly what identity was” later shared at university:

“My friends started asking, ‘Well, what kind of Native?’... It started sparking my interest because I didn't know. ... So I would go back and ask my parents. And my parents were like, ‘Well, your family's from [hub villages].’ I was like, ‘Oh, okay. Well, what does that make me?’ And then they would say I'm Inupiaq and Tlingit.

Kathryn similarly described exploring her identity during early adulthood: “I feel like I had to do some digging, with my family, just because I would like to identify with my culture, my Alaska Native culture, and I had to ask my mom, ‘Oh, what am I? Where's the family from?’” Some described taking university courses to better understand their identities, such as Napaaqtuq: “In my Native classes ... we often talked about culture. Then also background and history of this culture. Which can then stick to who I am. Such as my namesake, and stuff I use, words, the language itself.” This curiosity prompted participants to ask questions and seek out information
from a variety of sources to further their identity development.

**Sharing with Others**

As cultural identity development progressed, participants appeared to further strengthen their identities through sharing their identities, particularly with younger peoples. Faye shared, “What is important to me, my identity is definitely to be like somebody to look up to [for] younger Native people. ... I'm making my identity right now, you know, I'm young. ... Role modeling is important.” Some described this as a duty, such as Kathryn: “I feel like if I carry myself, and am proud, and wear our regalia, that'll like show [my younger siblings] that it's awesome to be Native.” “I think it's quite a big responsibility for me because I am a younger generation,” echoed Napaaqtuq, sharing that he was strengthening his identity through language learning as he taught others. This desire to share their cultural identities and related worldviews sometimes extended to non-Indigenous peoples and institutions, such as Morning who explained how she strengthened her understanding of herself by sharing her culture with others:

> I'm not scared to speak my mind. ... Alaska Native spirituality and philosophy is completely different. ... You're really just one part in this ever-changing thing. [The earth] is not relying on you, you're relying on it as well. A strong Alaska Native value is understanding collectivism with the land, with each other, with everything. That’s the main thing, that individualistic vs collectivistic mentality that I always have to preach.

As participants shared who they are with others, both AN and non-AN alike, they described feeling surer of their cultural identities.

**Discussion**

Results from this study provide insight into the conceptualization, construction, and development of cultural identity among Alaska Native (AN) university students raised in a diversity of settings and affiliated with a distinct set of cultures. While cultural identity was
described in diverse ways, AN peoples endorsed multiple identifications and connections – to self, to family, to community, to tribe(s) and/or region(s), and to history – to understand their identities; most participants used all identifications to make sense of who they are. Values, beliefs, and roles associated with culture were all tied into the construction of identity, aligned with the way in which Markstrom (2011) organizes American Indian identity, and cultural practices were frequently drawn upon in the construction of identity. Enculturation into cultural identity occurred across ecological systems and in many ways across the lifespan, through storytelling from family and/or Elders, engagement in cultural practices, connection with other AN peoples, exploration of identity, and sharing with others. Notable differences occurred across settings of upbringing in both the construction of identity and the way in which it was developed.

One’s relations and place appeared to be at the core of cultural identities described. Even as these AN students spoke of characteristics, values, beliefs, and goals that could be seen to comprise a ‘self’ identity component, they frequently harkened back to roles within families to describe the impetus for such identifications. Tribes and/or regional cultural groups were frequently referenced, often in relation to particular family members. Moreover, as they spoke of their place within history and referred back to the strengths, challenges, and resilience of AN peoples, they frequently referenced their relations to ancestors. Likewise, all participants referenced specific communities and geographic regions when describing their identities, centering place and the land in who they are. Place as a component of identity always included the land from which one’s ancestors came, regardless of whether or not participants had been there. These constructions of identity highlighted self and community identifications but were influenced by external structures posed by non-Indigenous peoples, such as identification with large geographic regions that comprise a diversity of peoples and cultures. Appearance was the other component of identity in which participants spoke most clearly about the construction of
identity being posed externally, usually in undesired ways. The impact of external structures on the formation of identity has been noted in models of Indigenous identity development (e.g., Weaver, 2001). In this study, setting of upbringing seemed to impact current construction of cultural identity, with AN peoples largely raised in rural and hub communities more likely to strongly identify with specific tribes and places, perhaps reflecting less identification posed by external structures, whereas AN peoples primarily raised in urban environments were more likely to identify with broader regional cultural groups and places.

When considering the development of identity within the ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1974), the microsystem stood out as the primary setting type in which cultural identity was clearly developed, as social interactions provided opportunities for the construction of identity (Hammack, 2008). AN peoples described primarily learning about cultural identity from family, particularly grandparents and parents, and in rural villages and hub communities, from Elders and other respected community leaders, consistent with research in this area (e.g., Wexler, 2014). Cultural identification was sometimes explicitly stated by relatives (i.e., “You are Gwich’in”, “You are Native”), but the meaning of identity was communicated through storytelling and further instilled through cultural activities, including subsistence (i.e., hunting, whaling, fishing, gathering), sewing and beadwork, language practice, dancing, drumming, singing, and spiritual activities. In rural settings in particular, the entire community was key in identity development, with both storytelling and experiential learning of identity embedded into all aspects of daily life through the many connections participants had with others who shared their culture. In urban settings, parents took a more prominent role in efforts to enculturate AN peoples into who they are. Moreover, for those in urban settings, identity development often took place through settings specifically designed to teach about culture, such as culture camps. This difference is perhaps reflective of more congruence between many ecological systems in more
rural parts of the state compared to urban areas that may have Eurocentric values and practices more readily embedded into their systems, such as the use of space and land, as well as the accessibility of these lands and activities.

When microsystems did not readily enculturate peoples into their cultural identities – which was often attributed to generational trauma and cultural loss – AN peoples reported not feeling a strong sense of identity. This appeared more common in urban settings. However, our study results provide reason for hope: AN peoples who described not having a strong sense of identity frequently shared a journey of personal exploration in which they became interested in their cultural backgrounds and began to seek out ways of learning. Many described significant identity development in their adult lives. While a couple participants indicated concern over how AN cultures had been discussed in school and university courses – particularly when taught by non-AN peoples – many described courses and co-curricular programming led by respected AN peoples, including Elders, as instrumental in their cultural identity development. All desired to share their identities with future generations, and on some occasions with non-AN peoples, and many described this as strengthening their own sense of cultural identity.

Results highlight that identity can develop across the lifespan via enculturation that occurs across multiple systems. However, historical trauma and cultural oppression have led to cultural loss and disrupted the transmission of cultural identity (Lewis et al., 2014; Napoleon, 1996). Moreover, as noted in this study, related migration into larger urban settings with often divergent cultures across systems appears to present challenges to cultural identity development. Because cultural identity is predictive of emotional/behavioral health and cultural loss, and marginalization have been associated with significant health disparities (e.g., Burnette & Figley, 2016; DeCou et al., 2013; Vedder & van Geel, 2017; Walters et al., 2002), it is critical to identify ways of supporting cultural identity development. In addition to ensuring that systems do not
further marginalize AN peoples’ cultural identities, formal supports such as culture camps; primary, secondary, and university educational programming; and community centers may foster the development of identity, particularly in urban areas where such opportunities may not be readily available. For example, universities may promote cultural identity development through Indigenous spaces that allow for engagement in cultural activities and foster connections among AN faculty, students, and staff (REDACTED, 2021). Multiple studies have pointed to the importance of access to cultural activities for identity development (e.g., Trout et al., 2018), coping, resilience, and wellness among AN young peoples (e.g., Allen et al., 2014; Rasmus et al., 2014; Wexler et al., 2014) – including preliminary evidence for the efficacy of culture camps in particular (Barnett et al., 2020) – and cultural interventions based in local, Indigenous theories have been found to protect against suicide and alcohol use disorders among AN peoples (e.g., Allen et al., 2018; Mohatt et al., 2014; Rasmus, 2014; Rasmus et al., 2019). Such programming should follow the lead of AN peoples, be led by trusted AN community members, particularly Elders, and utilize multiple methods to support cultural identity development. Methods identified in this study include storytelling, experiential learning through cultural activities, and connection with other AN peoples. AN young peoples should have opportunities to explore their identities and cultural strengths, and pass on their knowledge to others, particularly the next generation.

Limitations and Future Directions

The results and their implications must be considered within the context of the study’s design and its limitations. While the sample was diverse in many ways, all participants were university students currently living in an urban setting, the majority were women, and it is quite possible that those who were more interested in cultural identity and perhaps had a better sense of who they were participated in the study. While in our study, cultural identity related to gender and gender roles within cultures did not arise, this may be a reflection of our limited gender
diversity (relatively few men and no non-binary peoples). Moreover, given the diversity of AN cultures and the small sample size, the applicability of study findings across cultural groups should be considered with caution. Nevertheless, these findings are representative of participants’ experiences and constructions of themselves, providing important insights into the development of cultural identity. Focus groups have the potential to discourage divergent responses, and as with any self-report study, participants’ responses may have been influenced by the research team, and so multiple approaches were taken to minimize these possibilities: We partnered with a trusted campus resource to carry out the research; each participant was given a notepad to record any information they did not feel comfortable sharing aloud or could not incorporate into the discussion; a research team consisting of both AN and non-AN peoples was used to both collect the data and analyze the findings; and a CAB consisting of AN peoples of diverse backgrounds oversaw all aspects of study development and reviewed the findings.

Future research should include other AN peoples of diverse cultural backgrounds across lifespans, genders, and living in other areas to further flesh out understandings. Longitudinal individual interview studies of young peoples as they develop their cultural identities over time in different locations would provide insight into growth and pinpoint potential opportunities for intervention to support cultural identity development. This can help to further flesh out the wholeness of how AN peoples contemporarily construct, understand, and develop their cultural identities, as preliminarily delineated in this study. The results of this study have also informed the development an Elder-led program for AN university students to examine if and how cultural identity can be strengthened through university programming. We hope that such programming will also support emotional/behavioral health, because as Agnauruq described through her reflections on the impact of a strong cultural identity, “It's like having strong roots. We’re firmly planted.”
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