

**Book Review:**  
***Resiliency in Native American  
and Immigrant Families***

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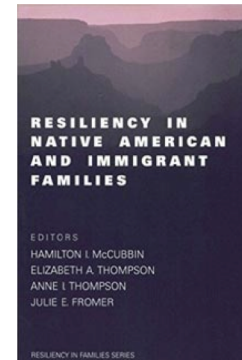
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**Review by Molly Siebert, Director, Al Siebert Resiliency Center**

This article is a collection of my thoughts both influenced from personal experiences and injected upon excerpts from the research book: *Resiliency in Native American and Immigrant Families*. This book is focused on the major concepts of the research performed by the Center for Excellence in Family Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (the “Center”) as well as Native American Relational Worldview Model affecting Native American resiliency as described by Terry Cross for the National Indian Child Welfare Association. My review centers on the resiliency abilities of Native American families as discussed by Cross in his chapter of the book.



It is my thought that the core construct for resilience in Native American families (or any indigenous peoples) resides in their cultural unity along with their intergenerational collective intelligence and beliefs. From the beginning of time, the Native Americans have integrated a multi-dimensional perspective of wellness. The Relational Worldview model described in this book speaks to this. The concern for the esteem and health of the natural world and the spirit world is integrated into the esteem and wellness of the tribe, and of the individual Native American. I get the sense when a Native American has a disease or an illness, it is the cultural mindset that there is a multi-dimensional warfare going on “down where the spirit meets the bone”<sup>1</sup> that impacts all dimensions of existence. Restoration to wellness for the individual Native American and families is attainable only by restoring both the body and spirit.

Native Americans have a collective naturalness that accumulates into integrative approaches instead of a single and/or linear approach that most of the Western world has. The Relational Worldview Model includes the following relational perspectives of the wheel of life:

- The Contextual
- The Mental
- The Physical
- The Spiritual
- All Together



The first four – contextual, mental, physical and spiritual – make up the four major forces or sets of factors which together must come into balance and can be visualized in an integrative wheel.

The mind includes our cognitive processes such as thoughts, memories and knowledge and our emotional processes such as feelings, defenses, and self-esteem. The body includes all physical aspects such as genetic inheritance, sex, physical condition as well as sleep, nutrition and substance use. The context includes culture, community, family, peers, work, school, and social history. The spiritual area includes both positive and negative learned teachings and practices as well as metaphysical or innate forces (Cross, 1994).

It is believed these four quadrants are in “constant flux and change.” “We are not the same person at 4 p.m. that we were at 7 a.m. ... Thus, behavior will be different, feelings will be different, and what we think about will be different.” This model demonstrates a constant balancing and rebalancing as we “change our thoughts, feelings, our physical state, or our spiritual state.”

The naturalness of the Relational Worldview model described above truly speaks to my heart. Its organic and fluid nature makes sense to me. A reference on page 155 shows how there is a great overlap of the relational model with the traditional Western linear model. “The linear model dominates delivery of family services – the MDs deliver services to the body; the educators and psychologists the mind; social workers the context; and the clergy the spirit. ... Approach to problem solving and resiliency is multidimensional (physical, psychological, contextual and spiritual) and fluid among these forces of nature to reach harmony.” It is fluid because a “person continually has new experiences and obtains new knowledge. ... We continually balance and rebalance among the forces of nature to reach harmony” (Cross, 1994).

The following is a description of balance and rebalance from page 148:

Take death, for example, that threatens harmony. When we lose a loved one we emotionally feel grief, physically we may cry, lose appetite, or not sleep well. However, spiritually we have learned a positive response: a ritual, called a funeral. Usually such events are community events, so the context is changed. We bring in relatives, friends, and supporters. In that context we intellectualized about the dead person. We may recall and tell stories about him or her. We intellectualized about death itself or be reminded of our cultural view of that experience. Physically we touch others, get hugs and handshakes; we eat, and we shed tears.

These experiences are interdependent, playing off each other in multi-relational interactions which, if successful, allow us to resolve the grief by maintaining the balance. If we cannot, then we are said, in a western sense, to have unresolved grief or, in some tribal cultures, to have a ghost sickness or to be bothered by a spirit. Different world views often use different conceptual language to describe the same phenomenon.

The Native Americans traditionally start any talk or important endeavor thanking their Creator for their words or experience to keep spiritual harmony and balance. This constant thanksgiving ensures a good relationship spiritually for the one evoking the thanks. The welcoming with thankfulness helps to bring about harmony in relations with people (Cross, 1994).

Now that you have relational mindset visualized in your mind, the rest of my review is focused on the major concepts of the research performed by the Center for Excellence in Family Studies. The Center’s research on resiliency in Native American families emphasizes “the creation, integration, application, and dissemination of knowledge about the *power of families* of all forms, structures, ethnic groups, and cultures to recover from adversity.” The Center’s research cites a wide range of data sources, including:

- family resources (e.g., financial and management skills).

- family member strengths and capabilities (e.g., the sense of coherence and personality).
- established patterns of family functioning (e.g., family traditions and routines).
- new and instituted patterns of functioning (e.g. effective utilization of health care and mental services that families create to facilitate recovery).
- family dispositional traits and competencies (e.g., the sense of coherence, hardiness) that family develop over time.
- family processes of appraisal (e.g., schema, paradigms).
- family patterns of unproductive coping and adaptations (avoidance, denial) which have short- term value of promoting adaptation but which, if adopted as an establish pattern, have adverse maladaptative outcomes.
- family patterns of productive coping and adaptations (e.g., problem-solving behavior, social support) which have both short- and long-term positive adaptive outcomes.
- family-oriented intervention programs and public policies that have the value of promoting resistance resources in families under stress and fostering the resiliency in families.
- dysfunctional patterns in families that increase the family’s vulnerability to stressors and that curtail the family’s recovery from adversity (McCubbin, et al, 1998).

From this framing of resiliency, “the well-being of families can be best understood by studying the natural capabilities of families to endure, survive and even thrive in the face of crises”(McCubbin, et al, 1998). This statement struck a chord in my soul. To me, the words “natural capabilities” truly reflects Native American attributes. The organic approach to Native American resiliency—by tapping natural capabilities—seems so fitting and harmonious to me. I think of the Sacred Wheel concepts of life complexity and the return to the natural rhythm of balance that is held within the Native American culture.

This suggests to me that new family patterns of functioning are called for and that the movement to “initiate changes in the family system’s pattern of functioning” begins with the Relational Worldview Model and incorporates the adaptation phase of the “Resiliency Model of Family Stress, Adjustment and Adaptation and the Relational Processes of Balance and Harmony.” The family adaptation model “is used as a central concept in understanding the family’s struggle to manage crisis as well as describing the outcome of the family efforts to bring a new level of balance, harmony and functioning to the situation” (McCubbin, et al, 1998). The Center’s research “finds it reasonable that the family struggles to achieve a balance and a fit at both the individual-to-family and the family-to- community levels of functioning. ... This is due to the supposed fact that change at one level of family functioning affects the other.”

It is believed “newly instituted patterns are called for to keep the family functioning with a sense of unity and stability while managing the crisis and related hardships.” The new patterns that affect the family functioning include five pattern domains that:

- involve changes in the family’s rules
- involve changes in the family routines/traditions
- involve changes in the coalitions in the family unit
- alter the family’s pattern in communication, and
- alter the family’s relationship to the community (McCubbin, et al, 1998).

Family capabilities for adaptation depend upon family resources and strengths as well as coping behaviors and strategies the family has learned and performs as an individual or family unit. This includes adaptation activities within the community as an individual and/or family unit.

Of the seven personal resources used for family adaptation, the ones below have been identified by many researchers as critical at managing demands, stressors, and change (p 19):

- A sense of mastery
- High self-esteem
- Ethnic identity and culture background of family members along with the family unit's ethnic orientation (world view) that guides the family's functioning (Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman, & Mullan, 1981)

The first two resources are identified in Al Siebert's research and books, which adds to the likelihood that the above attributes are universal throughout humanity. The Center's research relates the two most prominent family unit resources: family cohesion and family adaptability. "Cohesion is the bonds of family unity with traits that include trust, appreciation, support, integration and respect for individuality" (Stinnet & Sauer, 1977).

Other family unit competencies mentioned in the book include:

- Communication skills – with emphasis on the ability to deliver clear and direct messages (Satir, 1972), showing an instrumental and affective communication ability (Epstein, Bishop, & Baldwin, 1982) and embodying verbal-nonverbal consistency (Fleck, 1980)
- Family problem-solving – families that adopt a problem-solving styles underscore family member's worth and self-esteem opposed to the incendiary styles that exacerbates family tension. (M.A. McCubbin, H.I. McCubbin, & Thompson, 1987)
- Family hardiness – an adaptation using available resources to enable internal strengths and durability of the family unit

Family hardiness is characterized by:

- a sense of control over the outcome of life events and hardships (M.A. McCubbin, 1989)
- a view of change as beneficial and growth-producing
- and an active orientation in responding to stressful situations (M.A. McCubbin, 1989)

These resources - communication skills, problem-solving and hardiness - are referenced in Al's book, *The Survivor Personality*, as integral attributes for the ability to bounce back and thrive. Even though the following paragraphs speak to the Native American way to approach resiliency, the problem-solving efforts, coping behaviors, and adaptation are universal truths for all cultures.

The family has been the conduit for cultural transmission providing a natural atmosphere for traditions to be passed from generation to generation and it has evolved throughout the ages to keep culture and ethnic heritage alive. In turn, the traditions themselves have given families a sense of stability and support from which they draw comfort, guidance and a means of coping with the problems of daily life.

Ethnicity and culture, "are nurtured, cultivated and transferred across generations and among family members through traditions and celebrations, as well as through family problem-solving efforts." The family's culture influences the levels of family appraisal in the process of adaptation — the family's schema and family paradigms. (p 21)

Coping behavior is a specific effort (covert or overt) by which an individual family member or the family functioning as a whole attempts to reduce or manage a demand on the family system and bring resources to bear to manage the situation. ... Specific coping behaviors to maintaining

family integration and cooperation is important for families who have a chronically ill child. ... Coping patterns are more generalized ways of responding that transcend different kinds of stressful situations. ... Family adaptation is a process in which families engage in direct response to the excessive demands of a stressor and depleted resources and realized that systemic changes are needed to restore functional stability and improve family satisfaction. (pp 31-32)

Many stressors may also require family adaptation in the family system. In these situations families are called upon to expand and to contract, to incorporate and to release, and to achieve stability by disrupting existing patterns of functioning. In these struggles, families adapt by instituting changes in the family's pattern of functioning, change it scheme, or blueprint, for functioning, and by changes in the family's relationship to the outside world. (p 42)

I hope this review provides you an awareness of the dynamic process of the Native American model of resilience. As Tawna Skousen, PhD, so eloquently stated in the article we published in the last newsletter, [Native American Resilience](#), "cultures often have historical antecedents that impact resilience-related processes and outcomes...."

To me, this statement says that the deep sacred, cultural, and relational beliefs the Native Americans have developed through their vast inter-generational collective intelligence inherently help (though, at sometimes hinder) their efforts toward resiliency-related growth processes. While sometimes cultural ways and relationships block growth, their age-old wisdom encourages growth by striving to produce the best path ahead for the tribes, families, and individuals to resile and thrive.

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Phrasing inspired by Lucinda Williams, *Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone* album.

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