Surviving colonization and the quest for healing: Narrative and resilience among California Indian tribal leaders

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Abstract
American Indians must negotiate the cultural and psychological legacy of colonialism as they construct coherent, purposive individual and communal narratives. Analysis of the life stories of highly generative members of these groups who have emerged as leaders offers important insights for psychological adaptation in the context of the historical legacy of colonialism. Based on an interpretive analysis of the life stories of two California Indian tribal leaders, we posit a resilient-strength-based approach to narrative identity development to complement and counter the historical trauma discourse. Native American identity emerged as the major source of psychological resilience in the life stories analyzed. This identity manifested and was supported through a commitment to the wellness of tribal community, spiritual practices, and beliefs. For these men, their relationship to their grandmothers was central in molding their identities and serving as a source of resilience throughout their lives. As leaders of a federally unrecognized tribal group, they have adopted a narrative of survivance (Vizenor, 2008), which appears to buffer psychosocial stress and provide a resilient narrative identity. Based on these findings, we theorize an indigenous California Native psychology of resilience.

Keywords
colonialism, historical trauma, identity, indigenous, narrative, resilience

Introduction
We’re a people who dealt with a lot of adversity or worse related to the Mission period, the Mexican period, the American period, and the laws that have affected us, the loss of federal recognition. We’re a people who were scattered and lost but now...
we’re finding our identity and we’re fighting to bring it back and to restore it and to apply a lot of our traditions and customs. We always try and stay as close to the knowledge that we have gained from our ancestors.

Mark Morales, a California Indian tribal Chairman.

American Indians must negotiate the cultural and psychological legacy of colonialism as they construct coherent, purposive individual and communal narratives. By nature of their social and cultural identities, they inherit the legacy of genocide and colonialism, which has the potential to create significant challenges in their psychological development (Okazaki, David, & Abelman, 2008). In spite of these potential challenges, many American Indian persons and communities thrive and lead resilient lives. Many reveal a psychological strategy of strength and survival in the face of formidable adversity. In the above excerpt from Mark Morales’s life story, for example, he discusses his tribal identity as a people’s plight to overcome legacies of colonial oppression through reliance upon ancestral knowledge and culture.

The purpose of this paper is to critically interrogate the discourse of historical trauma through an analysis of two narratives of California Indian tribal leaders, which provide alternative possibilities of psychological response to the legacy of colonialism and genocide. The historical trauma discourse has emerged in the literature on the psychology of colonialism in general and the psychology of American Indians in particular. Through an interpretive analysis of the life stories of highly generative tribal leaders, we examine how narratives of resilience are constructed in the midst of historical trauma. Our intent is not to deny the significance of historical trauma for indigenous communities. Rather, we aim to identify strategies individuals use to find meaning and purpose in the context of historical oppression.

This analysis contributes to theoretical perspectives on generativity and narrative identity development, as well as trauma and resilience in contexts of oppression. We utilize the framework of generativity because of our interest in the way in which individuals and communities express a concern for the next generation and its welfare (McAdams, 2006). The concept of generativity is grounded in a Euro-American developmental psychological framework (e.g., Erikson, 1950). However, our use of the concept is not intended to suggest an intrinsic universal model of development based on Euro-American individualism but rather to engage with psychological theory that connects with the transactional model of resilience found in the narratives of these tribal leaders.

This study examines the narratives of Mark Morales and James Tyler, California Indian tribal leaders of a federally non-recognized tribe. We selected tribal leaders of a non-federally recognized California Indian community because virtually all the literature on American Indian identity and the psychosocial impacts of colonization have neglected these communities. Our research questions were: How do the life story narratives of two highly generative tribal leaders reveal psychological resilience to colonial oppression? How is psychological resilience
related to tribal identity, as revealed in their narratives? Can these narratives reveal an indigenous framework of psychological resilience which might inform psychological theories of resilience?

Our emphasis on resilience was conceived in light of the widespread discourse of historical trauma in American Indian communities and persons (Gone, 2009). The literature regarding American Indian resilience is surprisingly limited. The study of resilience continues to be a widely researched topic of study from multiple disciplinary perspectives such as psychology, education, and health sciences (for review, see Masten, 2007). Resilience research from diverse cultural and indigenous psychological frameworks is also a burgeoning field (Theron et al., 2011). Indigenous psychologies can offer novel understandings into human psychological resilience.

California Indians

California Indians have endured an especially brutal legacy of colonialism. European settlers saw California Indians as more “primitive” than other American Indian tribal groups (Rawls, 1984). California was under both Spanish (1769–1823) and Mexican colonial rule (1823–1848) before becoming part of the United States. The California Gold Rush (1848–1852) was a time of sanctioned genocide, in which there was a governor’s executive order authorizing bounties for Indian scalps (Stannard, 1993). The principal institution for Spanish colonization of California was the mission (Phillips, 1974). In this time period, over 50% of Indians died while in the colonial institutions of the missions (Newell, 2008).

Researchers have interpreted this colonial history through the lens of historical trauma (Duran, Duran, Yellow Horse Brave Heart, & Yellow Horse-Davis, 1998). According to Yellow Horse Brave Heart (2003), historical trauma is the “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences” (p. 7). Considering California history, we might expect historical trauma to be prevalent and severe throughout California Indian communities, resulting in considerable psychological distress and/or the adoption of a “colonial mentality” in which California Indians have internalized a sense of inferiority (see Fanon, 1952/1967; Okazaki et al., 2008).

Psychological resilience

The concept of resilience has become central to psychological perspectives on the development and adaptation of oppressed and subordinated groups (Franklin, 2009). Masten (2007) defines resilience as “a broad systems construct, referring to the capacity of dynamic systems to withstand or recover from significant disturbances” (p. 921). Developmental psychologists have distinguished between resilience and resiliency, in that the former is defined as interactive and contextual, and the latter addresses personal attributes of the individual (Luthar & Zelazo, 2003). Ecological research into psychological resilience has steadily increased since the resilience concept first emerged in developmental research (Theron et al., 2011).
Mainstream “contextual” research into psychological resilience has attempted to look at the impact of socioeconomic status, sex/gender, ethnicity, age, and educational attainment on resilient functioning. Much of this research has imposed Euro-American cultural notions of resilience in its cross-cultural gaze. As a result, mainstream resilience researchers (Bonnano, 2004) cite risk factors for developing posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after traumatic exposure as including ethnic minority status, sex/gender, lack of education, and age. Bonnano (2004) suggests that the inverse of these traits (the White educated male adult prototype) may predict resilience after traumatic exposure. In other words, mainstream theorizations of the resilience construct have yet to sufficiently extend beyond the scope of privilege based on race/ethnicity, class, sex/gender, and concomitant factors such as educational opportunity. Several researchers have advocated for cultural contextual models in studies of pathways to resilience (Kirmayer, Dandeneau, Marshall, Phillips, & Williamson, 2011; Ungar, 2008, 2010; Wexler, DiFluvio, & Burke, 2009).

Cross-cultural perspectives on resilience are of particular importance in a globalizing world (Arnett, 2002; Mattar, 2010). Some have questioned whether the usage of “culture” in psychological science has been largely superficial and not adequately interrogated the meaning of cultural practices (Hammack, 2008, 2011a; Mattar, 2010). In other words, cultural psychology and psychiatry would benefit from rethinking culture as a “variable” and instead consider culture in terms of a complex process of meaning-making (Bruner, 1990; Hammack, 2011b).

**Narrative and indigenous resilience**

Theory and empirical research in culture and psychology have revealed the ways in which psychological science itself is representative of a particular Euro-American indigenous psychology (e.g., Gone, 2011; Greenfield, 2000). That is, the knowledge generated about psychological phenomena has been confined to a narrow segment of the world population—that of Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic societies (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). As a result, psychological science has constructed theory and sought to generalize its findings from a highly unusual slice of the world’s population (Arnett, 2008). Dominant approaches in social, developmental, and clinical psychology and psychiatry thus generally reflect an “indigenous” psychology of Euro-American culture (Greenfield, 2000).

The limited research on resilience among indigenous peoples of North America has begun to shed light upon coping with historical trauma and its legacy for American Indian communities. Studies of American Indians have found identity and cultural practices to be major sources of resilience. Kirmayer et al. (2011) sought to understand resilience in collective and cultural terms and identified social structural barriers to the expression of resilience for indigenous populations. They found that indigenous strategies of resilience drew from both traditional cultural resources and paradigms and also reflected the ongoing responses to challenges posed by evolving relationships with the dominant society. Chandler and

Kirmayer et al. (2011) posit that resilience may reside in narrative identity, which helps people understand their experience, construct a valued identity, and ensure the vitality of a community. American Indian identity as a racial category and tribal identities have been shaped through engagement with larger social, cultural, historical narratives (Garroutte, 2003). Some narratives are specific to family, clan, tribe, region, and some are larger “race” narratives as Indigenous peoples of the United States (Garroutte, 2003; Markstrom, 2011).

The term *survivance* combines the terms *resistance* and *survival* to replace the idea of survival and assert that, for Native people, survival has required resistance (Vizenor, 2008). According to Vizenor (2008),

> The character of *survivance* creates a sense of native presence over absence, nihility, and victimry. Native *survivance* is an active sense of presence over absence, decracination, and oblivion; *survivance* is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent. (p. 1)

*Survivance* is an example of a collective narrative identity engagement utilized by indigenous peoples to reframe identity discourses beyond colonial trappings of erasure and victimhood (Vizenor, 2008).

Narrative identity development offers a particularly useful epistemological approach to explore the process of indigenous resilience, as the narrative approach intrinsically assumes particularity in process and content (Hammack, 2008). Central to the idea of narrative is that we make meaning of the social and political surround as we construct individual life stories which provide a sense of unity and purpose (Cohler, 1982; McAdams, 1990, 1996, 1997). Narrative psychologists have increasingly argued that this process, however, is not politically “neutral” but rather involves an engagement with dominant discourses about collective identity and intergroup relations (e.g., Hammack, 2011b; Hammack & Pilecki, 2012).

The purpose of this study was to explore sources of psychological resilience within the personal narratives of highly generative tribal leaders. Through examination of these narratives, we sought to conceptualize the American Indian psychological engagement with colonization beyond the historical trauma paradigm,
and toward a notion of resilient engagement with dominant discourses of political and cultural subordination. An indigenous American Indian psychology of resilience, we suggest, must be conceived from the “ground up.”

**Method**

**Overview**

Our methodology is grounded in the interpretive hermeneutic tradition in psychology (e.g., Dilthey, 1923/1988; Tappan, 1997). This tradition recognizes that the positivist approach has neglected the meanings at the basis of social reality (Herda, 1999). Our approach is also in line with recent perspectives in personality, social, and cultural psychology that emphasize idiographic or person-centered inquiry (e.g., Gjerde, 2004; Hammack, 2008, 2010a, 2010b; McAdams, 1995b). This renaissance of person-based approaches can be linked to earlier traditions which argued for a holistic analysis of individual lives to complement aggregate “nomothetic” approaches (Allport, 1924, 1937; Murray, 1938).

Consistent with the aims of qualitative research (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992), our intent is not to generalize our findings to a broad population but rather to contribute to theoretical developments in cultural psychology and psychiatry regarding the legacy of colonialism. Thus we are concerned chiefly with understanding, rather than explanation, and seek to offer theoretical and analytical generalizations, such as those that can be made based on one’s own experience or the relevant literature (see Hjelmeland & Knizek, 2010).

Our approach is concerned with the production of practical, transformative knowledge and empowering subordinate groups rather than merely advancing technical reason (see Sampson, 1993). The relationship among researchers and participants in this paradigm is both interpersonal and moral, and data is coconstructed rather than merely collected (Herda, 1999; Mishler, 1986). Previous versions of this manuscript have been shared with the research participants, and the interpretations of the authors have been adjusted based on the feedback of the research participants.

**Participants**

Because of our interest in resilience, we interviewed two generative tribal leaders who have been central to the political and cultural revitalization of their tribal group. These two tribal leaders have volunteered much of their life’s work in the past two decades to the revitalization of their tribal community. As influential leaders, their narratives are also of particular interest because of their influence within their tribal community and the greater California Indian community. These leaders are not generative in a top-down productive sense but generative in their efforts to promote the realization of community needs that will serve future generations. For example, Tribal Chairman Mark Morales understands his role in life...
as a “worker” and is committed to the empowerment and development of his community.

**Interview protocol, procedure, and coding**

Participants underwent an in-depth interview conducted by the first author, modeled upon McAdams’s (1995a) Life Story Interview (LSI) protocol. The LSI was developed to understand how people tell their stories and, in particular, how highly generative people construct their life narrative. The LSI has been used extensively among highly generative adults in the US of diverse ethnic backgrounds (McAdams, 2006), as well as more recently among individuals beyond the US (e.g., Hammack, 2011a). The LSI asks interviewees details about family and community and then asks them to reflect extensively upon a series of critical life experiences (e.g., peak experience, nadir, turning point). Supplemental questions regarding tribal identity, historical trauma, resilience, and spirituality were included to fully capture the participants’ perspectives and histories.

Interviews took place in March 2011, ranged in duration from 2 to 4 hours, were audio recorded using a digital voice recorder, and transcribed verbatim. Interview material was coded based upon thematic content related to sources of resilience. Information that could identify the individuals or their tribe was removed from transcripts, and pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of the research participants. Both research participants chose to remain anonymous. Both leaders are critical of academic scholarship on California Indians, which they see as being historically utilized to disempower the political existence of many California tribal communities. Therefore, the collaborative manner in which the project has been conducted was a condition of the leaders’ participation. The research participants view this research as helping to further interrogate the complications of American Indian identity in the academic literature.

An interpretive paradigm considers the social nature of meaning-making (Hammack, 2011b); therefore, the position of the researchers plays a role in all aspects of research (see also Langhout, 2006). This project is an example of both cultural and indigenous psychology. The first author is American Indian but not a member of the tribe studied. As a collaborator with this tribal community, the first author shares in a political paradigm with the research participants, which seeks community emancipation from oppression. This paradigm engages indigenous communities as partners in research by helping to set the direction of research taking place within their community. Research cannot be disentangled from political interests. Glaring historical moments remind us how research can be used to delegitimize and disenfranchise Native people from their rights (Gone, 2011). The second author is an American of predominantly European heritage but shares an ideological perspective of research that seeks community partnership in all stages of such a research endeavor. He is an outsider to both the American Indian experience in general and the particular experience of California Indians, but he identifies as an ally in the quest for social and political justice for American Indians.
Findings

To preserve the holistic, idiographic approach to lives in context we employ, we present findings from the narrative analysis according to each interviewee. We discovered that the two narratives shared a redemptive form in which the potential contamination of historical trauma was mitigated as the men constructed coherent life stories in which they discovered a sense of meaning and purpose in their tribal and Native identities (for discussion of these narrative forms, see McAdams & Bowman, 2001). Both narratives contained evidence of the legacy of historical trauma commonly associated with American Indian identity, including the breakdown of communities and problems with individual health and psychological well-being. Thematic content associated with resilience centered on the connection to both tribal and larger Native identity, which were facilitated in the narratives through a close connection to grandmothers. For both men, spirituality provided a site for the construction of personal resilience. Finally, we found evidence that both narratives were set within an ideology of generativity through sociopolitical awareness of oppression and a commitment to heal their community and educate others about the historical legacy of oppression.

Mark’s story

Mark Morales is a middle-aged tribal chairman, a retired professional, and a college graduate. He was raised Catholic and grew up within the boundaries of his ancestral territory. Mark is married and the father of two. Mark’s life story narrative details the suffering that he faced growing up which he relates directly to his tribe’s plight to overcome colonialism. Recall that in the excerpt at the start of this paper, Mark defined his people’s identity as negotiating and overcoming colonialism through the reclamation of tribal culture and heritage. For Mark, his tribal identity was taken and had to be reclaimed.

Our tribal identity was lost. I grew up knowing that bad things happened to us and that our ancestors didn’t want to talk about it because it caused a lot of pain. Our identity was kept from us. So that we are trying to regain our identity and hold on to it so that we never lose it again. It is something that’s really important, really valuable and it has a lot of benefit to offer us. We struggled to restore it, and our people thirst for it. So that [tribal] identity is a must for us.

Throughout the interview, Mark discussed the impact colonization has had on his people, which caused symptoms of historical trauma, such as a sense of loss, fragmentation, and behavioral health problems. Mark described how his people used silence as an attempt to manage the pain associated with the traumatic legacy of colonization. He detailed the negative consequences of colonization and both the struggle and value in reclamation of tribal pride.
The trust of society and the trusting of others are not there. It takes a very long time to develop trust. Confidence is broken. I mean how can you have any confidence? Confidence is a very big thing and is lacking. I tell you I didn’t speak. It took a very long time to develop a voice where I felt that I could say what I mean or what I needed to. This lack of confidence is just passed on generation to generation. Just not passing on the skills to fight for yourself, or to stand up for your what you believe in, and a passiveness with things. So the desire for expecting more and asking your kids to expect more, that’s missing in a lot of tribes. How do you get people to look at the big picture? At one time, our tribe was a very proud people. They were very intelligent. They had wisdom. They knew how to read the stars and how to read the oceans. They knew how to read the wind and how to predict the weather. They knew when it was time to light the grass on fire so that it would burn to a certain level, and then the rains would come and put the fire out. We had knowledge and a way of living that was superior to anything that we have today and that was all lost. But a lot of people don’t even realize what was lost. I think everything was taken away from us, even our memories and our knowledge. So that is what we struggle to bring back, but not everyone is willing to participate in that struggle.

Mark positioned his early personal struggles in life within a larger context of the negative impact colonization has had on his people’s life. He detailed the difficulties faced in childhood as the third of six children who “got buried in the pack”: “I spent a lot of time just by myself, alone. I didn’t speak until I was about 6 or 7 years old.” Mark explained how this sense of isolation persisted throughout his youth. The turning point for Mark appeared to come in his relationship with his grandmother.

I said I didn’t have a close friend, you know, association, but I had a real special relationship with my grandmother, and that’s my maternal side. She went completely blind due to diabetes, and then she had her legs amputated. Not one day in her life did she have any self-pity, did she talk negative. She was the most optimistic and happiest person.

Mark’s grandmother proved to be the key facilitating agent of resilience throughout his narrative. Mark described a terrible beating at the start of high school as a transformative experience in which he vowed to make a better life for himself.

At that time right there I made a lot of pledges and promises to myself of how I was going to live my life. It was hard making those changes [to do well in school and refrain from substance abuse] because everybody around me did drugs and alcohol.

Mark earned an athletic scholarship to attend a state University. He became a nationally ranked college athlete. For Mark, attending college was another major turning point and achievement in his life narrative.

Going to college was another big part of my life. Still, I had a lot of anger related to historic trauma. I mean why are we poor? Is it my parent’s fault, or have I been cursed.
by the Lord? Why am I stupid? I had a lot of anger. I looked for fights. I would spit at people. I would push and bump people hard, just to try and knock them on their ass. Luckily, I didn’t get my ass kicked, and didn’t get killed or shot. I survived.

While in college, Mark continued to face considerable family stressors, which made completing his degree more difficult. Were it not for the advice and support of his grandmother, Mark may have quit school. He explained, “She told me do not quit. Follow your dream. Follow your passion. She said you’re the only one that is going to college. We need you to show our younger generation.” Mark’s grandmother understood the importance of a college education and saw that Mark’s completion of college would benefit the family and larger community. Mark became the first person in his family to attend and graduate college. Mark’s grandmother was the most important and positive force in his early life.

Whenever I get low I just think about my grandmother, and I say don’t let yourself drop. Don’t go down there. You know they say 1 day at a time. I say 1 minute, 2 minutes at a time. I’ve done that, 2 minutes at a time, stuff.

The earliest memory Mark recollected was of his grandmother being able to see. His grandmother went blind when he was 2 years old. “So I have a memory of my grandmother seeing and I am very thankful that I have that.” Although Mark’s grandmother suffered from diabetes, her fortitude and ability to maintain empathy, was a model of psychological strength in the face of suffering.

A lot of times you’ll talk to people and it’s like they put a mirror in front of them [selves] and they say “I, I, I, I, I.” My grandmother never did that. I think I just kind of picked that up from her. When she talked, she would put things in a much bigger picture. Just the social condition, you know having compassion for the poor, having respect for mankind, regardless to where they are in life, they deserve some kind of respect.

Mark experienced significant family trauma in a short period of time. His son had been severely ill and almost died numerous times. His father died from cancer, and his stepson was severely burned in an automobile accident, all while he was going through a divorce. Mark’s religious faith and spirituality were integral sources of resilience.

I was raised Catholic. But I don’t need the Catholic Church to pray. I can pray anywhere. I believe that the Creator is with us no matter where we are. We can have a connection with the Creator through our Native American ceremony. It allows us the opportunity to focus. When you go to a dance and you sit there and you watch the dancers, it gives you a chance to reflect on your life, on what you have done right, what you have done wrong and what you need help with and to reflect on what’s causing you pain. It’s a chance to talk to the Creator. It’s a chance to listen to the Creator. If you go with a lot of pain, it’s a chance to give it up. The dancers are there as messengers. They will carry that pain to the fire, and the smoke of the fire will
carry that up to the Creator. Or when you go to sweats, it’s an opportunity to have more personal contact and a stronger focus to say what’s in your heart. To speak what’s in your heart and what’s in your mind and then to understand the message back to you better.

For Mark, tribal ceremonies provided an opportunity for spiritual and psychological connection and healing. Mark is a Catholic and also a practitioner of his tribal spirituality. Spirituality was a primary source of resilience that he drew from including both tribal and Catholic frameworks and practices.

As a tribal leader, Mark feels responsible to his ancestors and the future generations of his tribe. “As a tribal leader, I speak for all the generations that came before me and I speak for all the future generations. I think of our ancestors, what would they want us to do?” Mark believes that the future of his tribe will continue, “as long as man is on this earth.” Mark’s work is centered upon tribal revitalization and strengthening his community’s pride as tribal people.

It’s my job to push that ball up the hill the best I can and let future generations take on the rest. We don’t have a 1-year or a 10-year plan. We have as long as man is on earth. I guess long-term goals would be to try and help our members have good health and teach the values of fairness, honesty, hard work, respect, and compassion. So those are the things that I work hard for and try to do in a cultural way. Learning the language, learning our songs is really important.

James’ story

James Tyler is also middle-aged and the vice chairman of this same tribe. He is a Vietnam combat veteran in a long-standing marriage. James is retired from a long career as a tradesman. He grew up within his ancestral territory.

James described being at a loss during childhood to understand where the rest of his tribal people were. James understood enough of the history of his tribe to know that there was once a strong cohesive tribal group that he descended from, and that something significant happened, which led to his family’s isolation in their indigenous homeland.

When I got into school, as I got through elementary school, I realized that there were no Indians. That’s when I started thinking what happened to all of the other Indians. I wondered where all the Native people are. I knew a little bit about the missions. My grandmother never said much about the missions. And when we did ask her questions about it, she just didn’t say anything. She didn’t talk. So I believe that that was because, the way she was. She had nothing good to say, so she didn’t say anything.

As a child, James learned to be proud to be descended from the indigenous group of the land in which he grew up. James explained, “So our family has always been
kind of leaders, and that goes back from the mission time.” James had a good childhood where he was taught to be proud of tribal identity.

I was very proud that I was a Mission Indian. [At school] we built this little mock mission. It was big enough so that somebody could go into it, like a room. My teacher told me at that time, “Well you’re Native Indian so I want you to go last so you will get the most time.” And I said, man, that’s really cool. But as things turned out, I got about 30 seconds in there. She let all of the other children play in there as much as they wanted, and when I got in, the bell rang and it was time to go.

As James became older, his peers at school also challenged his identity as a Native Californian.

When we did talk about being Native Californian as I got a little older, and they would ask what tribe I came from, and I would tell them. And it was almost like most of the time I got like a little laugh, and, “well, I never heard of them, who are they?” When I would bring it up with my other friends, it was like, “well, you’re not Indian; you’re Mexican” and that kind of stuff. And it was kind of troublesome.

For James, the process of learning and naming of the historical legacy of oppression and colonization and associated traumas has been extremely trying.

I think reading and really learn about the atrocities that were done to Native people has had one of the biggest negative impact in my life. Through the Spanish missionaries, the Mexican people and the American people, we faced atrocities. And when I read some of these hard readings, it’s hard for me to deal with it, sometimes. It’s really, really negative. I can’t… I mean there have been a few people in my life that were negative but I have always been able to get past that. But this stuff that happened to our ancestors, has really had a hard impact. I guess it happened to all native people, but because of our history it was passed down a lot. That stuff we had mostly heard had been a lot of good stuff about our people, but never the real negative history. So some of the stuff I am learning now is very difficult to deal with.

James explained that learning about what happened to his ancestors through the colonization of the Spanish missions, the Mexican period and the American people, was an extremely difficult process.

For James, the relearning of tribal identity and ownership of a California Native tribal consciousness have become sources of empowerment. They form not just key elements of thematic content in his personal narrative but also the foundation of its ideological setting. That is, James’s narrative attains its redemptive form through an ideological grounding that promotes his Native identity as a source of pride and empowerment rather than the shame and inferiority cultivated through the colonial encounter (Okazaki et al., 2008).
As James discusses adulthood, the theme of Native identity as a resilient strategy emerges.

In Vietnam, that’s where I really started getting this Native power feelings come back to me. I met some Native boys from New Mexico, and they were full bloods, and there were three of them in our group in our company. They didn’t fully understand the concept of the Mission Indian, and that I didn’t know my language, but they didn’t question me. I was brought into that circle, before we would go into battle, they would sing a song. A couple of times we would paint our faces for protection.

In the service with other Indians, James felt a sense of Native power return. Although Indians from outside of California may not have fully understood the experience of a Mission Indian, James found intertribal camaraderie in the service. The term “Native power” became popular with the insurgence of the activism of the American Indian Movement (AIM) in the late 1960s and 1970s (Warrior & Smith, 1997).

James recalled that after returning from war he drank heavily, which prevented his participation in the Native community. For James, excessive drinking was antithetical to his expression of Indian identity. James described becoming sober as the major turning point in his life.

Sitting in the jailhouse, and I am halfway sober, and I am thinking about how stupid I am, that all the problems I ever have come from alcohol, and I said “why am I doing this to myself. This isn’t who I am. I am not supposed to be in the jailhouse. I was raised better than this.” I remember thinking about how my grandmother had passed and thinking about what she would have said to me if she saw me doing that.

Within the historical trauma discourse, alcoholism has been cited as a symptom and form of self-medication (Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 2003). James described his journey to rediscover his Native identity through his gradual participation in tribal activities that eventually led to his assumption of leadership responsibilities within his tribe.

This woman in 1989 started reaching out to our community and looking for Native people of our tribe. She found us, and I thought because of my past, trying to figure out where all the people went, that this is a good thing.

Becoming involved in the revitalization project of his tribe became the central project in his life. James viewed his work to keep the tribal community alive as an act of continuity with his grandmother’s efforts. James explained that, “My grandmother knew all the people, I can remember her talking on the phone all the time, in the 1950s when I was a little boy.” As a leader in their community, James’s grandmother diligently worked to strengthen their community. From his
grandmother, James was taught tribal knowledge and a responsibility to their tribal community.

So being so close to her [grandmother], my brother and myself we were able to learn a lot about, or get a lot of knowledge from her. . . . I do believe the most important thing I did learn from my grandmother was how to treat other people around me and always be respectful. A lot about our Native ways came from her. At night, she would always make us say our prayers, and she would speak in our Native tongue.

For James, spirituality provides anchoring throughout his life narrative. An example of James’s use of identity and spirituality as a strategy of resilience came when James was faced with his father’s impending death.

My father was very, very sick, and he was very close to dying. I was down in a national park that is part of our ancestral lands. Our family has gone there since as long as I can remember. I was in this cave canyon with some people, and I had some tobacco and sage and some water with me, and I knew my dad was very, very sick, and he wasn’t going to last too much longer. So I walked into the canyon by myself away from everybody, and I prayed. I prayed to our ancestors that for them to get together and welcome my dad because he was going to be there shortly, and for them to make a place for him ‘cause he was going to be there. I stayed there by myself for maybe an hour and burned the smudge and left some tobacco and water. I felt comfortable when I left there, and I don’t know why but that was just what I was supposed to do, to go pray to the ancestors.

James’ generative commitment to the wellbeing of future generations are expressed in his efforts to strengthen his tribal community.

A good thing that I am happy about is that we found 600 descendants of the original people. That makes me really happy. I no longer have that question “what happened to all the people?”

Still for James, “There are still people out there that we need to reconnect and be together.” James’s tribal community suffered successive attacks, including the Spanish, the Mexican, the Gold Rush era, and most recently federal policies aimed at destroying tribal cohesion. Thus, the act of reuniting his tribal community is a healing of a collective traumatic wound. For James, a primary goal of the project of rebuilding his tribal community was to reunify his family.

When a tribal member passes away, now that’s an extended family. There is a tribal member that is grieving for other tribal members. We are an extended family. When we have a tribal member pass now different families come together, and it’s really a positive thing. That organization, our tribe, is really powerful.
James had been involved in numerous sustained projects to educate the general public of his people’s place in California history, working to counteract the erasure of California Indians in the public discourse and subsequent denial of their rights.

We are trying to protect certain areas and protecting the remains of our ancestors is really important. I have had opportunity to work in a field school, at a junior college and talk to the young students, as a Native person, and educate these students about what our beliefs are, about how important our ancestral remains are. We give them a different perspective. When they find something in the ground, it doesn’t necessarily mean they own it. If it’s in the ground, it’s supposed to be in the ground. It shouldn’t be displayed in cabinets. Especially our remains, they need to be in the earth. So hopefully as these young students go out in the world and build their careers, they will remember what they learned from us about respect and the need to take care of our ancestral artifacts and remains. Maybe we can teach some of the professors a little bit too.

For James, the construction of a redemptive, highly generative life-story narrative was associated with a form of social practice committed to the regeneration of community and culture. His identity is a document of the psychological power of reclaiming culture and history through personal and collective narrative, as well as social practice oriented toward the construction of a community of shared meaning (see Bruner, 1990; Hammack, 2008). His narrative reveals the potential of collective identity, historical and sociopolitical consciousness, relationality, and shared practice through spirituality to redeem the potential for contamination in the life stories of indigenous peoples.

Discussion

The experience of American Indians has been increasingly framed through the discourse of historical trauma in the psychological and psychiatric literature (Estrada, 2009; Yellow Horse Brave Heart, Chase, Elkins, & Altshul, 2011). The purpose of our study was to better understand personal and collective resilience within a California Indian community, using the personal narratives of two tribal leaders as case studies. Within the narratives, we discovered the theme of overcoming the historical legacy of colonial oppression to be a central component of personal and collective psychological resilience. The narratives of these men provide critical insights to understand the psychological resilience of indigenous peoples of California, particularly nonrecognized tribal communities.

While we found expected evidence of the historical trauma discourse in the life stories of James and Mark, both constructed redemptive life stories in which critical turning points, typically linked to relational connection to a grandmother, forestalled the potential contamination of historical trauma. Most important, however, we found that thematic content associated with Native identification and reclamation of collective narrative and collective memory of the tribe oriented
the men’s narratives toward redemption. That is, the narration of their life stories appeared to receive redemptive structure chiefly through identification with Native and tribal identities. Finally, the narratives suggested that through *generative social practice* oriented toward the benefit of the larger tribal community, these men achieved a sense of meaning, purpose, integrity, and coherence in their lives.

Within these narratives, an ideological commitment to the reclamation and strengthening of Native identity consistently emerged as a prominent theme. The historical trauma discourse has positioned the reclamation of Native identity through cultural practice, as *the* pathway to overcome historical trauma (Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 1998). Within these case studies, tribal identity provides a generative social outlet and a site of agency to overcome historical legacies of oppression. In order to assert their identity, however, these men must resist dominant narratives of American Indian identity.

Our analysis suggested that personal and historical trauma were intertwined in the life-story narratives of these men. Yet, these narratives are not that of traumatized victims, instead they embody the theme of *survivance* (Vizenor, 2008). That is, we interpreted these men’s ability to respond to personal and collective trauma by constructing resilient life-story narratives as a form of resistance. Despite facing considerable oppression throughout their lives, these men are not merely subjects of a legacy of social and cultural oppression. Their narratives often highlighted their development of agency to empower their community and define their tribal identity. The development of agency is all the more salient as members of a non-federally recognized California tribe because such groups lack access to the resources that come with federal recognition.

A collective narrative identity, tied to ancestral homeland, in conversation with past and future generations, exists within many indigenous communities (Kirmayer et al., 2011). Yet, unlike many tribal groups that have been studied, these men are members of an unrecognized tribal group whose federal legitimacy was revoked by the Bureau of Indian Affairs as a result of the 1927 Dorrington Report (Fixico, 1986). As descendants of the California mission era, these men have endured a legacy of colonial oppression that continues today in their fight for federal recognition. These men have negotiated their marginalized (nonrecognized) status by framing their personhood as strong survivors.

From a developmental perspective, healthy adults must develop generativity, and their social practice must then take a generative form (e.g., Erikson, 1950; McAdams, 2006). The development of this psychological state and its concomitant set of practices may be more challenging for socially marginalized and oppressed communities, who by nature of their oppression have less access to outlets of generative social production within the broader society. Yet our analysis reveals the value of adopting a generative mode of making meaning of life events for resilience among members of socially marginalized communities. Translating trauma into action that might work for the social and political benefit of future generations, the narratives of these men suggest that individual psychological
resilience and sociopolitical development are often closely related for members of marginalized communities.

American Indian identity and status is constantly being contested through representations and policies that have created a master narrative of the vanishing race (Garrouette, 2003). In this context, the preservation of Native or tribal community becomes central in the resilient response to psychological adversity. Resilience researchers have cited common themes as contributing to resilient outcomes that are relevant to the themes that were identified in this project. These include positive relationships with an adult caregiver (Werner, 1994), spiritual practice (Kim & Esquivel, 2011), community engagement (McAdams, 2006), and ethnic identity pride (Adams, Fryberg, Garcia, & Delgado-Torres, 2006). This project diverges from other studies that focus on indigenous identity as resilience (or resource) in an important way because it focused on elders from a nonrecognized California tribe, which exists well outside the bounds of the stereotypical authentic Indian existence (which is reservation-based, Plains Indians; Gone, 2006). Dominant historical narratives portray California Indians as either extinct or completely colonized.

For both of these men, their grandmother was a central facilitating agent of resilience. The emphasis on the maternal figure in their narratives may also reflect California Indian culture, which was often matrilineal prior to European colonization (Castillo, 1994). As a result of colonization, many tribal societies that were traditionally led by women were thrust into patriarchal Western systems (Smith, 2008). Currently, the tribal leaders of this community are men. However, in recent history women leaders have occupied prominent leadership roles. These leaders’ narratives indicated how relational connection with their grandmothers provided strength to overcome individual and structural barriers to wellness.

Through a fluid engagement with tribal culture (Ramirez, 2007), these men incorporated non-Native influences, such as Catholicism, into their tribal personhood. Both men are practitioners of their tribal religious customs, such as ceremonial dances, and remain devout Catholics. Spirituality is a major source of resilience for these men, which is consistent with research suggesting spirituality as a potential source of resilience (Peres, Moreira-Almeida, Nasello, & Koenig, 2007). Many tribal groups colonized by the Spanish developed a syncretic relationship between tribal religion and Catholicism (Voght, 1967). For these men, much of their spiritual training came from their grandmothers, who were descendants of the mission period, but had retained elements of tribal spirituality.

Our analysis is consistent with the growing literature on resilience among American Indians which emphasizes adaptations rooted in tribal identity and practice. For example, Denham (2008) found strategies of resilience embedded in cultural practices, such as Sweat Ceremonies, or Naming Ceremonies. Grandbois (2009) suggested that Native elders attain resilience from relationships within tribal communities.

These case studies illustrate the importance of generative social practice in promoting resilience for socially marginalized communities. These leaders’ narratives emphasized their commitment to secure the resources needed to ensure the cultural,
political, and social sustenance of their communities. For socially oppressed communities that lack equal access to opportunities and have a history of exploitation, survival and psychological resilience requires a resistance to oppression in the form of *survivance*.

**Conclusion**

This study relied upon gathering and interpreting the narratives of generative exemplars in order to build empirical knowledge of resilience among contemporary American Indians. Through these exemplars, we can begin to conceive psychological resilience among California Indian peoples. These men employ creative strategies of resilience that are grounded in tribal culture and identity. The resilience embodied in these men is based on a collective tribal identity, for which narrative inquiry provided an effective method of exploration. The generative social practice of these men described an agency in overcoming the historical legacy of colonialism. Through adopting a *survivance*-based narrative identity, these men are creatively envisioning a self-determined tribal presence in a current discourse of invisibility for the nonrecognized tribal peoples of California. For James and Mark, resilience is not an individual trait; it is embodied in a collective narration of survival and generative social expression in the face of marginalization. American Indians have undergone enduring multilayered oppressions and understanding their responses, therefore, can further our knowledge of the human potential for psychological resilience.

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**Notes**

1. All interviewee names are pseudonyms.
2. Generativity is the adult’s concern for and commitment to promoting the welfare and development of future generations (see Erikson, 1950; McAdams, 2006).

**References**


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