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Cultural Continuity as a Protective Factor Against Suicide in First Nations Youth

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The question of whether, in some now legendary and less trammeled part of Canada’s past, Aboriginal suicide—particularly youth suicide—was once a less commonplace tragedy is, perhaps, unanswerable. What, is not open to serious doubt, however, is the accumulated body of more contemporary evidence (evidence forcibly brought to public attention by the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples) demonstrating that, among certain of Canada’s First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities, youth suicide rates have reached calamitous proportions—rates said to be higher than those of any culturally identifiable group in the world (Kirmayer, 1994). Although such statistics can easily prove misleading (especially if taken as a commentary on the whole of Aboriginal life), such evidence can and has been used to successfully promote the importance of renewed research and prevention efforts, all aimed at reducing what is rightly judged to be both an epidemic of Aboriginal youth suicide and a public shame.

In the decade following the release of the Report of the Royal Commission there has been a remarkable outpouring of interest in, and concern over, the problem of Aboriginal youth suicide—efforts that have taken the form of literally scores of public gatherings, funded research initiatives, government reports, and scholarly publications. Although this literature is much too large and voluble to be reasonably summarized here, it is, nevertheless, possible to extract from all of these diverse efforts a handful of summary judgments that may well serve to help guide future research.

One of these available conclusions is that the death of children by suicide is so heart-wrenching, and so devastating to families and friends and communities, that there is not (and perhaps should not be) any holding back on a range of well intended impulses to ameliorate and prevent such tragedies. An evident consequence of this collective need to be helpful is, however, that preventative efforts have far outstripped available knowledge concerning the actual causes of such suicides. In short, the sentiment that it is better to do something rather than nothing appears to have overtaken the classic dictum of therapeutic practice—“no differential treatment without differential diagnosis.” If this imbalance is to be corrected, it seems clear that a greater proportion of our collective energies and resources need to be devoted to coming to a better understanding of the causal circumstances responsible for the high rates of youth suicide known to characterize some Aboriginal communities and not others.

What we would hold out as the second general “take-home message” to emerge from the available research literature on youth suicide is that the most productive unit of analysis in such studies is probably not that of individual children, but, rather, the whole communities in which such children live (Lester & Yang, 2006). This follows, we argue, because: a) given that suicide is rare (even when it is epidemic), it is almost never possible to predict which individuals will or won’t behave in suicidal ways; and b) because, while changing the subterranean thoughts and feelings of suicidal individuals remains a poorly understood art, addressing the crying needs of whole Aboriginal communities that exhibit extraordinarily high rates of youth suicide may well require more “will” than we sometimes collectively have available, but not more “ways.” These limitations are neither new (see Rosen, 1954), nor has the lack of progress gone unnoticed (Goldney, 2000).

Taken together, these rules of thumb both stress the importance of searching out potentially causal factors associated with community level variability in youth suicide rates, and have dictated the course of the decade long program of research to be summarized in the balance of this account.

Cultural Continuity and Suicide in First Nations Youth

Because they are generally hardy and otherwise hard to kill, death among young persons, including Indigenous youth, is very often self-appointed. Beyond auto accidents, suicide is broadly recognized to be the major killer of young persons, Indigenous or not (Statistics Canada, 2001). Nowhere is all of this more evident than among Canada's young Aboriginal peoples, who generally suffer the highest suicide rate of any culturally distinct population in the world (Kirmayer, 1994). For example, in British Columbia, where the data to be summarized here were collected, First Nations youth are reputed to be especially and infamously suicidal, taking their own lives at rates variously estimated to be between 5 and 20 times higher than that of the general non-Native population (Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003).

Without supposing that those who work to compute such summary statistics have somehow gotten their sums wrong, generic accounts of the sort just cited are, at best, "actuarial fictions" that regularly hide more than they reveal. This happens for the reasons that indiscriminately painting the whole of Canada's (or BC's) First Nations with the same broad brush not only works to obscure the real cultural diversity that marks the lives of such distinctive peoples, but serves to mistakenly substitute the banner headline of "Aboriginality" for all of the sundry social and economic factors that actually stand some chance of being causally related to such deaths at an early age.

The research reported here began with the finding that, far from being uniformly distributed across BC's nearly 200 bands, the rate of Aboriginal youth suicide actually varies in wildly saw-toothed ways from one First Nations community to the next (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Chandler et al., 2003). This new fact of the matter sets an agenda for what has already become a decade long project. The primary focus of these efforts was to try and work out why it should happen that some Aboriginal communities experience epidemic rates of youth suicide, while in others such deaths are largely unknown.

A Developmental Back-Story

These research efforts began with the wonderment of how it could possibly happen that young persons, Aboriginal or not, (persons with all of life's potential sweetness not yet full upon their lips) could so frequently take steps to end their own lives, often for reasons that have seemed, in retrospect, to have been little more than passing fancies. This earlier work, already summarized elsewhere (Ball & Chandler, 1989; Chandler & Ball, 1990), is only alluded to here, as it potentially bears on the still unfinished task of trying to work out why Aboriginal youth suicide so often happens "here" rather than "there."

A promising key to unlocking the puzzle of why suicidal behaviors are so prevalent among the young is to be found in the characteristic pitfalls that mark the course of development that ordinarily leads young people to form some coherent sense of their own identity. A common obstacle facing young persons as they approach this identity-securing task is, our earlier research has shown, the joint necessity of constructing some sense of responsible ownership of a personal and collective past, and some commitment to one’s own future prospects. Without some sense of personal (not to mention cultural) continuity, it would appear, life is easily cheapened, and the possibility of suicide becomes a live option.

Even under the best of developmental circumstances, finding a way of warranting one’s necessary convictions about self- and cultural continuity is no simple matter, and much of childhood and adolescence appears to be taken up with drafting and re-drafting various perduring forms of self-understanding sufficient to withstand the expectable ravages of time. As our own research has shown, young people who falter or fail in meeting such expectable developmental obligations often behave irresponsibly, and are known to demonstrate a lack of appropriate care and concern for their own future well-being. Self-abuse and self-injuries of every description, including suicide, have recently come to be counted among the common costs of such failures in identity development.

From Normative to Risk and Resilience Research

However hazardous simply growing up may otherwise be, such risks are necessarily magnified when the cultural backcloth against which development automatically unfolds is unraveled by social-cultural adversities. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the identity struggles of young Indigenous persons who are required, not only to clear the standard hurdles of normal growth and development, but are often forced to construct a sense of selfhood out of the remnants of a way of life that has been largely overthrown. In the best of circumstances, one’s culture can be counted on to provide young people a measure of sameness while in the business of outgrowing childish ways. *If* instead, one’s culture is marginalized, or vandalized, or turned into a laughingstock; and *if* (because of colonization or decolonization or globalization) the familiar and trustworthy ways of one’s community are criminalized, legislated out of existence, or otherwise assimilated beyond easy recognition, *then* woe be upon those transiting toward maturity, and for whom otherwise customary ways and means of warranting one’s personal persistence often no longer suffice. This is the fate, we argue, of many Indigenous youth around the world. Their culture of origin no longer computes, and their key to paradise is turned into a parking lot. The predictable consequence of such personal and cultural losses is often disillusionment, lassitude, substance abuse, self-injury and self-appointed death at an early age.

To the degree that all that has just been said concerning the place of self- and cultural continuity holds some promise in providing a conceptual framework for better understanding why the burden of suicide falls disproportionately on the young, and especially on some but not other young Aboriginal persons, then a network of related hypotheses suggest themselves.

From Self- to Cultural-Continuity

If, as argued, cultural continuity forms a critical back-stop to the ordinary process of identity formation, then it also follows that community-level rates of youth suicide should ordinarily vary as a function of the degree to which particular Indigenous communities find themselves bereft of meaningful connections to their traditional past, and otherwise cut off from local control of their own future prospects. More particularly, two testable sets of claims flow from these expectations.

One of these is that, because different Aboriginal communities have differently weathered their typically negative contacts with the non-Aboriginal world, their collective responses to such adversities should be equally variable. With particular reference to the problem of youth suicide, it ought, then, to be the case that, when viewed at the level of BC's almost 200 separate bands and 23 tribal councils, the rate at which youth suicides occur should vary remarkably from one community to another.

Second, and because some communities have met with greater or lesser levels of success in rehabilitating their differently savaged cultures, it was also hypothesized that youth suicide rates would prove to be remarkably lower in those bands that have achieved a greater measure of success in reconnecting to their traditional past, and in building ties to some shared future.

Both of these hypotheses have now been tested in two separate waves of data collection. The first of these data sets covers the period from 1987 to 1992, and reports on every confirmed Aboriginal youth suicide in the province of BC, classified by their band of origin. In addition, and for the same time period, 197 of the province's recognized bands were dichotomously coded in terms of the presence or absence of six "Cultural Continuity factors," described in more detail below. The second wave of data collection covered the period between 1993 and 2000, and involved the addition of two new cultural continuity measures. Summary findings from these two data sets are reported below.

RESULTS

Hypothesis One: Province-Wide Youth Suicide Rates as an Actuarial Fiction

The province-wide rate of Aboriginal youth suicide for both the period 1987-1992, and again for 1993-2000 is, not surprisingly, approximately 2-3 times that of the general youth population. If, contrary to our own findings, such data were unrelated to band of origin, then tabulating the suicide rate for each band would have resulted in a more or less rectangular distribution. As can be seen from an inspection of Figure 1, however, something much closer to the opposite is true. What this saw-toothed picture makes clear is that many (roughly half) of BC's Aboriginal communities suffered no youth suicides during our initial 6-year study period, while, for others, the rate of such deaths was many times higher than for the province as a whole.

Insert Figure 1 about here

This same pattern of results was also present in our second (1993-2000) wave of data collection. Figures 2 and 3 combine Wave One and Two data, and array youth suicide rates, first by band and then tribal council. What these data show is that some 90 percent of the province's Aboriginal youth suicides occur in less than 10 percent of the bands, and that in more than 50 percent of bands, and one in five of tribal councils, youth suicide is effectively unknown.

Insert Figures 2 & 3 about here

Hypothesis Two: Cultural Continuity As a Hedge Against Aboriginal Youth Suicide

Hypothesis Two was predicated on the assumption that distinctive cultural groups, like individual selves, are constituted by identity preserving practices that work to forge links to a common past and future. On this prospect, it was anticipated that Aboriginal communities bereft of such sustaining ties would prove to be at special risk for suicide, while those that had already achieved a greater measure of success in preserving such connections would be better shielded from some of the slings and arrows that regularly cost young Aboriginal persons a proper measure of appropriate care and concern for their own future wellbeing.

Two waves of data, meant to test this hypothesis, were again collected. During the first of these study periods (Wave One), available federal and provincial records were carefully sifted with the aim of locating community-level variables descriptive of common efforts to preserve links to a shared cultural past, and to forge a common cultural civic future. Six such markers of "cultural continuity" were initially identified, including indications of whether each of BC's 197 distinctive bands, and 23 tribal councils, had: achieved a measure of self-government; litigated for Aboriginal title to traditional lands; accomplished a measure of local control over health, education and policing services; and had created community facilities for the preservation of culture. Summing across these dichotomized measures yielded an overall "Cultural Continuity Index" ranging from 0 to 6.

The average youth suicide rates for all bands scoring at one or the other of these six "Cultural Continuity Levels" are detailed in Figure 4.

Insert Figure 4 about here

As can be seen from an inspection of this figure, those bands that evidenced all of these "Cultural Continuity Factors" had *no* youth suicides during our first study window—suicide rates that are remarkably lower than those characteristic of the non-Aboriginal population at large. By contrast, bands (and tribal councils) that evidenced none of these "protective" factors suffered youth suicide rates many times the national average. Clearly, bands that enjoy more substantial ties to their cultural past and collective future also experience youth suicide rates that are vanishing to absent.

Wave Two of this ongoing program of data collection (1993-2000) newly replicates and extends our previously findings. Our earlier work is extended by identifying two new cultural continuity markers demonstrating that bands that have achieved a measure of local control over child welfare services, and that are characterized by having elected band councils composed of more than 50 percent women also evidence dramatically lower youth suicide rates. As can be seen by an inspection of Figure 5, bands characterized by all of this extended list of Cultural Continuity factors again show zero-order levels of both youth and adult suicide, while those characterized by none of these factors suffer epidemic suicide levels.

Insert Figure 5 about here

CONCLUSION

Taken altogether, this extended program of research strongly supports two major conclusions. First, generic claims about youth suicide rates for the whole of any Aboriginal world are, at best actuarial fictions that obscure critical community-by-community differences in the frequency of such deaths. Second, individual and cultural continuity are strongly linked, such that First Nations communities that succeed in taking steps to preserve their heritage culture, and that work to control their own destinies, are dramatically more successful in insulating their youth against the risks of suicide.

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Figure 1: Youth suicide rate by band (1987-1992)

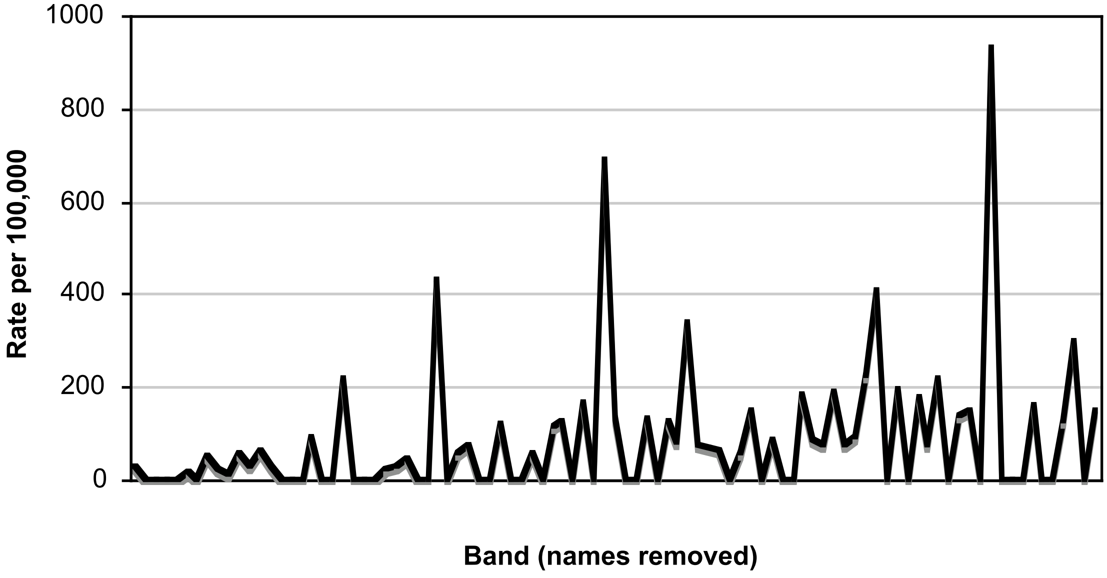

Figure 2: Youth suicide rate by band (1987-2000)

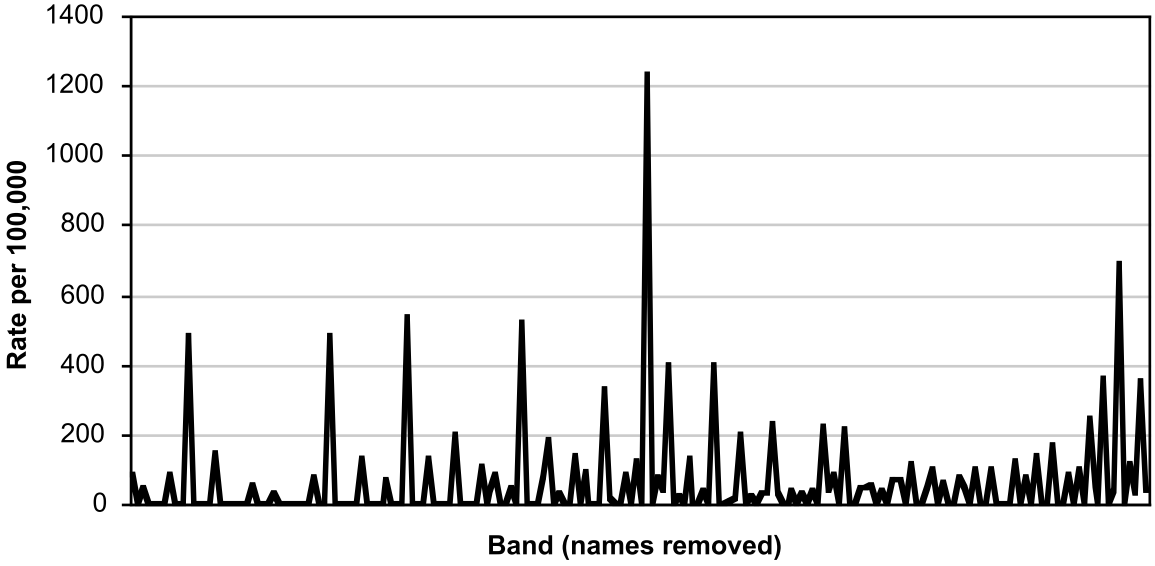

Figure 3: Youth suicide rate by tribal council (1987-2000)

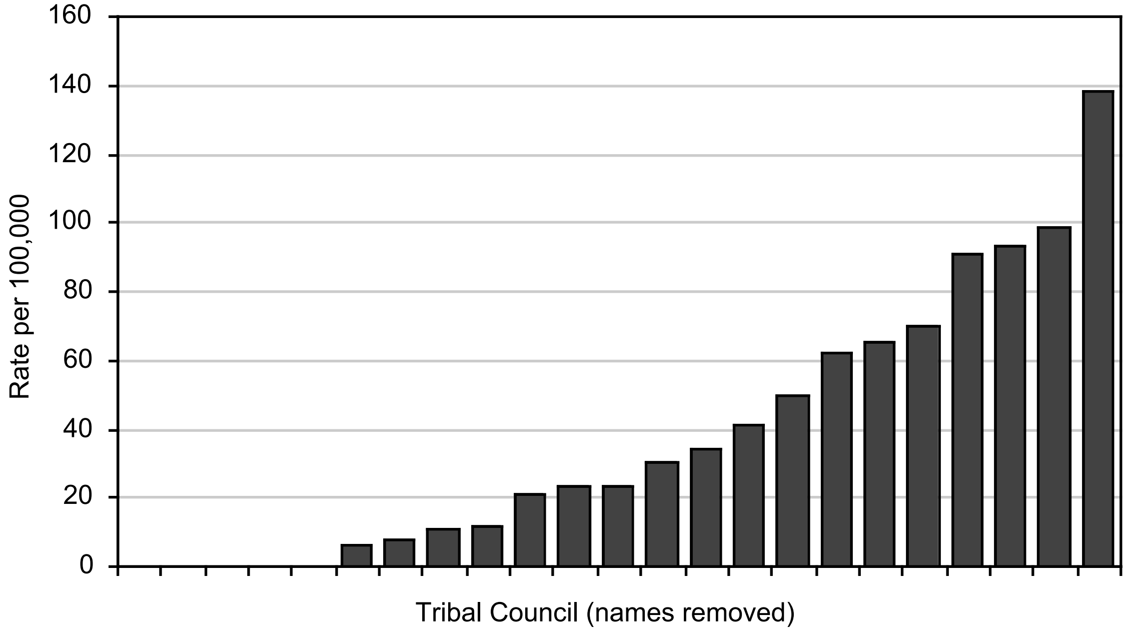

Figure 4: Youth suicide rate by number of factors present

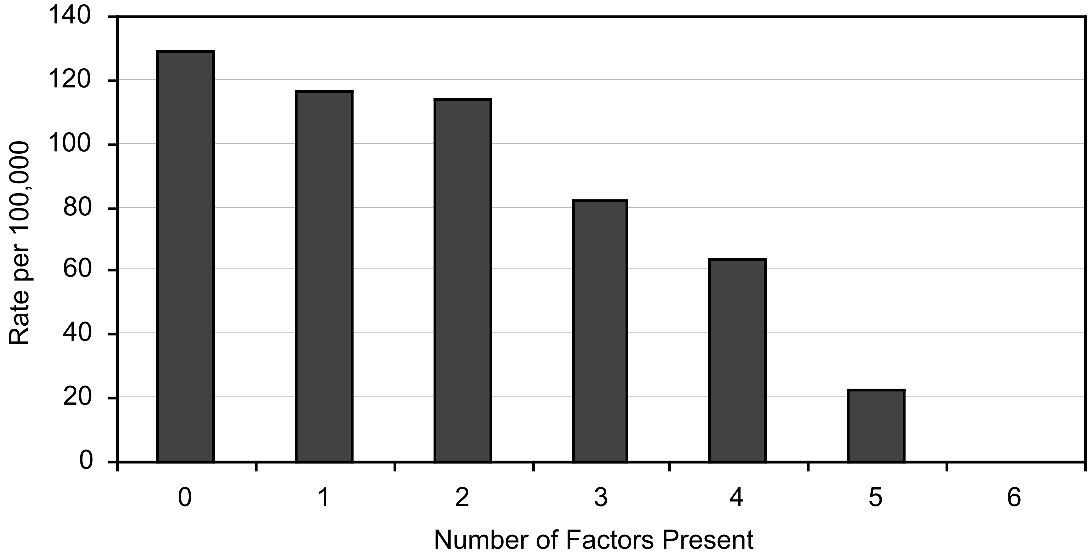

Figure 5: Total suicide rate by number of factors present