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Indigenous emotional economies in Alaska: surviving youth in the village

Abstract:

According to *The Status of Alaska Natives Report 2004* produced by the Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of Alaska Anchorage; Native youth in rural Alaska experience significant mental health disparity. Suicide rates for Alaska Native youth are the highest in the nation, and in some regions, among the highest in the world. Substance abuse, social misconduct and teenage pregnancy rates are also much higher among the rural, indigenous population in Alaska. These unrelentingly high rates have caused many people, both local and non-local, to ask the question; what is going on with the youth in the villages today? This dissertation reports on research conducted to help answer that question, and identify local intervention strategies for youth growing up today in the villages. The research was funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (1R34MH073601-01), and supported by the University of Alaska Fairbanks at the Center for Alaska Native Health Research, Institute of Arctic Biology. The study used a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach and ethnographic methods to explore the affective lives of youth in Athabascan villages in Alaska. Findings from the research demonstrate a model of Athabascan mental health based on an *indigenous emotional economy*. Young people in these northern communities were once socialized to manage their relationships with people through their relationships with the animals. Over the last half-century the fundamental human-animal relationship in Northern indigenous economies has changed; and the *emotional schemas* of Athabascan youth in the village are based on the cultural norms, social values and environmental requirements for *survival in the village*. Data collected from eight months of fieldwork in the village demonstrate four primary emotional schemas motivating youth into action: fun ~ boredom ~ mischief (juvenile delinquency/social misconduct); love ~ jealousy ~ fighting/hooking-up (assault/teenage pregnancy); excitement ~ drama ~ partying (substance abuse); loss ~ lonesomeness ~ going crazy (suicide/suicide attempts). The emotional schemas reveal “what is going on” with youth in the village using the local terms and explanations of the behaviors. These emotional schemas provide the “emic” or insider explanations (e.g. mischief), while the State and other reporting agencies provide the “etic” descriptions (e.g. juvenile delinquency). Interventions based on decreasing juvenile delinquency among youth in the villages will not effectively mitigate *mischief*. The emotional schemas of youth in Athabascan villages reveal continuity with aboriginal emotions along with adaptations to aboriginal behavioral modification and intervention strategies. Intervention strategies in the rural villages need to be based on local models of emotion, behavior and mental health to provide young people with *Native* strategies for surviving their feelings..