

DEG XIT'AN ATHABASCAN CONVERSATIONS ON WELLNESS:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXPLORING THE RADICAL
POSSIBILITIES OF RELATIONSHIPS

by

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ABSTRACT

It is essential that Indigenous people tell their own stories that describe the “who,” “what,” “where,” and “how” of Indigenous life in order to shape our own destiny.

The question posed in this research study is, *In what ways do Deg Xit’an, Athabascan people draw from their culturally unique experiences, knowledge, values, and relationships in the context of their lives to create and maintain wellness and wholeness?*

The Deg Xit’an Athabascan (DXA) people are one of the smallest of the eleven Athabascan language groups located in Southwest Alaska. The importance of asking this question is significant at the individual and collective levels. The question itself is strengths focused. While it does imply that individuals and communities go in and out of balance and that problems exist, it is focused on the broader idea that within an individual and community are unique sets of existing tools and knowledge that can be utilized to maintain or create wellness and/or get back into balance. There are many statistics that highlight some of the many challenges Alaska Native people face today; however, they do not highlight the potential and possibilities of a strong and enduring people. Wellness, as it has been written and discussed by many Indigenous scholars, is shaped by a holistic combination of factors (mind, body, spirit, environment, history, traditions, and relationships) influencing each other in a continuous and dynamic way working toward balance and harmony.

This is a qualitative study utilizing an Indigenous research framework. Twenty-two participants took part in four conversational focus groups and two interviews. The study included a mixture of Elders, culture bearers, middle-aged community members, and young adult community members.

The themes and subthemes that emerged from the data and that contribute to wellness include: The cultural practices that were modeled by our Elders, traditional values that were embedded within those cultural practices, life's challenges and how the people adapted and grew strength from those challenges, and community action recommendations from participants on how to preserve our way of life and lead us back to the cultural practices that keep the people well.

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my parents, Rudy and Alice (Frank/Modiak) Demientieff. To my father, Rudy, the rugged riverboat captain, whose Indigenous knowledge guided us expertly through our journey on the mighty Yukon River and beyond. And to my mother, Alice, the silent strength she radiated inspired her whole family to be as strong; the love and faith she possessed could move mountains and was also a protective force over all her children. Dogidihn for instilling in me the strength of my ancestors, the ability to work hard, the love for our people, and the determination and will to do whatever I choose in life. Love you both.

“If you want to keep it, you have to give it away.”

Deg Xit'an Elder

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	ix
Chapters	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
Purpose and Significance of the Study	3
Overview of Deg Xit’an People.....	7
2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW	15
Theoretical Framework.....	15
Literature Review.....	20
Challenges Are Inevitable; However, There Needs to Be a Focus or Refocus to Strengths	24
Wellness Is Multifaceted and Contextual	26
Wellness Is a Way of Life: Understanding the Impact of Culture, History, and Contemporary Issues.....	30
Relationships Create Energy and Transformations That Produce Possibilities	34
Conclusion	37
3. METHODOLOGY AND METHOD.....	38
Researcher Preparation	40
Research Preparation	42
Decolonizing.....	47
Ethics in Research.....	49
Gathering Knowledge	52
Making Meaning.....	56
Giving Back	59
Conclusion	60
4. RESULTS	62

Tea Partner Tradition	65
Conversational Focus Group Themes	70
Theme #1: Cultural and Traditional Practices	70
Theme #2: Traditional Values	77
Theme #3: Embracing Challenges by Remembering Who We Are	84
Theme #4: Deg Xit'an Beliefs and Action Recommendations	92
Conclusion	100
5. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	104
Discussion	105
Cultural and Traditional Practices	105
Traditional Values	107
Embracing Challenges by Remembering Who We Are	108
Deg Xit'an Beliefs and Action Recommendations	109
Implications	110
Deg Xit'an Community	110
Social Work Practice	112
Policy	116
Personal	116
Limitations	118
Future Research	119
Conclusion	119
Appendices	
A. HOLY CROSS TRIBE LETTER OF SUPPORT	121
B. CONSENT COVER LETTER	123
C. RECRUITMENT LETTER #1	126
D. RECRUITMENT LETTER #2	128
E. IRB RENEWAL LETTER #2	130
F. IRB APPROVAL LETTER #1	132
G. INFORMAL RESEARCH AGENDA	135
REFERENCES	137

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

For many, writing about wellness is a description of a personal journey. Native people have many stories of resilience, difficult compromises, and survival against great odds. For me and many of my contemporaries, we recognize we have survived as Native people because of the strength and sacrifices of our ancestors and elders. While many people look at Native communities and see poverty, overcrowded living conditions, or houses without electricity and running water, we know that this is not the sum of these communities. A closer look, in many cases will reveal a core of cultural values and knowledge that continues to be passed through the generations. Even in the midst of many problems, the seeds of wellness remain fertile and are ready to be nurtured. (Weaver, 2002, p. 13)

It is fitting to begin this work acknowledging that conversing and writing about wellness is a process and a personal journey. This personal journey is also embedded in a collective journey of the Deg Xit'an, Athabaskan (DXA) people and many Indigenous people worldwide. Indigenous people worldwide are included because they are connected in many ways, including experience, history, culture, spirituality, strengths and challenges facing communities, and in the pursuit of healthier societies.

The question posed in this research study is, *In what ways do Deg Xit'an, Athabaskan people draw from their culturally unique experiences, knowledge, values, and relationships in the context of their lives to create and maintain wellness and wholeness?* The importance of asking this question is significant at the individual and collective levels. The question itself is strengths focused. While it does imply that individuals and communities go in and out of balance

and that problems exist, it is focused on the broader idea that within an individual and community are unique sets of existing tools and knowledge that can be utilized to maintain or create wellness and/or get back into balance. The existing knowledge may be newly acquired skills and practices and/or may be skills acquired through generations of practice and oral tradition. Conversations about wellness among the DXA people have the potential to bring these culturally significant skills, knowledge, and practices to the forefront of the collective minds of the people so that they are practiced more frequently, which in turn creates a broader focus on solutions and a more positive and hopeful outlook. One example of a traditional practice among many Athabascan communities is that of the potlatch. When there is a death in a community the family is surrounded by the community who will share stories, songs, and food, and ensure that family members are not alone; the traditional potlatch, an honoring and send off of the deceased, is a spiritual mechanism for healing and getting back into balance and wellness after the trauma of the loss and is a community-wide event. The documentary by Madison (1991) titled, *Hitting Sticks, Healing Hearts*, beautifully illustrates this practice of the potlatch and the process of healing amidst the Tanana, Athabascan people of Minto, Alaska. There are numerous examples of cultural and traditional practices, such as the potlatch, that highlight how traditional and contemporary knowledge and practices nurture the seeds of wellness (Bassett, Tsosie, & Nannauck, 2012; Healey, 2008; Hill & Meadows, 2009).

Deg Xit'an people are familiar with struggle and survival; in a way, it is common, or at least a part of existence that is accepted and even embraced. Survival has meant the continuity of the people, culture, and ways of life, through hardship in a demanding climate of cold, dark winters, and rough terrain and waterways in the summer; through times of abundance of wild game to hunt and times of starvation; and through colonization efforts, a rapidly changing

society, and globalization. Wellness practices have been maintained through times of celebration and times of hardships and continue to be there for future generations to draw upon.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

One goal of this study is to create awareness of the DXA traditional practices that emphasize wellness and focus on the inherent strengths of the people in the effort to create positive energy around feelings of connection, belonging, and pride. This can help to shift from a deficit-based perspective to a more strength-based perspective when working to overcome and embrace challenges in living. Among Indigenous communities there may be many “problems” that exist that pose the need for further research on how to create wellness and healthier communities; however, to focus energy on these problems does not necessarily further the wellness of a community or people. In fact, completely focusing on the problem itself can lead to feelings of being overwhelmed or it can conjure up judgmental and negative attitudes about the people or community either from outsiders or from the community themselves. A deficit-based approach may also impede the ability to know where to start in the effort to find solutions, resulting in no progress at all toward wellness. Problems, as defined by Saleebey (2002), arise because of a lack of internal or external resources to meet the needs of an individual, group, or community in the context of their situation. Problems, challenges, and stressors are unavoidable in the lifetime of an individual and community. A deficit-based perspective is the belief that a client (individual, group, or community) has “become a client because they have deficits, problems, pathologies, and diseases; that they are, in some essential way, flawed or weak” (Saleebey, 2002, p. 3). In contrast, a strengths perspective mobilizes the client’s (individual, group, or community) potential and creates possibilities through empowerment and the focus on

internal and external assets and resources (Saleebey, 2002). Itzhaky and Bustin (2002) differentiate a pathology-oriented perspective (or problem-focused perspective as will be used in this dissertation) and a strengths perspective in three dimensions: the client, the role of the worker, and the process assessment. In the dimension of the client the problem-focused perspective concentrates on the client's problem specifically, in a strengths perspective the emphasis is on uncovering the client's strengths and capacities. In the dimension of the role of the worker the deficit-based perspective would show that the solutions lie within the worker while in the strengths perspective the solutions lie within collaboration between the worker, the client, and the environment. In the dimension of the process assessment utilizing a deficit-based perspective would mean to assess for risks and impairment while a strengths-focused perspective would be to also incorporate in the assessment a gathering of strengths and capacities (Itzhaky & Bustin, 2002; Saleebey, 2000, 2002).

This research on wellness is influenced by the literature on wellness perspectives and practices and the literature on the use of a strengths perspective in working with individuals, groups, and communities and stresses the importance of understanding the differences between a strengths perspective and a deficit-based perspective on the outcomes of all levels of interventions. Wellness research has created definitions and models of wellness and has shed light on understanding how wellness differs in various communities and populations. One gap in the wellness literature is the link between wellness and practice or action and the implementation of wellness approaches within communities and evaluation of those approaches.

Another goal of this research is to add to the current conversations and research around community wellness models and approaches, specifically with Indigenous communities. Definitions and conceptualizations of wellness are influenced by the worldviews of the

researcher, organization, and community; however, there are many overlapping and similar themes that run through these definitions. It is understood that each community and people have unique aspects of history, tradition, place, and culture that vary from region to region and even within a particular group, and so it is likely that each will also have their conceptualizations of wellness and ways with which they nurture wellness. Understanding how the unique and contextualized worldview influences what wellness is and how it is practiced within and among Indigenous communities can help shed light on the complexities of wellness of Indigenous people. Research on wellness among Indigenous people can open up a pathway of knowledge and ways of being and living that can impact individual and collective wellness, social service delivery, and create and add to the body of knowledge focusing on positive outcomes in health research. Current data on the health status of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) people reflect the need for increased wellness strategies and practices. Below are a few of the statistics on AI/AN people as reported in the U.S. Dept of Health and Human Services, Office of Minority Health webpage (2017),

Health: It is significant to note that American Indians/Alaska Natives frequently contend with issues that prevent them from receiving quality medical care. These issues include cultural barriers, geographic isolation, inadequate sewage disposal, and low income. Some of the leading diseases and causes of death among AI/AN are heart disease, cancer, unintentional injuries (accidents), diabetes, and stroke. American Indians/Alaska Natives also have a high prevalence and risk factors for mental health and suicide, obesity, substance abuse, sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), teenage pregnancy, liver disease, and hepatitis.

Other Health Concerns: American Indians and Alaska Natives have an infant death rate 60 percent higher than the rate for Caucasians. AI/ANs are twice as likely to have diabetes as Caucasians. An example is the Pima of Arizona, who have one of the highest diabetes rates in the world. AI/ANs also have disproportionately high death rates from unintentional injuries and suicide. In 2012, the tuberculosis rate for AI/ANs was 6.3, as compared to 0.8 for the White population. (Profile: American Indian, Alaska Native, para. 9)

The above statistics highlight some of the many challenges Alaska Native people face

today; however, they do not highlight the potential and possibilities of a strong and enduring people. Walter and Andersen (2016) in their book titled *Indigenous Statistics: A Quantitative Research Methodology* make the point that statistics, while important, also tend to lump Indigenous people together not taking into account the diversity that exists within and between groups and also highlights the problems without context. These statistics are often viewed by the public as a truth that does not offer any alternative viewpoints and so the statistics then become who the people portrayed are to the larger society. Walter and Andersen (2016) state,

For Indigenous peoples, especially in first world countries where populations statistics powerfully influence governance and social services, these numbers have become a foundational lens through which we, as Indigenous people and peoples, become known to our respective nation-states and how we engage in many of our relationships with government actors. Statistics are used to describe our population profiles and geographical distribution, and almost universally across the colonized world, our lagging levels of educational achievement, labor market participation, health and economic status. They are nation-states' chief tool for ascertaining and presenting the official "who," "what," "where," and "how" of Indigenous life. Often positioned as a subset of overall national social trends, these data are accepted as a straightforward, objective snapshot of an underlying reality. As such, they have also become the backbone for the creation and implementation of social policy for Indigenous people. (p. 8)

It is essential that Indigenous people tell their own stories around health, mental health and overall wellness that describe the "who," "what," "where," and "how" of Indigenous life in order to shape our own destiny.

The significance of this research on wellness includes: honoring the Deg Xit'an people and honoring the ancestors, creating and strengthening relationships, opening communication surrounding wellness concepts, sharing stories and resources, a deeper connection and understanding of what it means to be Deg Xit'an, self-determination toward community members identifying their own strengths and issues, and also identifying the most appropriate and effective solutions.

Overview of Deg Xit'an People

The Deg Xit'an Athabascan (DXA) people are one of the smallest of the eleven Athabascan language groups located in Southwest Alaska. Leonard (2007) states that the name Deg Xit'an translates as "beings from around here." The DXA people speak the Deg Xinag language, "the westernmost Na-Dene language, whose ancestral territory lies near the confluence of the Yukon and Innoko Rivers and the nearby reaches of the Kuskokwim River in Western Alaska" (University of Alaska Southeast, n.d.). Figure 1 is a map of Alaska created by the Alaska Native Language Center at the University of Alaska Fairbanks; this map reflects the main language groups that exist within the state. On the southwest portion of the map it shows in pink and red the region where the Deg Xit'an people originate. According to the State of Alaska (2017), Alaska Population Overview Estimates for 2015, the population of American Indians and Alaska Natives (alone or in combination with one or more races) in 2015 was 144,274 or 19.6%. The population of Athabascan people according to the State of Alaska, Department of Labor and Workforce Development (2013) for 2010 was 16,665, of which the Deg Xit'an people are a small portion. The four main Deg Xit'an, Athabascan communities in Alaska are Holy Cross, Anvik, Shageluk, and Grayling. Table 1 highlights the population estimates for each community from the 2010 U.S. Census; however, large numbers of Deg Xit'an people live in the larger urban cities of Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau as well as around the rest of the state of Alaska, the United States, and the world. The overall population estimates for DXA people are unknown but likely number in the few thousands. Many of the DXA people currently living in urban communities do so for reasons that include being close to medical care, employment and educational opportunities, or to be near other resources and activities. Many of these individuals return often or occasionally to their home communities to subsist off the land, visit family, and to

attend major events such as births, deaths, and traditional ceremonies, and some still own property or homes or have fish camps in and nearby these communities.

The DXA people of Southwest Interior Alaska come from a culture rich with traditions, customs, and knowledge that have been passed on orally from generation to generation for thousands of years. Archeological evidence places the Athabascan people in the Interior of Alaska for at least 10,000 years (Alaska Humanities Forum, 2017). Like other Indigenous groups, the DXA people have endured and persevered through abrupt and swift cultural and community changes by means of various forms of colonialism. Cultural change and development over time is an expected course that all people and communities will undergo. Rapid and forced change over a period of the last 200 years through various forms of colonialism, such as boarding schools, missionaries, epidemics and forced assimilation have had harmful and lasting effects (Duran, Duran, & Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 1998; Evans-Campbell, 2008; Walters et al., 2011); however, much of the worldview and value systems have survived without much change, in spite of colonial efforts (B. Leonard, personal communication, July 3, 2013). While perseverance and resilience are evident traits the DXA people embody, loss of cultural practices and language have found their way into the lives of the members of the DXA community, as has happened in numerous other Indigenous communities. As the DXA people continue to practice, and in many instances reclaim, their traditions, language, and culture, it is important to have discussions surrounding the concept of wellness in order to nurture and progress in our cultural knowledge, sense of identity and belonging, and way of life for future generations.

The concept of wellness is not a new concept, and it is increasingly utilized in discussions and practice around individual and community health efforts. It is a widely popular topic in the social work, psychology, health, and holistic medicine literature; it has become a “buzzword”

that is used widely to mean a number of different things. There are many definitions, both Western and Indigenous, which discuss the complexity of this topic. Yet, when it comes to conversations around wellness among the DXA people, there is almost nothing written because the DXA people are an oral society with oral traditions and the knowledge resides in the minds, stories, and lived experiences of the elders and community members and a few historical documents, and is intertwined within an ever-changing way of life. This dissertation is an effort to identify past and present practices, beliefs, and ways of life that include aspects of wellness among the DXA people, and to explore the connections between conceptualizing wellness and applications of wellness models, theories, and definitions.

This qualitative research study is a process aimed at understanding and moving toward wellness, not just by this researcher alone, but also for and with family and community through the use of conversational focus groups and interviews. It is important that those reading this study understand that this research is with and for Deg Xit'an people, and that this researcher's experience as a Deg Xit'an woman is not separate, but intertwined in every aspect, and will definitely be reflected in the writing and implementation of this study.

I am a Deg Xit'an, Athabascan from the Interior of Alaska. My parents, Rudy and Alice (Frank) Demientieff, both grew up in Southwest Alaska in the community of Holy Cross and in surrounding areas along the Yukon River. Both my parents are deceased; however, both continue to influence the notion of "wellness" in my life. My son Khayree also influences my "wellness" daily in ways that are both profound and complex. "All my relations," in fact, influence how this document is written; it could be no other way.

I will begin with a story my mother used to tell me when I was growing up, between the ages of 5 and 10 years old. It is hard to remember exactly some of the facts in her story but the

messages for me come across loud and clear. I grew up with my mother telling me stories; bible stories, fairytales, nursery rhymes, and stories of her life and of our family. The stories were usually told to my brother and me when we were lying beside her in bed in the evening or when she was trying to entertain us. My mother's presence was very calming, most of the time; she had really soft skin and a calm presence so I enjoyed being close to her. One of the stories she used to tell me about was a dance the Holy Cross and surrounding communities used to have when she was growing up, called the Tea Partner Dance (Osgood, 1958). She never said why they had the dance but that she loved it and looked forward to the dance. She and other community members from Holy Cross were partnered up with younger or older people from other communities. She said her partner was a younger, cute, and shy boy that brought her gifts. The partners would come from surrounding communities and would bring gifts of various forms and then take them to the dance. She never did go into much detail about why this happened, but she would smile happily at the memory whenever she told me how much she loved that event. I think I remember her body language when telling that story more than her words, which is why it is difficult to recall all that she said about it. When I think about the story today, I reflect on why this particular dance was held, and I imagine that this effort to build and maintain relationships, share stories, food, and knowledge, and have fun in the process not only ensured survival in a harsh climate and changing times, but also nurtured the idea and practice of "wellness." The values of building and maintaining relationships and sharing what we have to offer with others are what have been instilled in me as a DXA person and are manifested in this story. I have since learned much more about this Tea Partner traditional practice and its teachings and impact on our people that I will share and discuss in the following chapters. This story and many others that are told by DXA people about the old times or the old ways, shared with such love and nostalgia,

inspire me to want to learn more about who I am as a DXA person, and who we are collectively, both historically and currently, and how that influences wellness. Many old and new beliefs and practices about wellness among the DXA people are a source of strength and knowledge that can be drawn from when working towards individual and/or community wellness. It is important that this way of thinking not be construed as romanticizing the past, rather, finding what has been useful to DXA people and continuing to utilize or adapt those practices to our lives today.

When trying to understand the concept of wellness in the context of my life as a DXA person I think of lessons from both my mother and my father. My father was called a river man because of his gift for understanding and navigating the rivers in Alaska. My father, who had a third grade classroom education, could build a houseboat for his family of 10 children, navigate the mighty Yukon river and other smaller rivers, set up camp in the wilderness of Alaska, and subsist largely on fish, moose, berries and other small game that he and the family hunted and gathered. The Yukon River, he taught us, much like most other aspects of Alaska's wilderness, is beautiful and majestic, and also should be respected for its power and force. The videos *A Beautiful Journey* (Demientieff & Williams, 2009) and *Legacy of Our Elders* (Tanana Chiefs Conference, n.d.), highlight life on the Yukon River as told by Elder Daisy Demientieff. In my own experience as a young child, I recall many instances where the Yukon water was extremely violent and our family relied on my father's experience and knowledge to get us safely to our destination. My father grew up in the wilderness and on the rivers in Interior Alaska and had all the tools required for knowing what to do in these situations. Not only did he have Western tools, such as the boat, motor, compass, and other supplies, he had other tools in the form of a lifetime of observations, lived experiences, stories, and cultural knowledge that he carried with him to bring him and his family through the rough waters safely. Navigating the mighty Yukon River is

a relevant analogy to explain the concept of wellness. The idea is to find ways to navigate through rough waters or challenges utilizing the tools we have, both Indigenous and Western, in the context of our lives. Strength is gained from our ability to navigate through the rough waters to more calm and balanced waters. A person skilled in maintaining and creating wellness is not a person who has avoided rough waters all of their life. Practice and experience moving through challenges back to a state of balance or wellness strengthens our ability to do so.

My mother modeled the concept of wellness for me by working through challenges with patience, love, generosity, kindness, and strength, both to our family and others. Strength and balance are two highly valued and important characteristics that Deg Xit'an people demonstrate. There are many stories from my mother; however, the one I want to share highlights the concept of "usefulness" and "resourcefulness." As a lifelong student and academic, I have had the opportunity to attend many conferences on a variety of topics. Almost every conference provides free bags for the participants. I usually am happy to receive the bag and bring it home, only for it to be shoved in the back of my closet with all the other bags. I started giving them to my mother to use however she liked. One day she excitedly showed me an apron that she had made out of one of my conference bags. She stated that the fabric of the bags was thick and of good quality for aprons she could use when cooking or cutting fish. She also stated that each bag had such a great logo and picture on the front that it was perfect for the front of the apron. My mother had cut the bags in half, modified the handles to fit around the neck and sewed on fancy and colorful borders to finish the product and to make something useful out of the bags that I had been collecting. This was not the first time she had found a use for something so that it was not wasted; she has done this as long as I can remember with anything and everything possible.

This story illustrates for me the importance of conducting research on wellness that

creates or produces something useful, beautiful, and strong and that making things useful is part of strength and survival of the individual and community. One way to apply this value and practice is for the community to come together and share the stories and traditions and strengths of the DXA people, which in turn will create positive energy and focus on solutions that will be transformative and create all kinds of possibilities.

Table 1 Deg Xit'an Communities

Deg Xit'an, Athabascan Communities	2010 United States Census Population Estimates
Holy Cross	178
Anvik	85
Shageluk	83
Grayling	194

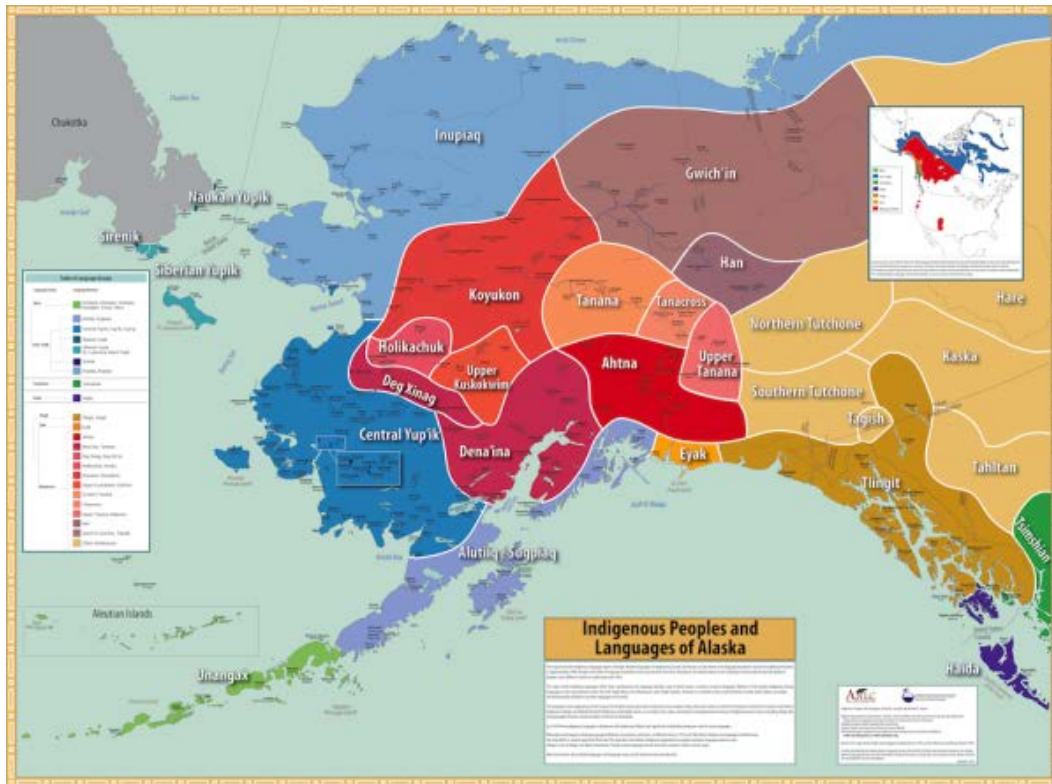


Figure 1. Alaska Native Language Map (Krauss, Holton, Kerr, & West, 2011)

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This study utilized a theoretical framework that included a combination of social constructivist theory, an Indigenous model of wellness, and the strengths perspective.

Theoretical Framework

The social constructivist theory focuses on how people create meaning through the co-construction of knowledge, through observation, lived experience, and interaction in the context of the environment (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1985; Kim, 2001). For this research, social constructivism provides a lens to understand how wellness is created and maintained through a DXA worldview and the relationships that are important, both individually and collectively, in the context of our lives and community. “Social constructivism emphasizes the importance of culture and context in understanding what occurs in society and constructing knowledge based on this understanding” (Kim, 2001, p. 2). This quote highlights two very important factors in understanding how wellness is constructed among the DXA people; culture and context are essential components of determining how wellness is created and maintained. Culture is a broad concept that includes history, traditions, spirituality, rituals, language, food stories, and a shared understanding of how to live and be in relationship to the people and

environment around us. Context highlights the importance of place for the DXA people and is needed to understand the culture and gives meaning and perspective to the person's experiences. Kim (2001) states that there are three important assumptions to consider about social constructivism: reality is constructed through human interactions and does not exist without society giving meaning to reality; knowledge is created through human interactions within the environment (context) and therefore is co-constructed; and learning occurs through social interaction around activities, not just within the individual. Social constructivism is about the relationships that exist between people, animals, objects, and the spirit world, which fits appropriately with the worldview of the DXA people. Wellness as it relates to DXA people can be understood by utilizing the social constructivist theory; it is important to explore how DXA values, knowledge, culture, practices, and context shape thoughts and actions and give meaning to the concept of wellness.

The strengths perspective is integral to the theoretical framework in that this dissertation study is an effort to highlight the strengths of the DXA people and move away from problematizing the people, as has been done numerous times in past research and media. Reclaiming our personal and collective power and to be proud of who we are as cultural and spiritual beings is an essential part of being well. Saleebey (2000) states,

The work of the strengths approach is the work of empowerment—helping individuals, families, and communities see and utilize their capacities; recognize the options open to them; understand the barriers and scarcities they may face; surface their hopes and aspirations; and align them with their inner and outer resources to improve the quality of their lives. (pp. 127-128)

The strengths perspective connects closely with social constructivism since having a strengths focus is a fundamental piece of the co-creation of wellness within a culture and

community. The strengths perspective also connects to an Indigenous model of wellness as discussed by Weaver (2002), she states that “wellness reinforces and is reinforced by a sense of cultural identity” (p. 7) and that we as Native people have been labeled and defined by others in many ways, one way this has been done is through all of the negative statistics that permeate journals, conferences, and media. These statistics are all that some people know about Native people. They don’t see or hear or know about the beauty, strength, and wisdom of the people. Weaver (2002) goes on to say, “When you are defined by external entities, it is disempowering, demoralizing, and often devastating to your sense of self.” The strengths perspective is an important part of the framework for this dissertation that guides the researcher and participants to have conversations about what is working as opposed to what is not working. Weaver (2002) discusses an Indigenous model of wellness as being,

A holistic concept, as illustrated by the different elements of the medicine wheel. All areas must be in balance and harmony for true wellness to exist. A problem in one area upsets the balance and affects other areas. Wholeness or integrity of individuals, families, communities, and nations are all facets of wellness. Wellness and spirituality are inseparable. (p. 7)

The Indigenous model of wellness is an important part of the theoretical framework ensuring that this study takes a holistic approach to looking at wellness.

It is also essential to define and describe some aspects of DXA values, as these are what will influence the construction of the concept of wellness. Some values that nurture and reveal wellness include the concepts of balance, strength, survival, relationships, beauty, and usefulness. I have highlighted these ideas of DXA wellness as important DXA values and practices that connect wellness and action together. The Alaska Native Knowledge Network (ANKN; 2006) has created posters of shared

Athabascan values (with the help of elders and community) and distributed posters depicting these values. These values are practices about how to live a good Athabascan life. They include:

- Self-sufficiency and hard work
- Care and provision for the family
- Family relations and unity
- Love for children
- Village cooperation and responsibility to village
- Humor
- Honesty and fairness
- Sharing and caring
- Respect for elders and others
- Respect for knowledge & wisdom from life experiences
- Respect for the land and nature
- Practice of native traditions
- Honoring ancestors' spirituality

In reviewing articles on broader Indigenous concepts and definitions of wellness, these authors as well as many other scholars (Durie, 2004; Hodge, et al., 2009; Marsalla, 1998; Weaver, 2002) depict Indigenous wellness as maintenance of balance and harmony, looking at a holistic view of the individual to include all aspects of their humanness and connection to other people, their environment, culture, and history, which are compatible with the social constructivist theory. It is also important to highlight the concept of relationships because they are central to the Indigenous way of life and also connect to the social constructivist theory. Wilson (2008) discussed the importance of relationality when conducting research with Indigenous people. Relationality is described as recognizing and honoring the relationships that exist for individuals, groups, and communities, as well as the importance of building relationships. These relationships include family, community, organizations, spirituality, the earth, food, seasons, history, culture, and traditions. Wilson argued that not only should we recognize and honor these

relationships but that we also have to be accountable to them. The term relational accountability depicts the importance of the researcher and the research process in being accountable or respectful of the relationships that are known to be important and relevant to research participants and the community (Wilson, 2008). For this research study the general idea of relationships, in particular the reciprocity within relationships, have the potential to open up ‘radical possibilities’ for wellness efforts. A fuller discussion of the term *radical* can be found in Chapter 3 of this study; however, it is referring to the transformational possibilities that occur during the process of gathering together and sharing knowledge. DXA culture and values are the foundation of this research on how to better understand and enhance wellness, as well as gaining an understanding and awareness of the interconnectedness and reciprocal interaction between all parts of the whole (Durie, 2004; Hodge, et al., 2009; Marsalla, 1998; Weaver, 2002).

Deg Xit’an language revitalization efforts in the past 20-plus years have left the people with some great resources, many highlighting wellness concepts. There is an online dictionary titled, *Deg Xinag Alixi Ni’elyoy*, which means, “The local language is gathered together.” This dictionary is a project of the Anvik Historical Society and is housed on the Alaska Native Knowledge Network website. It is a learner’s dictionary with contributions from Deg Xinag Elders, including Edna Deacon, James Dementi, Raymond Dutchman, Katherine Hamilton, Lucy Hamilton, Hamilton Hamilton, Alta Jerue, Hannah Maillelle, and Ellen Savage. This dictionary includes concepts related to wellness like “getiy xiyo t’anh” (she has a good mind), and “ngizrenh” (good, handsome, pretty), and “xeledz” (well) that depict the worldview of the DXA people (Miller et al., 2007). Another great resource is a collection of stories by Deg Xit’an Elders Hannah

Maillele, Ellen Savage, and Edna Deacon recorded between 2002-2004 and titled, *About Deg Xiyani' Xidhoy: Stories From Just Around Here*, and housed on the University of Alaska Southeast, Alaska Native Studies webpage. These stories encompass the worldview and way of life of the DXA people and help to understand and frame the health and wellness of the people (Miller MacAlpine & Taff, n.d).

Literature Review

The mainstream Western wellness movement began in 1961 with a book titled *High Level Wellness*, by physician Halbert Dunn. In the decades that followed, wellness and the wellness philosophy caught on and are used widely today. The wellness model is often looked at as opposite to the medical model, in which the illness or disease or problem takes precedent over the interests, skills, and potential of the individual (Swarbrick, 2006).

A review of studies on conceptualizations of wellness in the literature are promoting the documentation and use of alternative wellness frameworks and strategies in combating social problems through the use of wellness perspectives, solution-focused techniques, and an understanding of the complex relationships between the individual, collective, and the environment; this clearly can influence all levels of social work research and practice (Bartlett, 2005; Gould, 2006; Hodge et al., 2009; Weaver, 2002; Wolsko, Lardon, Hopkins, & Ruppert, 2006). Each individual, group, and community can have their own unique understanding of how to create and maintain wellness. The more Indigenous groups and communities engage in the research and discussion around the concept of wellness the better that they and outsiders understand their community's

strengths and practices related to wellness. This level of understanding of community wellness strategies can enhance social service programs that want to use the community's knowledge and conceptualization of wellness to guide their interventions. The knowledge of community wellness strategies, especially if successfully applied to interventions and evaluated, can also positively impact policy and funding for programs that have a wellness philosophy or component. Studies that have been done through the guidance of community input and participation have proven to be more effective than studies done on communities without their input; this participatory process increases the level of community action in creating solutions in a manner that fits with the community (Davis & Reid, 1999; Legaspi & Orr, 2006; Saleebey, 2002; St. Denis, 1989; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006; Walters & Simoni, 2009; Weaver, 1999; Wexler, 2006).

Wellness has and continues to be defined in a variety of ways. Some terms that are linked with wellness or used interchangeably are health; holistic wellness; balance; physical, spiritual, social, and environmental health; happiness; productiveness; harmony; and complementary and alternative medicine (Weaver, 2002). There are currently wellness websites, conferences, and programs that encompass a broad range of wellness ideas and offer many ways of looking at health and well-being. Instead of looking through a deficit-based lens and asking what is wrong, people are asking what is right, what is good, and what is working. Reporting on the strengths and successes provides an opportunity to balance the perspectives of media consumers, to accurately depict various communities and populations, and to instill pride and nurture identity.

Below are examples of the variety of definitions of wellness that exist:

- Wellness as defined by the Rural Assistance Center website is “an

active, lifelong process of becoming aware of choices and making decisions toward a more balanced and fulfilling life” (Rural Assistance Center, 2002-2003, n.p.).

- Wellness should not be lumped in with the term ‘alternative medicine’ because wellness is a state of being, it is not a treatment or form of medicine (Corbin and Pangrazi, 2001).
- Dunn (1961) defined wellness as, “An integrated method of functioning which is oriented toward maximizing the potential of which the individual is capable, within the environment in which [she or] he is functioning” (p. 4).
- Ardell (2000), another leader in the wellness movement, emphasized wellness as “helping people better appreciate what it means to be a healthy person, as opposed to just not being sick” (n.p.). Wellness is also a philosophy of looking at health from an interrelated perspective (Ardell, 2000).
- Weaver (2002) noted that wellness is both difficult and simple and natural to define; she states that wellness consists of balance and symmetry of different parts of the whole and is reinforced by a sense of cultural identity and is inseparable with the concept of spirituality.
- Another way to view wellness is as an either-or statement such as this. “Wellness is harmony in mind, body, and spirit; unwellness is disharmony in mind body and spirit” (Portman & Garrett, 2006, p. 456).

- Hodge, Limb, and Cross (2009) discussed a “Native Model of Wellness,” in which they described wellness as balance and harmony among the spirit, body, mind, and context. They described wellness as a complex interplay of spirituality, physical status, cognitive and emotional processes, and environment; and when all four areas are in balance wellness exists. “Wellness is a multidimensional state of being describing the existence of positive health in an individual as exemplified by quality of life and a sense of well-being” (Hodge et al., 2009, p. 1). Wellness is also linked to the person and environment as a whole; wellness models can explain how those linkages occur (Hodge, et al, 2009).

Four key messages that are important to highlight about wellness are: challenges are inevitable, however, there needs to be a focus or refocus to strengths; wellness is multifaceted and contextual; wellness is a way of life: understanding the impact of culture, history, and contemporary issues; and relationships create energy and transformations that produce possibilities. Each of the key messages are intertwined and overlapping and are ideas that are important for understanding the reason for the study, the way the study should be carried out, and are part of the lens for understanding how wellness can be maintained and/or reclaimed and/or created among DXA people. A discussion of these four themes continues below.

Challenges Are Inevitable, However, There Needs to Be a Focus or Refocus to Strengths

Challenges and stressors are an inevitable part of life for individuals, groups, and communities. It is how we navigate the challenges that determine wellness. Strength-based approaches have been shown to be more effective and manageable in working toward wellness than a deficit-based approach (Davis & Reid, 1999; Legaspi & Orr, 2006; Saleebey, 2002; St. Denis, 1989; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006; Walters & Simoni, 2009; Weaver, 1999; Wexler, 2006).

One indicator of the need for further wellness research stems primarily from the disproportionate amount of deficit-based data that exists on social, health, and behavioral health related issues among Indigenous populations—data such as high suicide rates, disproportionate amounts of Alaska Native children and adults in the child welfare and prison systems, and high rates of diabetes, cancer, and alcohol-related disorders (Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, 2009). These types of data are collected and widely disseminated among legislators, university faculty and students, social service professionals, and the communities within Alaska. While this type of data is important to understand the breadth of the issues and what is happening within a population and to advocate for funding and examine existing programs, it is often viewed solely as the truth without fully understanding the context, history, diversity, and what is working within the population. What is necessary is more information that highlights the inherent wisdom, strengths, and achievements of Indigenous people and communities and expands and balances the public's knowledge and perception of these communities. Unfortunately, if much of the widely disseminated data are deficit-based, the public, and the community

itself, begin to see that group or community as deficient and the many strengths that exist may become less visible, even to the community themselves (Saleebey, 2002). It can be overwhelming and frustrating when community members only see and hear the negative aspects reported about them; it is defeating, stigmatizing and oppressive.

Another aspect to reiterate is about research itself. Much of the research done in Indigenous communities has been one sided, harmful, and benefitted the researcher, not the community (Dunbar & Scrimgeour, 2006; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). Much of the data and reporting on Alaska Native people has been deficit-based and includes very little documentation of strengths, resilience, and what is beautiful and working. Approaching Indigenous communities from a strengths perspective and creating discussions around positive experiences that enhance optimistic feelings about oneself and one's family and community create hope and produce possibilities.

There is a large body of research suggesting that focusing on strengths and assets of a people and community, as well as groups coming up with their own solutions based on their cultural understanding of the world, is more effective in creating long lasting solutions (Saleebey, 2002; St. Denis, 1989; Weaver, 1999; Wexler, 2006; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006; Davis & Reid, 1999; Legaspi & Orr, 2006; Walters & Simoni, 2009, Davis & Reid, 1999).

Accentuating the problems of clients creates a web of pessimistic expectations of, and predictions about, the client, the client's environment, and the client's capability to cope with that environment. Furthermore, these labels have the insidious potential, repeated over time, to alter how individuals see themselves and how others see them. In the long run, these changes seep into the individual's identity. (Saleebey, 2002, p. 4)

Saleebey expressed the need for social workers and other professionals to rethink problem-focused approaches with clients and communities and work toward solutions

and strength-based strategies in an effort to be more effective in creating positive change. The strengths perspective has evolved in more recent years to embody the idea of empowerment, liberation, and mobilization, accentuating the importance of connecting theory to practice (Itzhaky & Bustin, 2002; Rapp, Saleebey, & Sullivan, 2005; Saleebey, 2002).

Another gap in the literature is a discussion around the coexistence of surviving in hardships and living in wellness. Survival is innate to human beings and Indigenous people have been put to the test and survived many situations and continue to survive and thrive. The possible coexistence of the two, surviving and thriving, does not match theories, such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, where self-actualization occurs when the person is no longer in "survival" mode. In a Western lens survival means barely getting by and holds negative connotations, while the experience and meaning is different among Indigenous people. Survival is a day-to-day experience embedded in cultural activities, crafts, and practices, for example hunting, fishing, and staying warm. In Western society a survivor was once a victim, where in the Indigenous culture, surviving defines the strength of the people. Looking at how DXA people, individually and collectively, have survived over a lifetime as well as over generations and unearthing and reclaiming the strategies that facilitated that survival and recognizing those strategies as strengths that can be drawn upon today, can unleash many possibilities for wellness.

Wellness Is Multifaceted and Contextual

Wellness, as it has been written and discussed by many Indigenous scholars, is shaped by a holistic combination of factors (mind, body, spirit, environment, history,

traditions, and relationships) influencing each other in a continuous and dynamic way working toward balance and harmony. Wellness is determined by individuals and groups in the context of their respective environments and worldview (Durie, 2004; Hodge et al., 2009; Marsalla, 1998; Weaver, 2002).

Another gap in the literature is in the definition of wellness itself. Wellness literature presents varied definitions and practices of wellness as illustrated above. Wellness is contextual and influenced by all aspects of the person's environment, which would mean that wellness varies from person to person and community to community and culture to culture. More research and literature and discussions on a variety of communities are needed to contextualize wellness and use that knowledge to create interventions that work for that community. These discussions among community members may unearth ideas and solutions that fit within the worldview and way of that community. The issue with always defining something is that the definition can then become a one size fits all set of guidelines and approach; that approach may work for some communities and not work for others.

The ecological perspective, embedded in a number of disciplines, and used as a framework for practicing social work, relates to the complex relationships that are central to wellness philosophy. The ecological perspective views human beings as a part of the larger ecosystem where they are in a continuous transaction/relationship with all elements of their environment. The human being is influenced by elements of the environment (physical, spiritual, social, cultural, political, historical, and natural) and in turn all those elements of the environment are influenced by the person; there is a constant adaptation happening among all the elements working towards balance. When one element is unable

to adapt challenges can arise, for example, if people over-hunt a specific animal, that animal may become extinct, therefore altering the ecosystem, possibly in a detrimental way, which may then negatively affect the human population (Germain & Gitterman, 1996). The ecological perspective has become more popular in the area of public health and health research because of the compatibility with the complex and relational nature of understanding and intervening in health issues. Social ecology has been around since the 1980s and fits well with health- and wellness-related issues and research. Social Ecology is a theory and framework for understanding the relationships between personal and environmental factors in health (McLaren & Hawe, 2005; Stokols, 1996; Ungar, 2002). “According to the social ecological perspective, the congruence or ‘fit’ between people and their environment is considered an important predictor of wellbeing” (McLaren & Hawe, 2005, p. 12). The social ecological perspective is compatible and supports the literature on the complex and interrelated nature of wellness in Indigenous communities.

Kawagley (2006), a Yupiaq scholar and Elder from Alaska, added to the ideas of the ecological perspective when he noted that ecological systems among Alaska Native people were taught in stories and practiced as a way of life before Western science came to acknowledge and value them. He posited the idea of people, animals, land, thoughts, and feelings reciprocally influencing and affecting one another and that this has always been a belief and way of life of Native people that has helped people stay balanced and live in harmony with each other and the earth. One example of this balance is the practice of giving thanks to the creator, to animals, and the land for what has been received. In many Alaska Native cultures it is common to thank the animal for giving itself to the

hunter for food and clothing and sustenance. If thanks were not given or if any part of the animal were wasted or treated disrespectfully it is believed that the animal would not give itself to hunters in the future and that could be detrimental to the Tribe in the form of starvation and death.

Historical and generational trauma among Indigenous people has also influenced wellness dramatically. Colonization efforts and Western encroachment and influence, particularly in schooling, has had known harmful effects on the culture, identity and wellness of Native people. Schools in Native villages that do not teach the Indigenous language or Indigenous concepts but rather teach English and Western concepts produce young children who are losing their identity.

The messages from the school, the media, and other representations of western society present...students with an unreal picture of the outside world, as well as a distorted view of their own, which leads to a great deal of confusion for students over who they are and where they fit in the world. The loss of Yupiaq identity leads to guilt and shame at being Yupiaq. The resultant feelings of hurt, grief, and pain are locked in the mind to emerge as depression, which is further reinforced by the fear of failure in school, by ridicule from non-Natives, and by the loss of their spirituality. (Kawagley, 2006, p. 48)

Relating these ideas with the conceptualization of wellness brings in the element of identity and the importance of Native people knowing who they are and where they come from and gives them a sense of belonging that ultimately manifests itself into a form of wellness; it also points to the ways that humans and environments are not separate but intertwined.

Current research on health and illness raises the importance of acknowledging, valuing, and learning from both Indigenous knowledge and Western knowledge (Brayboy, 2006; Burkhart, 2004; Durie, 2004; Kawagley, 2006; Kawagley & Barnhardt).

In a case study with the Maori people in New Zealand, Durie (2004) stated that,

Maori perspectives on health have favoured a holistic interpretation; good health is seen as a balance between mental, physical, family/social, and spiritual dimensions. Because all four are regarded as essential there is little support for a uni-dimensional outcome measure such as HONAS (which records mental symptoms only). The underlying premise in the framework is that wellness, not simply the removal of symptoms, should be the aim of an intervention. (p. 1141)

Connections and relationships within the environment add to the creation and maintenance of wellness. Research can study human beings using holistic approaches to avoid developing fragmented and partial understandings of complex phenomena. It is necessary to look holistically at an issue like wellness, as complex as it may be, in order to see what strengths exist and build on those toward creating lifelong, positive change. Western society tends to have education and social service systems that focus narrowly on their own discipline or subject area without recognizing that the world we live in is not pieced apart, that all pieces impact one another (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005; Orchard, Curran, & Kabene, 2005); it is imperative that collaboration happen within systems of care in the effort to increase health and wellness. This will help to bring those puzzle pieces together to see the bigger picture and formulate more effective interventions (Durie, 2004; Germaine & Gitterman, 1980; Kawagley, 2006; Weaver, 2002).

Wellness Is a Way of Life: Understanding the Impact of Culture,

History, and Contemporary Issues

In conducting research on wellness with Indigenous communities it is fitting that the research be culturally and contextually appropriate to Indigenous ways of life.

Foundational concepts that are experienced by Deg Xit'an, Athabascans and influence

wellness are balance, strength, survival, usefulness, purpose, beauty, and relationships (Kawagley, 2006; Leonard, 2007; Wilson, 2008).

Conceptualizations of wellness are important when looking at health-related interventions with American Indians and Alaska Natives in rural and urban areas in the United States due to the vast amount of cultural, geographic, and historical differences each area encompasses. Health and wellness-related interventions in Indigenous communities are most effective when the intervention reflects the people's and the community's culture and traditions; however, because each area is unique it is important that the interventions also respond to and incorporate those unique aspects, prompting the need for further research (Weaver, 1999; 2002). Other factors to consider in understanding the complexity of wellness in Indigenous communities are to examine how social, economic, and political factors influence wellness. "In the history of the Native Hawaiian people are etched irrefutable facts which testify that human health and well-being are first and foremost sociopolitical challenges" (Marsalla et al., 1998, pp. 93-94). This sentiment adds to the complexity of understanding and conceptualizing wellness in Indigenous communities and leads to the need for further exploration of those sociopolitical challenges.

Yellow Horse Brave Heart (1998) conducted research on historical trauma and grief as experienced by Lakota tribal people, where she defined historical trauma as cumulative and collective trauma over the life course and spanning across generations. The effects of historical trauma among Indigenous people have been documented by other researchers as well (Duran, Duran, & Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 1998; Evans-Campbell, 2008; Napoleon, 1996; Weaver & Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 1999).

However, research conducted within specific communities examining what individuals know about historical trauma and how it personally affects their lives today is less known. Yellow Horse Brave Heart (1998) hypothesized that education about historical trauma would increase awareness of the impact historical trauma has had on the Lakota people, sharing grief with others leads to cathartic relief, and that through this grief resolution there would be a reduction in grief effects and a more positive group identity. Her hypotheses were supported by her findings. This has important implications for researchers working in Indigenous communities and definitely for researchers who are focusing on aspects of wellness. In response to cumulative group trauma there is unresolved grief, which correlates with loss of cultural identity and high rates of suicide supporting the idea that “past events shape current reality” (Weaver & Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 1999, p. 22). Embedding the concept of historical trauma within the ecological perspective highlights how individual and community wellness are impacted by historical events, among other factors.

Depression and loss of spirituality are connected through historical trauma and colonization; being able to grieve in a way that is meaningful for Indigenous people is becoming lost with the loss of spirituality and culture (Marshall, 1991). Language, one variable in the relationship to wellness, is for many Indigenous people connected to spirituality through the knowledge and words, especially in songs, which are considered sacred and powerful.

Loss of language and poor linguistic rights (e.g., policies, legislation, and attitudes toward language use in society) influence lower life expectancy, high rates of sick days from work, and lower quality of life (Kunnas, 2003).

Excellent linguistic rights are also connected to mutual trust in community, active members in the community, and overall positive well-being and health (Kunnas, 2003).

Feelings of communality, solidarity and mutual trust within the group contribute significantly to mental health while feelings of marginality and lack of communality have been considered the most important reasons for ill health. Minorities often lack feelings of communality, because they are marginal to society (Kunnas, 2003, p. 417).

In the article titled *Aboriginal Language Knowledge and Youth Suicide* (2007), Hallet, Chandler, and Lalonde report,

At least in the case of BC, those bands in which a majority of members reported a conversational knowledge of an Aboriginal language also experienced low to absent youth suicide rates. By contrast, those bands in which less than half of the members reported conversational knowledge suicide rates were six times greater. Although the newly minted index of Aboriginal language use was found to form a common factor with other previously identified markers of cultural continuity, even this crude marker of language use was shown to have strong discriminatory power independent of these earlier factors, and to make a significant independent contribution to our understanding of the high youth suicide rates that plague many Aboriginal communities. Altogether these results demonstrate that indigenous language use, as a marker of cultural persistence, is a strong predictor of health and wellbeing in Canada's Aboriginal communities. (p. 398)

What is important to note is that Indigenous communities are experiencing the highest levels of wellness when they are able to express themselves as cultural beings and when they feel valued by society for who they are as cultural beings; this includes the ability to speak their language, practice their spirituality and traditions, freedom to subsist off of the land, and the right to determine their own needs and solutions.

Books by other Indigenous (Alaska Native) authors such as Howard Luke (1998), Peter John (1996), and Dorothy Savage (1997) all tell stories about life in Alaska; some of the central themes are surviving off the land, relationships, hard work, spirituality, and reflecting on culture and tradition as a guide to living. They discuss changes over time, to include loss of cultural knowledge and practices, and they stress the importance of

remembering and finding the time to relearn what was forgotten or forced out of the minds of native people so that the healing process can begin and native people can utilize the strength and grounding of their culture to help to endure all of the new changes the future will undoubtedly bring forth. Overall themes from these and other books about the lives of Indigenous people include the discussion of spirituality as a way to live life; teaching about value systems based on respect, honor, and balance; conversations surrounding the value of listening and learning from elders and the environment; portraying the connection and respect between the people, animals, land, and spirit world; and discussing the importance of Indigenous knowledge that has shaped life for thousands of years (Joseph, 1997; Kawagley, 2006; Krupa, 1995; Luke, 1998).

Relationships Create Energy and Transformations

That Produce Possibilities

Recognizing, honoring, and building relationships are essential in research and practice around wellness (Wilson, 2008). Relationality and relational accountability describe the importance of being aware of and accountable to all the relationships that exist among human beings, including spirituality, the community, environment, land and animals, the river and sky, and with the formal and informal systems and organizations within which we interact (Wilson, 2008). Social workers, for example, should be aware of the important relationships that exist for their clients and be accountable and respectful to those relationships, to explore the ways people might utilize the relationships in healthy ways and to understand how those relationships impact the individual or community. A foundation for creating and maintaining wellness is the awareness and

accountability to the relationships that exist within and around the individual and community.

Another gap in the wellness literature is the role and relationship with technology in communities and how that influences wellness. In a rapidly changing world, one that promotes and focuses on communicating through Twitter, Facebook, websites, blogs, and smart phones, the world has become more virtually connected. It is an exciting new world where instant knowledge is at the touch of a fingertip and individuals can “friend” others that live across the world; these new opportunities have also decreased time for face-to-face connections. The DXA people of southwest Alaska have a strong oral tradition through which knowledge and culture is transmitted through storytelling, discussion, prayer, dances, and songs from one person to another. Technology and modernization have positively added to this transmission of knowledge and now there are available text and web-based dictionaries to help teach the language, as well as videos, computer discs, websites, and family websites that share cultural information. The transmission of knowledge now has more vessels than ever before. The individual seeking knowledge has many to choose from at their leisure. It seems that there is so much information out there; it is hard to know where to begin. No longer is it required to sit and listen and reflect and understand the stories in order to pass them on, because technology can do that instead. This can also have a detrimental impact on the culture and the people. Even though there are more opportunities to transmit knowledge, less and less of the culture, dances, rituals, language, and stories are being shared and transmitted to the younger generation to pass on. The Deg Xinag language has only a small number of remaining speakers. The purpose of the transmission of knowledge from generation to generation is to document

history, create a sense of belonging and place, to find our way spiritually, to increase understanding of identity, to learn respect, to learn our role within the community, to survive in a harsh and ever-changing context as well as support the survival of a people, language, and culture. For example, transmitting knowledge of the Yukon River, which is a source of sustenance and transportation for the Deg Xit'an people, through teachings about how it has changed, how to read it, and how to maneuver within it, is imperative to the well-being of the individual navigating the river. If the knowledge of how to live and survive around the river was not passed on to younger generations it would have detrimental consequences to that generation in terms of survival and sustainability. Many people could argue that this type of knowledge is not needed in modern times because of access to grocery stores and the availability of other modes of transportation, as well as other advances; however, elders still caution that someday society might need to go back to simpler times. Athabaskan Elder Howard Luke shares his concerns with youth and community whenever the opportunity presents itself to remind us that technology is fragile and there may be a time when we have to solely rely on the land and each other for survival and we have to take time to learn how to do this. Transmission of knowledge for cultural continuity is a related aspect to technology and is another reason wellness research is important. Increasing face-to-face transmission of knowledge in ways that are natural as well as finding ways to build on connections that already exist will ensure that the knowledge will more likely be heard and understood, which is an important aspect of enhancing the well-being of individuals and communities. The practices of working hard to hunt and gather food and taking time to gather together for celebrations or during times of tragedy are two of many ways in which information is obtained or transmitted. For

example, cutting fish or gathering berries is a time when people come together and talk, laugh, and reminisce about old times. During gatherings, around food, songs, and dance, there are often speeches and stories being told. Wellness is a concept that encompasses all parts of being and can be understood from a historical, cultural, spiritual, and ecological perspective. Looking at wellness from these perspectives can add to further understanding of circumstances and culture and can enhance the ability to obtain skills and knowledge to support and increase wellness.

Conclusion

The discussions in the above literature review surrounding wellness are very diverse. Wellness is linked to the person and environment as a whole, models are created for ways to think about how wellness exists, and wellness is discussed as a lived experience. Also, the roles of an individual, family, and community/environment in contributing to or maintaining balance are conceptualized differently in Indigenous thought. The commonalities that exist are the strengths-based focus that seems to be core to the concept of wellness in general, as well as the social ecological perspective, which highlights the importance of understanding connections and relationships and looks at wellness holistically. The literature on wellness is strengthened with the addition of diverse worldviews and experiences.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

The use of Indigenous research frameworks in the academic arena by Indigenous scholars worldwide is increasing as scholars exercise the right and choice to develop and apply Indigenous epistemological frameworks as a basis for research and practice (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). It is a blessing that these growing handful of scholars have created space in academia for upcoming Indigenous scholars to write using the knowledge and practices of Indigenous people as a framework, and, in the case of this research project, to be able to explore and apply the cultural practices that exist among the Deg Xit'an people to emphasize and discuss the lived concept of wellness.

The methodology utilized in this study will be discussed and organized within an Indigenous research framework created by Margaret Kovach in her book titled *Indigenous Methodologies, Characteristics, Conversations and Contexts* (2009). The framework will be applied utilizing a foundation of DXA epistemology and worldview. Kovach describes the framework as a “nest that holds within it properties full of possibility for approaching research” (p. 45). She states that this framework is just one expression of an approach to Indigenous methodologies and others can utilize her framework with their tribal epistemologies or create their own based on their cultural knowledge and practices. This model is useful and makes sense for this research

on many levels, including the way in which to think about and approach research. The model in a visual form takes the shape of a bird's nest holding six eggs. The eggs are metaphors for six characteristics of the research framework and within the middle of the eggs include Indigenous epistemology, in this research the Deg Xit'an epistemology. The six characteristics are: a) researcher preparation, b) research preparation, c) decolonizing and ethics, d) gathering knowledge, e) making meaning, and f) giving back. Each of these characteristics is utilized when needed and no linear approach or form is dictated, as the researcher may go back and forth between any of these during the research process.

Figure 2 is a visual of Margaret Kovach's (2009) Indigenous research framework.

A description of each of these characteristics and a discussion of how it has been applied to this research study is represented below. Before I begin this discussion I would like for people to recognize that in my journey as an Indigenous scholar I have been taught both by my community of Deg Xit'an people and other Indigenous people and I also have gone to school in Western institutions all my life. I struggle with knowing how to navigate this process of doing research with and for my people and within a Western academic institution. So I feel this is a bit clunky trying to fit parts and pieces together to make a whole. I am starting to understand through my discussions with Elders and through the mentorship of my Indigenous colleagues how to do this better. I am grateful to have learned what I have learned and know that I will continue to learn how to be who I am, a strong Deg Xit'an woman, in the realm of academia.

Researcher Preparation

Researcher preparation concerns conducting the research in a good way. It describes the experiential aspect of the researcher and is focused around the process the researcher undertakes before and during the research project. The idea is that the research being conducted requires preparation, and choices are made as to how researchers come to decide on their particular research study. Likely, past experiences have led the researcher in the choices that they make in the planning and implementation of the research and it is necessary for them to look inward or outward to self-reflect and center themselves within the research. The implications of this are to: culturally ground the research and the researcher, to understand underlying motivations and purpose of the researcher, to self-reflect on any aspects of insider/outsider characteristics, and to begin to document the process. Kovach (2009) states that, “cultural grounding is the way that culture nourishes the researcher’s spirit during the inquiry and how it nourishes the research itself” (p. 116).

Researcher preparation, as it relates to this research study, will be reflected below in a discussion about my own positionality within the research and also in Chapter 5 of this document where I discuss my own wellness journey and transformation throughout this research process. Researcher preparation is closely related to the idea of reflexivity in qualitative research. Trimble and Mohatt (2006) state that, “reflexivity on the part of the researcher is the ability of the researcher to continually think about what he or she is feeling, thinking, and doing, and with humility” (p. 330).

According to the worldview of my people I have been preparing for this research on wellness since before I was born. This part of my life has already been written.

Working in the area of wellness, specifically with and on behalf of DXA and other Indigenous people, is part of my purpose. Elders have told me that I have an important role to play and that our ancestors have been waiting patiently for me to step into my role. My experiences throughout my life have prepared me to work in the area of wellness research and practice. I was given the gift of seeing the beauty and strength of our culture and people and I have also been given the gift of experiencing challenges in life and among our people. DXA Elders talk about the fact that we are given our challenges so that we can learn what we need to learn and be who we were meant to be. I am grateful for all my experiences because they have led me to this day. As I mentioned above I learned both from my people and from the Western academic setting. I often struggle with this fact, I wish I knew more about my culture and people, I wish I grew up speaking my language, I yearn for all that could have been. I recently have come to be more at peace with my upbringing. Recently, in a meditation with an Indigenous healer it was revealed to me that growing up in two worlds has given me an important perspective and understanding; I can use my education, knowledge, and experiences to communicate across cultures. In the beginning I chose to do research on wellness because I was trying to heal myself and throughout this process I realized that my healing and wellness was linked to the wellness of my people. I am both an insider and outsider in my research. I am a Deg Xit'an woman and my family is known among my people. I am the youngest daughter of ten children born to Rudy and Alice (Frank) Demientieff. I am the granddaughter of Stanley Demientieff and Edith Bifelt and great granddaughter of Ivan Demientieff and Mary Elizabeth Newman on my father's side, and Joe Frank and Marcia Reed and Frank Modiak and Cecilia Nekot on my mother's side. My parents grew up in

the Holy Cross area. They both attended the Holy Cross Catholic Mission. They did not learn the language but they knew who we were as Native people. I grew up outside of the Deg Xit'an village communities in a small roadside town called Nenana, where I was greatly influenced by the culture and traditions of the Tanana Athabascan people, and also in the urban centers of Anchorage and Fairbanks where I was exposed to many diverse cultures. The connection to the place of my ancestors on the Yukon and Innoko rivers is still within me; however, living outside the communities made it challenging to build relationships and learn from my people. This research undertaking has been an integral part of my journey home both literally and figuratively. I am accepted and loved by my people because when they look at me they see the faces of my ancestors, of my parents, and because of that I can do this work and because of that I have an important responsibility to do my best and do this in a good way, always with the people, the culture and our future in mind.

Research Preparation

Research preparation is focused on the strategies used during the research undertaking, for example, determining what methods are deemed appropriate. Kovach (2009) developed this Indigenous research framework through discussions with many Indigenous researchers. By examining the process the researcher can be transparent within the research about how it has transformed the research and the researcher. In Brian Yazzie Burkhart's chapter in *American Indian Thought* (2004), he stated that, "In American Indian philosophy we must maintain our connectedness, we must maintain our relations, and never abandon them in search of understanding, but rather find

understanding through them” (p. 25). This idea is key to creating practical and transformative research with Indigenous people and communities. Research preparation also involves how participants are chosen and how information is obtained both from participants and the literature review.

From the beginning of this study I was interested in having transformative conversations with DXA people where participants left feeling energized and excited about who we are as a people, proud, more connected, and having gained some knowledge and tools to help us through life. It has been my experience that through groups that I have been a part of, such as Deg Xinag language groups, for the past 20 years as a learner, there have been times that have nurtured my sense of identity and belonging and created energy around wellness. I remember taking a Deg Xinag language class taught by Deg Xit’an community member Beth Leonard and linguist Alice Taff at the University of Alaska Fairbanks in my early 20s. There were a number of Deg Xit’an Elders there as well that I was meeting for the first time. I was taught the language through playing games, cooking moose soup, and taking nature walks on the UAF grounds. I remember the Elders telling me how proud they were of my ability to pick up the language and that the ability to speak the language was in my blood. They were always so generous with their words and had the ability to build you up in this way. I would often go home and share what I learned with my (late) mother who was talked to in the language when she was very little but then lost it when she went through the Catholic Mission in Holy Cross. I would share words that I learned and she would sometimes guess correctly at what they meant. She loved that I was learning and she loved remembering and sharing this with me. This type of positive energy and connection

and inspiration is what I hoped others would gain from our conversations on wellness. I chose to do a qualitative research study utilizing an Indigenous research framework, focused around Deg Xit'an, Athabaskan epistemology to answer the question: *In what ways do Deg Xit'an, Athabaskan people draw from their culturally unique experiences, knowledge, and relationships in the context of their lives to create and maintain wellness?* This study consisted of four informal conversational focus groups and two interviews. The term conversational was used to create a more organic and informal setting where Elders started us off in a good way by sharing their stories and where others along the way were able to add to their stories or memories. When Elders are together they often feel more supported to share and when they hear something from another Elder it sparks a memory that they will then share with the group. In Kovach's (2010) article titled "Conversational Method in Indigenous Research," she discusses the conversational method as a "means of gathering knowledge found within Indigenous research." She goes on to say that it is relational at its core and follows the protocol of many Indigenous communities, which is to start off in a good way, by showing respect to Elders by having them begin the conversations with their thoughts. Much of the conversational method focuses around storytelling and remembering. Stories are often told in a very purposeful way, to teach a lesson, highlight values and beliefs, and to be humorous and make people laugh. Almost all stories take the listener on a journey and the best part is that each listener takes away a message that was meant for them, that resonated with them. Sitting with each other exchanging stories and listening always stirs up good feelings, reflection, growth, connection, belonging, and support. The conversational focus group method was chosen for this study because it is consistent with the Deg Xit'an epistemology. It centers

on the collective relationships between community members, relationship to the past, present and future, relationship to spirit and nature, and takes a holistic view of the concept of wellness. The conversational method also allowed me as the researcher to be a participant and listen and learn and be transformed right along with the other participants.

An informal interview questionnaire for the conversational focus groups was created but not utilized or needed due to the organic nature of the conversations. Conversational Focus Group #1 encompassed 7 participants and was held in Anchorage, Alaska; Conversational Focus Group #2 encompassed 9 participants and was held in Fairbanks, Alaska; Conversational Focus Group #3 encompassed 10 participants and was also held in Anchorage; and Conversational Focus Group #4 encompassed 6 participants and was also held in Anchorage. Three focus groups were held at the University of Alaska Anchorage, Native Student Services (NSS) Program during times when students were not on campus. NSS is a large room on campus separated into differing spaces, one area with couches, one area with tables, and one area that included kitchen basics. The space has offices in the back area that were closed during the conversational focus groups. It was a very comfortable space with good energy that we were lucky to have been given permission to utilize by one of the research participants. One focus group and the two interviews were held in individual family homes. In each of these settings food was provided that included salmon, moose, and berries among other store bought items; home-made gifts of jam, nature prints, potholders, and other small items were given to participants in gratitude for their participation. Each group started off in a good way with prayer and hugs and catching up with each other. Each group consisted of Deg Xit'an Elders, culture-bearers, and young adult community members, ages 18-90 years old. It

was important to include a mixture of people from young to old so that the Elders could use this as a teaching time as well. Elders and culture-bearers, as discussed in the publication *Guidelines for Respecting Cultural Knowledge*, state that,

It should be understood that the identification of "Elders" as culture-bearers is not simply a matter of chronological age, but a function of the respect accorded to individuals in each community who exemplify the values and lifeways of the local culture and who possess the wisdom and willingness to pass their knowledge on to future generations. Respected Elders serve as the philosophers, professors and visionaries of a cultural community. In addition, many aspects of cultural knowledge can be learned from other members of a community who have not yet been recognized as Elders, but seek to practice and teach local lifeways in culturally-appropriate ways. (Assembly of Alaska Native Educators, 2000, p. 3)

Two separate interviews were also conducted with Deg Xit'an Elders, one in Anchorage and one in Fairbanks. These interviews were added to be able to follow up on some of the ideas and discussions from the conversational focus groups and understand them in more depth. Conversational focus group participants were provided with a meal and given small homemade gifts for partaking in the study. Participants were invited to attend through word of mouth. A recruitment letter was sent to Deloycheet Corporation (Holy Cross Village Corporation), Holy Cross Tribal Council, as well as emailed and handed out to Deg Xit'an people (See Appendix C & D for recruitment letters). A support letter from the Holy Cross Tribe giving their permission to carry out this study can be viewed in Appendix A. Participants were provided a consent cover letter explaining the study purpose and processes. By attending the conversational focus groups and interviews participants, through this action, gave their consent to participate (See Appendix B for consent cover letter). It is important to note that I have a preexisting and on-going relationship with my participants, which is different than Western research practices

where having a relationship with participants is seen as not the best practice. The number of DXA people is small and I am related to many, if not by blood, then by marriage and kinship. Everybody knows everybody in one way or another. Kovach (2009) states that, “Having a pre-existing and ongoing relationship with participants is an accepted characteristic of research according to tribal paradigms” (p. 51). Conversational focus groups were the primary source of data collection because it is compatible to how DXA share ideas, knowledge, and traditional teachings with each other. DXA people, not unlike other Indigenous people, come together often as a collective and teach and learn from each other, while building stronger relationships and resources in the process.

Decolonizing

Decolonizing means that the voice and knowledge of the DXA people have an opportunity to be expressed and heard in a way that is meaningful to them and valued by society at large. Kovach (2009) began her discussion on decolonizing by stating,

No matter how it is positioned, a decolonizing agenda must be incorporated within contemporary explorations of Indigenous representation and voice in research. Furthermore, a decolonizing agenda is a forceful unifier that continues to shape our distinctive experience as an Indigenous collective. (p. 81)

Kovach also stated that in order to move forward you have to look back and that this conversation will be important in discussing the experiences of the Indigenous researcher in regard to “holding dual accountabilities to divergent communities” (p. 80). According to Kovach there are three ways the researcher may go about utilizing a decolonizing approach. The first is minimally integrated because the researcher is centering the tribal epistemology as the main focus and decolonizing is incorporated only

through sharing colonial history with the reader. This approach is employed when there are already many Indigenous academics within an institution. The second approach is to use decolonizing theory as the epistemology, rather than solely focusing on the tribal epistemology. This is related to transformative research and critical theory. The third approach is incorporating a decolonizing lens with the tribal epistemology at the center. It weaves the decolonizing lens throughout and seeks change. The main objective of a decolonizing approach will be to bring Indigenous methods out of the margins and construct openings and space for Indigenous knowledge in all areas of academia and everyday life (Kovach, 2009). Burkhart (2004) states that, “We are therefore I am.” He goes on to say, “If it is we that is first and not I then what counts as the data of experience is quite different” (p. 25). This statement alone, when applied to research, is a decolonizing and Indigenous centered approach because it validates the value of the collective culture of Indigenous people.

This research has focused around a collective understanding of cultural values and ways of knowing that lead to wellness among DXA people as a means of weaving a decolonizing lens throughout this paper and centering the Deg Xit’an epistemology. A large part of decolonizing in this study was related to decolonizing my own mind, remembering who I am as a DXA person, and conducting research in a good way with my people and writing about it in a good way. It is a work in progress. Another area that is important to mention is in my attempt to move from a problem-focused to strengths-focused perspective when discussing the DXA people and our understanding of wellness. I have felt the heaviness of hearing about my people, my relatives, discussed as statistics and have seen the spotlight go to us when talking about the problems and the plight that

exist and the needs we have. I wanted to ensure that for this study these issues were briefly mentioned but not the focus. It was important to highlight the beauty of the people and culture and what is working so that we can build on that, so society can have a more accurate depiction of who we are as a people. Smith (2012) in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies* states that,

The “Indigenous problem” is a recurrent theme in all imperial and colonial attempts to deal with Indigenous peoples. It originates within the wider discourse of racism, sexism and other forms of positioning the other. Its neatness and simplicity gives the term its power and durability. Framing “the...problem”, mapping it, describing it in all its different manifestations, trying to get rid of it, laying blame for it, talking about it, writing newspaper columns about it, drawing cartoons about it, teaching about it, researching it, over and over...how many occasions, polite dinner parties and academic conferences would be bereft of conversation if “the Indigenous problem had not been so problematized?” (p. 94)

Additionally, an important aspect of the decolonization process in this study was the acknowledgment that together through this process we are defining ourselves and what wellness means to us as a people; we are remembering who we are, sharing who we are, and being who we are; we are healing together; and we are leading others to heal and reclaim who they are.

Ethics in Research

Ethics in research encompasses many components. The researcher is accountable to the participants and community and has a responsibility to protect the knowledge gained. Indigenous research methodologies change the power dynamics so that the researcher does not control the process and outcome, and participants are free to express their perspective and knowledge on their own terms (Kovach, 2009). Other aspects related to ethics are self-awareness, understanding of motivations, and to ensure that the

community and participants benefit from the research conducted. Ethics also include getting approval from both academic and tribal ethics committees. I received approval for this study through the University of Utah IRB. The Deloycheet board (Village Tribal Council based in Holy Cross) has also approved this research and sent a letter of support. Informal verbal discussions with elders have occurred in which they have expressed their support for this research and the researcher will continue to have conversations with elders and other community members about this research.

In today's world, research for and with Indigenous people is very complex. Research, throughout history, conducted by outsiders on Indigenous people and communities has generated a distrust of research for many Indigenous nations, due to the various ways harm was inflicted through the process of research or in the name of research. This has laid a foundation for suspicion, anxiety, and refusal to participate—and for good reason. It is unfortunate since research, especially using Indigenous methodology, can impact theory, policy, and practice in ways that can enhance quality of life and foster awareness and positive change among the broader community.

Ethics in research from a DXA perspective is about doing things in a good way and following cultural protocol. Each of the conversational focus groups started off with a prayer and acknowledgement of our ancestors, asking our ancestors to guide us and be with us through the process. Elders were asked if they wanted to start off the conversation making sure to give them that respect. Food, to include fish, moose, and berries, was offered, and homemade gifts were always provided to participants as thanks for sharing their wisdom and experience. It is important to start in a good way and end in a good way.

The processes of Indigenous, participatory research and similar forms of research have begun to rebuild the trust and regain the participation of Indigenous communities. The increase in Native scholars who conduct research also impacts the level of participation and trust a community has for the research process. The more that Indigenous people can provide various forms of evidence-based and community-driven information to policy makers and the general public regarding societal strengths and issues the more likely funding will be received and needed interventions can take place. In an article on developing a needs assessment in Native American communities, Weaver (1999) asserted that the participatory approach is necessary to gain community involvement, trust, and ensure a successful outcome. The participatory approach includes the community in all aspects of the research process from determining the strengths and the needs that the community reveals, to being involved in the data gathering, compilation, and dissemination processes. This relates to the research idea in the sense that determining how wellness is lived will have to be community driven in order for the information received to be meaningful and for the outcomes to be beneficial to the community.

In my attempt to be a responsible researcher it was important for me to reflect on and ensure that this work not exploit or discredit any DXA person or group that was involved in the process and to make sure the research reflects certain values and requirements for both the DXA people and the Western institutions involved, including: transparency, which entailed being open and honest about the intent and the process and product of this study; incorporating a detailed consent form that outlined expectations and mandates accountability; respecting relationships, particularly around my role as

researcher and tribal member; putting forth an honest effort in approaching this research from the guidance and perspective of the DXA community in every aspect of the research; being self-reflective of my journey through the research process and having a continuous conversation with participants about how the process went; and making every effort to give back to the community throughout the research process. Deg Xit'an tribal teachings discuss caring for the spirit of the people, land, and community; doing things in a good way; following protocol; and sharing and caring for each other. These are all ethical teachings, if followed then good things will come to you or your family now and in the future.

Gathering Knowledge

Gathering knowledge is focused on how the researcher goes about collecting data in a way that is compatible with tribal ways of knowing and doing. As stated above, Kovach (2009) shares that having preexisting and on-going relationships with participants is tribally appropriate; this is a guiding factor in how the researcher relates to participants and gathers data.

This is a qualitative study utilizing an Indigenous research framework. The participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling. In this research study the main data collection process was primarily through conducting four conversational focus groups; this method was conducive to creating effective, action-oriented discussions surrounding DXA transmission of knowledge related to wellness, to include storytelling, visiting, remembering, and sharing songs and dances. These conversational focus groups were recorded through the use of audio equipment, written

notes, and journal reflections. This research project utilized conversations among the DXA people by viewing the concept of wellness as action oriented; the simple act of having conversations around wellness creates inspired interactions and elicits the “radical possibilities of relationships.” In conversations with a mentor, Lumbee scholar Dr. Bryan Brayboy, upon hearing a presentation of this work, he profoundly stated that the implications for these conversations focusing on strengths in knowledge and practice to bring about wellness would begin to reveal the “radical possibilities of relationships” that exist among human beings when we gather together and share meaningful and personal stories (B. Brayboy, personal communication, 2010). Small group conversations about family, history, culture, sense of place, spirituality, language, and so on, enhance connections between individuals participating; these participants leave those conversations inspired, hopeful, and feeling connected to community and culture. Those feelings and ideas are then brought back to family and other community members, and this in turn creates more inspired relationships. In this research study the term “radical” is used in the transformational sense, meaning that through gathering and coming together, the participants, including myself, are transformed or changed for the better. In these conversations lies opportunities for learning, growing, and healing and begins the creation of new knowledge, ideas, and relationships that will be the foundation for wellness knowledge and practices now and in the future. In an article by Garrouette (2003) titled *Defining “Radical Indigenism” and Creating an American Indian Scholarship*, she states that,

The name Radical Indigenism reflects the Latin derivation of the word “radical”: radix, meaning “root.” Radical Indigenism, as I define it, illuminates differences in assumptions about knowledge that are at the root of the dominant culture’s misunderstanding and subordination of indigenous knowledge. It argues for the

reassertion and rebuilding of knowledge from those roots. The kernel of a revolutionary American Indian scholarship, as I imagine it, is a rejection of the academy's long-standing assumption that the main reason to examine Indian cultures is to learn something about the people who practice them – their beliefs and values, their “worldviews,” their psychological health or illness, the social structures they create. Radical Indigenism dares to suggest, as its fundamental theoretical premise, that American Indian peoples possess philosophies of knowledge that can be understood as rationalities– articulable, coherent logics for ordering and knowing the world. This assumption permits us to understand these philosophies not merely as objects of curiosity (unusual things that people have believed) but as tools for discovery and for the generation of knowledge. (p. 171)

This way of understanding the research is important because this study and others like it are not only highlighting alternative ways of knowing and doing in the world, in particular as it relates to wellness, but also teaching and modeling this for others and is the process generating new knowledge that can be utilized by all for generations to come.

Conversations in small groups are more natural sharing and learning formats in the DXA community. Dr. Bryan Brayboy also noted that the focus on small groups de-centers the individual and centers on relationships. Most importantly the goal of this research was to create and continue conversations among the DXA about wellness through shared memories and stories. The intent of this research is that through inspired conversations the radical possibilities of relationships will emerge.

In the conversational focus groups I was both the researcher and a participant. The Elders guided me and I listened and reflected and interjected with few questions here and there. Elders are masters at telling stories that relate to the topic and as expected the DXA Elders did just that, they always circled back to how their story related to wellness. Once I got comfortable with the process of being researcher and participant I allowed myself to be immersed in the activity of listening and learning and enjoying the experience.

Another part of gathering knowledge was a trip I took to the DXA community of

Anvik with my Uncle and his organization, Returning To Harmony, which is dedicated to the healing and wellness of Indigenous people utilizing cultural and traditional approaches. They were working with the community on healing and wellness activities and invited me to be a part of their process. This trip was truly a healing and transformative experience for me. It was about going back to my ancestral homeland, connecting with people, learning about by ancestors and history, and being taught important cultural protocol by my uncle. One of the first things he told me was that we were going to visit and pay our respects to the people of the community. He said instead of taking a snow machine up and down the hilly community we would walk so we could get a feel for the rhythm of the land and community; he asked me to be present and notice what was around me. I met a lot of great people, we connected because of who my parents and grandparents are. These people shared stories with me, food, to include homemade ice cream made with snow from the Yukon River, and fish strips, and vanhgiq (fish ice cream). I loved the stories they shared about my mom and dad; everybody loved them and remembered them and me even though I have not been there since I was about 8 years old. I kept a journal of my time there. Below is one excerpt from my journal about going back to the land of my people.

On my flight to Anvik I rode in a 4-seater airplane with two people upfront. I was the only passenger. On the way the pilot flew low so I could see all the glory and vastness of the land, beautiful. I remembered my experience from the night before with the owl. After a long day Saturday preparing for my trip I finally got back to the cabin at 11 pm and finished some last minute packing. I went to bed about 12:15 am in my pitch-dark room trying to relax so I could sleep. I heard a noise that alerted me a bit because I wasn't sure what it was. Then I realized it was an owl. It wasn't the hoot hoot but a string of sounds. The owl kept this up until I fell asleep. At first there was a sound that reminded me of my mom. As I began thinking about the significance of the owl I first thought that they send messages, dark messages, so that alarmed me. Then I talked myself through that and knew that they must send all kinds of messages. (Uncle later said that if you

believe the messages are dark, they will be.) I started thinking about what the owl was trying to tell me (Uncle, Laura and Liz, founders of Returning to Harmony, have always said watch and listen for messages in all forms, animals, weather, unique happenings, all are signs). Since the sounds reminded me of my (late) mom my thoughts went to her and my journey to Anvik the next day and I pictured her standing there in Anvik waving excitedly to me as I flew in and motioning for me to come. She was welcoming me back and then I visualized lots of people (ancestors) waving happily at me, welcoming me home. Then I fell asleep. As I flew in that little airplane from Aniak to Anvik and watched the scenery I started thinking about my mom and ancestors welcoming me home. I was so excited, not even nervous of the little plane, and not even cold, even though it was significantly chilly in the plane. The young Native man in front of me was diligently watching the scenery below and he started motioning down with his finger so I looked and saw what looked like herds of moose all standing and laying together. The young man kept motioning and I kept looking. I realized he was counting them, not motioning to me. The herds must have averaged 10 each and there must have been 6-7 different herds. Lots of moose. Later in the day I realized they were welcoming me back as well. (Author's Personal Journal)

This was the start to a great week in Anvik where I started remembering and connecting to who I am as a DXA person. I am grateful to the Chief and the people for welcoming me, showing me love, and sharing our way of knowing and being with me.

Making Meaning

Making meaning is another characteristic that is based on the interpretation of the knowledge gathered. Kovach (2009) states that when we craft research stories utilizing our voices we have a better chance at engaging others. DXA Elders also know the power of story and share that when you start with a story it allows everyone to get on the same page. It is an opportunity for both the researcher and participants to have a transformative experience.

We participate in the meaning-making of the world. There is no world, no truth, without meaning and value, and meaning and value arise in the intersection between us and all that is around us. How we behave, then, in a certain sense shapes meaning, gives shape to the world. In this way, what we do, how we act, is as important as any truth and any fact. We can

think of this as the meaning-shaping principle of action. (Burkhart, 2004, pp. 16-17)

Burkhardt portrays the connection between meaning making and researcher behavior and action, and action of the participants and community, which is so important among research with Indigenous communities. Burkhardt's ideas are also supported by the social constructivist theory.

Making meaning has been a continuous and reciprocal process between myself and the Deg Xit'an participants and my family and my community. It was through my continued dialogue with them and others that patterns started to emerge and things began to connect. I would also say that making meaning started when I was born and began to experience life as a DXA person in the context of my surroundings. Everything I knew I learned through observation and listening and through the modeling of my parents, family, and community. My understanding of the world and how to be a Deg Xit'an person in the world kept building on itself and expanding my worldview. This research study took my knowledge and understanding and connection about how to live and be in the world to a whole new level. I have truly been on a transformative wellness journey throughout this process both individually and collectively. The stories shared in the conversational focus groups and interviews were recorded and then transcribed. I listened to them multiple times to make meaning. A thematic analysis was undertaken within this study with the goal of finding patterns and creating themes. The first level of analysis was open coding the six printed transcripts line by line, which elicited a large number of codes, a little over 100. Those codes were then grouped together to create 27 major codes. Those six transcripts and 27 codes were then entered into the qualitative data analysis software called Atlas.ti and then all the transcripts were then recoded using these

27 major codes. From this process four major themes were revealed and used to create the Deg Xit'an Wellness Journey Diagram that can be viewed in Appendix A. Discussion of these four major themes are located in Chapter 4 and 5 of this document. Once these themes emerged and were put into a diagram I brought this diagram back to three Elders and two culture bearers to share my understanding of the data as part of the member-checking process. Through this process and their feedback my diagram evolved and shifted and my understanding of the material was strengthened. The feedback was invaluable and provided the clarity I needed to complete this dissertation. Along the way I also engaged in peer debriefing, both with Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, to get feedback, guidance, and mentorship. This proved to be invaluable as well and kept me moving forward. I also attended numerous writing retreats in various settings, mainly with other Indigenous scholars. I believe this is what inspired me and kept me motivated to push through the times when writing felt lonely in the writing process and when I was overwhelmed with what to do next. I believe this type of collective, community, supportive working situation fit better with my worldview and experiences. In Chapter 4 I highlight ways in which I was able to triangulate the data utilizing written material by other Deg Xit'an scholars as well as some historical documents written by non-Indigenous scholars.

Overall, coming together, sharing, and discussing the strengths and traditions of DXA people were transformational for both the participants and myself and produced positive feelings and energy, connection, and a better understanding of wellness and movement toward wellness.

Giving Back

Giving back is the final characteristic, but perhaps the most critical characteristic, of this methodological framework. It is consistent with DXA values and practices of sharing and reciprocity. Indigenous researchers have the opportunity to create relevant and culturally based research that can be useful for the participants and community and add to their health and wellness. Giving back is a core value in Athabascan culture, whether it is giving back to the community, land, or animals; it is a notion that I as the researcher have grown up with and observed first-hand in every facet of life. Research with Indigenous communities has to have a core element of giving back to balance what the research is taking. The main way I gave back so far was through creating space for sharing positive Deg Xit'an stories and experiences within the focus groups, which created positive energy around who we are as Deg Xit'an people. This research will also create more positive awareness of who Deg Xit'an people are to those outside the group or community. I also made sure that participants were taken care of, given food, and went away with a small gift as a gesture of my appreciation. The process of giving back does not end at the conclusion of this research process; I will spend the rest of my life giving back to my DXA community because that is a value, belief, and practice in our culture. I will also continue to work with my community around healing and wellness efforts and to bring back the Tea Partner traditional practice. My uncle shares that he has supported me in this dissertation endeavor because he knows that through his efforts in helping me that at some point I will "return the favor," that I will be there to help his family or that my work will help his family and our people in ways that we may never know. What we know is that everything is reciprocal, what is given always comes back to us.

Conclusion

Conducting research with Indigenous populations is sensitive, and must be done from a good place and with good intentions, as well as with careful consideration and understanding of a people's values and beliefs, place in the world, and relationship to all things (Wilson, 2006). This research on wellness will benefit the Deg Xit'an community first and foremost. As a Deg Xit'an person conducting the research, it is an unusual opportunity both for the community and researcher to be of the same background, and hopefully together an accurate and rich description of Deg Xit'an wellness was discussed and developed.



Figure 2 Indigenous Research Framework (Adapted from Kovach, 2009, p. 45)

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

“Wellness is our way of life.” ~ Deg Xit’an Elder Participant

This results section will discuss the ways in which the conversational focus group process with Deg Xit’an Elders, culture bearers, and community participants led to the emergence of the below four main themes and subthemes that describe the wellness journey among the Deg Xit’an people. The four main themes and subthemes are outlined below:

- 1) *Cultural and traditional practices*, to include: preparing for the future, transmitting culture and language, and building physical, social, mental, and spiritual strength.
- 2) *Traditional values*, to include: respect, relationships, balance and reciprocity, caring and sharing, and happiness and humor.
- 3) *Embracing challenges by remembering who we are*, to include: isolation/disconnection, identity and belonging, historical trauma and grief, and alcohol abuse and addiction.
- 4) *Beliefs and action recommendations*, to include: coming together as a community, doing things in a good way, and sharing and caring for self and others.

The Deg Xit'an wellness journey diagram in Figure 3 tells a story about the themes that emerged from the conversational focus groups with the DXA people related to wellness. This story will be discussed throughout this results section utilizing the Tea Partner tradition as an example of how the DXA way of life leads to wellness. This diagram is depicted and will be discussed as a journey that Deg Xit'an people take throughout their lives.

We are taught Deg Xit'an values of respect, relationships, balance and reciprocity, sharing and caring, and happiness and humor, that are deeply instilled within us from the time we are born; these values are embedded through the lived cultural practices and way of life modeled by Elders, parents, and community leaders. The cultural practices include preparing for the future; transmitting culture and language; and building physical, social, mental, and spiritual strength. As Deg Xit'an people grow and develop, and as they move through their wellness journey, the people encounter life's challenges that include competing values and practices from Western society and various other types of struggles related to isolation and disconnection, identity and belonging, historical trauma and grief, and alcohol abuse and addiction. These struggles sometimes lead to poor health and mental health and can distance the people from their cultural knowledge and practices and create barriers to wellness. Yet, because Deg Xit'an values have been deeply instilled in the person, we don't ever lose who we are as Deg Xit'an people. Through the community action recommendations from Elders and culture bearers those values are able to emerge and provide the person with a sense of belonging, direction, and purpose. In response to these generational changes and life struggles, Deg Xit'an Elders and culture bearers continue to pass on their knowledge and wisdom of what can be done to

get Deg Xit'an people back to cultural practices that promote wellness and their way of life. These community action recommendations include Deg Xit'an people coming together as a community, doing things in a good way, and sharing and caring for self and others. Through these actions the Deg Xit'an person will be able to return to the cultural practices of preparing for the future, transmitting culture and language, and building physical, social, mental, and spiritual strength, which then models Deg Xit'an values and practices for the next generation so the cycle continues. Elders and culture bearers from the conversational focus groups also shared experiences of the Tea Partner tradition as an example of how wellness was infused into the Deg Xit'an way of life through lived cultural practices. This practice is infused throughout the discussion of the themes that have emerged from the conversational focus group process.

Twenty-two participants took part in the four conversational focus groups and two interviews. There were a mixture of Elders, culture bearers/community members and young adult community members. The title Elder is differentiated from that of culture bearer because they were given the title Elder from their community and peers because of their knowledge, lived experience, and giving back. Lewis (2011) states that,

In Indigenous communities in Alaska, the community respects their elders, and this is a cultural convention that distinguishes those elders who have lived traditionally and continue to serve as an integral part of their community and are viewed as role models. (p. 540)

Some of the participants joined in more than one focus group/interview. All participants lived in the urban cities of Anchorage and Fairbanks in Alaska or on the road system, however, all of the Elders and culture bearers have lived in the rural communities of Shageluk, Anvik, Holycross, and Grayling at one time in their life and many of them grew up in these communities. Many still return to their communities to visit, do

subsistence fishing and hunting, and have land allotments and/or own their own homes. Even though the participants currently live in urban areas and on the road system there is an understanding of the important relationship that exists to place and to their ancestral homelands of Holy Cross, Anvik, Shageluk, and Grayling. Walters and colleagues (2011) in their chapter titled “Dis-placement and Dis-ease: Land, Place, and Health Among American Indians and Alaska Natives” (in the book titled, *Communities, Neighborhoods and Health* by Burten et al.) state that, “Indigenous people have unique attachments to original lands, and we carry these attachments, or sacred threads, wherever we go. These attachments are linked not only to special or sacred ritual sites, but also to the whole of land and creation.” (p. 170)

A brief description of the participants of the four focus groups and two interviews are shown in Table 2.

Before discussing the four main themes, the Tea Partner tradition will be reviewed in the following section.

Tea Partner Tradition

The Deg Xit’an traditional practice called Tea Partner, or also sometimes referred to as Potlatch Partner, was a means to wellness. The following discussion will provide background and context to this traditional practice to highlight it as an example of how wellness is lived among the Deg Xit’an people.

The Tea Partner/Potlatch Partner custom is a Deg Xit’an Athabascan tradition that is an example of a cultural practice leading to individual and community wellness. In the Deg Xinag language the term “sixoldhid” is used to describe this tradition, which means,

“my friend or my partner.” The Tea Partner tradition was brought up numerous times in the conversational focus groups as an example of how wellness was lived and will also be further discussed as part of the community action recommendation theme. The term *partner* will be used throughout the rest of the results section in reference to this tradition.

Many participants between the ages of 50 and 75 years old remember getting connected with a partner when they were very young, in their teenage years and sometimes before. Many have fond and loving memories of their partner and some still know who they are and remain connected today. Partners were connected through various ways, either through ceremonies or connected together by Elders or parents in the community. The importance of the partner tradition is still evident among Deg Xit’an people today even though it is not fully practiced. It can be understood as a form of a community-based and culturally grounded safety net, focused on individuals and communities helping each other through creating connection, resources, mentorship, and sharing knowledge, stories, and humor. The overall intent is to help each other to survive and thrive in a harsh and ever-changing environment, to nurture and promote health and wellness, and establishes continuity for future generations. Many community members still remember and know their partner from long ago; however, no new partnerships have been created in a long time. Deg Xit’an people remember this tradition in a variety of ways; the process as it was remembered varied, from how they were connected to their partner and the activities they did with their partner, to the rituals, ceremonies, and dances that were included in the tradition. In his book *Ingalik Social Culture*, anthropologist Cornelius Osgood (1958) discusses three types of partners he observed among the Deg Xit’an people: the feeding partner, the potlatch partner, and third is an

informal partner that was created in childhood sometimes referred to as “special friend.” Osgood states, “One of the principal forms of interpersonal relationships is that in which one individual establishes with another a continuing partnership on the basis of reciprocal obligations.”

The Tea Partner tradition included a young person from the community of Holy Cross, Shageluk, Anvik, or Grayling getting partnered up with someone of the opposite gender and from a different community. These connections were not romantic, instead the partnership was meant to be a lifelong friendship, to create a network or web of support across communities. It is important to know that it was not always just one partner, but that you may be paired with additional partners from surrounding communities. For example, an Elder male participant stated that, “We had way more than one partner.” Another culture bearer, a female participant, stated she had three partners from different communities. Sometimes people and communities outside of these areas were also included as well as creating partners with non-Native people. Support from partners included sharing food, giving gifts, visiting, and helping in a variety of ways when needed. The partner tradition was closely associated with community potlatches and mask dances, where one community would host the dances for other communities one year, and then the guests from another community would host the potlatch and dance the next year. Everything was very reciprocal, and they would try to outdo each other and provide the best that they had to offer. One participant stated that he believed that when this tradition abruptly ended the reciprocity between communities was not paid back and therefore it needs to happen sometime soon to continue to maintain the balance and respect owed to each other.

According to one Elder male participant, “they had different dances, and they had contests, and they had humor dances and serious dances and spiritual dances.” This same participant went on to discuss how to treat your partner when they were visiting your community for the big dances and potlatches. You were to serve them meals and offer them a place to stay and honor them and show them respect while they were in your community. The same Elder goes on to say it’s about “how you respect one another.”

Another younger female participant recalled the partner tradition as:

They would take us out of school, you know, we were all little kids, and they would take us out of school because they were having a certain ceremony going on in the Kashim and we were part of that, and I don’t remember quite, you know, what, because I was pretty small, quite what it was about, but, um, yeah. It was very, very uh, serious, and, we all took it really seriously anyway, and it was really exciting.

She referred to her experience by stating,

As far as the tea partner, I did have one, and he wasn’t that...too much older than me. He was maybe 5, 4 or 5 years older than me, um, but to this day, whenever we see each other, you know, he’s, he’s my, like long lost relative, or something.

This same participant shared,

It’s like an unspoken pact between you and your partner, and it’s always, um, a man and a woman, that’s what I’ve always seen, so, you know I was just a girl and he was a boy, but we, you know, he would invite me over to his house and his mom would make this spread, and, of course other people were, eh, were, were eating, but, it was like we knew it was for us, and it was such a, I mean you kind of felt like royalty, you know, because, you know, they paid so much attention to you, and uh, yeah. I kind of miss it. I think about it once in awhile.

In interview transcripts recorded by Frank (2002) and maintained by the Alaska Native Heritage Center, DXA interviewees discussed this same concept of feeling like royalty with their tea partner,

It was a really special time to be with somebody who is just giving you his or her time. It was like you were royalty to them and that’s how they treated their partners. Like you were royal! (Smiling) You come into their house and you were

waited on and really taken care of so that was nice.

Another female Elder participant stated that the partner might also be thought of as similar to a godparent, which was echoed by another younger female culture bearer from a different community who shared this same sentiment of god parent/god child. Another male Elder participant discussed activities, such as women putting on dances for the men one year and the next year the men had to reciprocate and put on dances for the women. Everything is always supposed to balance out; the people were always honoring the values of respect, reciprocity, and giving back. These were, and are still, underlying values of the Deg Xit'an people and these values are infused in the customs and traditions of the past and also what occurs in the present.

Even though this tradition is not fully practiced today, the conversational focus group participants all shared the sentiment that the tradition was positive and important and many expressed interest in bringing back the tradition. One culture bearer, a female participant, stated that she modified the tradition in her own family today and calls it "birthday partners," where her children are connected with others around their birthdays with the same idea of sharing, gift giving, connecting and supporting each other. She says her family loves this tradition. Frank (2002) asks his interviewee what having a partner means to them, the interviewee states,

That there was somebody other than my immediate family that always kind of looks out for me. And your partner goes off and does their thing and you really don't have a say over that, but wish they're well and safe. But you always kind of kept a special eye out for your partner. Make sure that they are alright and doing o.k. That's what it meant. It brought the community together probably more than anything that happened in the community.

This discussion on the tea partner tradition will be revisited and continue within the four themes, specifically within the community action recommendation section.

Conversational Focus Group Themes

The following discussion will elaborate on the four themes that emerged from the conversational focus group process and depict how the Tea Partner traditional practice relates to how Deg Xit'an people, through this cultural practice, have created and maintained wellness and wholeness. Each of the four themes also include three to four subthemes that will be discussed and quotes from participants will be shared to support the material.

Theme #1: Cultural and Traditional Practices

Cultural practices were discussed among participants as practices that Deg Xit'an Elders, leaders, parents, and community members modeled that included preparing for the future, transmitting cultural and language, and building physical, social, mental, and spiritual strength. Many stories were shared that began with the phrase, "I remember..." These stories were shared with expressions of love, humor, sadness, respect, and longing...and mainly with the intent to teach or learn something from the past. Cultural practices emphasize the Deg Xit'an ways of life and how to be human and navigate through life's challenges. One Elder male participant stated,

It's important to remember...the elders always say, think about the way you live. Remember your people, remember your ways, remember your language, all the stuff...and they say that for a reason. There's a real reason there—that's to survive. So, that's from and that's directly from the Deg Xit'an Athabaskan people, and other Athabaskan Elders.

Another Elder male participant shared,

You know, that, our people in the villages, and what it takes is one person at a time to get well – one family at a time and then one community at a time. I still have hope that our people down there can all become well again, and, and, you know, uh, and then maybe by using what we talked about today, the character and

strength of our people, our ancestors, get back to that culture, get back to this, and then just, you know, establish a pride in themselves as they do these things, we could have a new, you know, a new river. We could have a whole bunch of healthy people up and down the river. The way I think it used to be.

Another Elder male participant stated, “We could turn all these statistics around that is plaguing the Native people if we go back to reclaim who we are.” Stories shared about Deg Xit’an cultural practices highlighted three main subthemes, preparing for the future, transmitting culture and language, and building physical, social, mental, and spiritual strength. These will be discussed next.

Preparing for the future. Participants discussed the cultural practice of preparing for the future as an integral part of the Deg Xit’an way of life. It was a matter of survival. The people prepared from day-to-day, season-to-season, year-to-year and for the future generations that are following. Everything that was done was in preparation, thinking ahead and planning for something coming. One culture bearer, a male participant stated,

Elders talk about the future. What’s gonna happen in the future? Now, we know what’s gonna happen in the future. We do. From the stories the Elders tell us, and people that are gonna survive are the ones that know how to survive.

Another Elder male participant remembered fondly about the importance of listening to the stories. He stated,

[Name omitted] was saying that he was sitting there as a young boy and if he was going to fall asleep his dad’s mukluk will hit him in the side of the head. He said they knew who wasn’t going to make it because they weren’t listening to these stories, cause when they got old enough, um, they remember these stories and in those stories had the survival and the life skills.

The Elders and culture bearers talked about the people, because they lived so close to nature and the land, being able to predict what was to come. That connection with all things allowed them to closely observe their surroundings, have an acute awareness of

changes, and they also remembered what was told to them through stories by their own Elders; these skills and practices helped them to see patterns in nature, the weather, and life and predict and prepare. Some of the Elders talked about the close connection with the spirit world and through that connection some Elders or healers or medicine people had premonitions about what was to come. One male Elder told the story of another female Elder who said long ago that strange new animals would come into the area of Holy Cross, Shageluk, Anvik, and Grayling, and recently buffalo were introduced into the region. Another Elder male participant also stated,

Seeing, it's just, uh, it's understanding, maybe it's because living so close to the nature—the past and the future and present is all tied together and you can kind of understand what is occurring because you're so close, um, to nature and spirituality.

Planning for the future also occurred on a daily basis, harvesting berries, roots, and other plants, fishing and hunting and preserving those for the long winter ahead, migrating from summer camp to winter camp to spring camp to continue to gather and hunt for food for the family and community. There was also preparation for celebrations and gatherings and funerals and memorial potlatches and stick dances. Making gifts to give out to those who have honored you by coming to the community to share and be a part of the gathering and to those that have supported you in your time of hardship or grief.

An Elder male participant remembered how Elders were always ready for the elements.

He stated,

They always got ready for the flood, you know, years ago, the old people, even didn't happen, they were happy they brought their stuff back....but they got ready for the flood, they didn't have much, many belongings would go in that tent.

Another male Elder discussed the importance of not taking too much from the land so that it will return in the future for you and your children and grandchildren. He stated,

We were taught, never over trap a beaver house, I don't know how many lines or houses they would have in your days [name omitted], but they said never to over trap, just get so much out of a house then your line will always be there for you to make a living for your family, then when your children and grandchildren. So it, your taught in the early ages to respect mother earth and down stateside they said, you make decisions your life for 7 generations, but for the beaver house you make it for the next season, you know. We think, we really think ahead, and people talk about visioning and mission statements and everything else, our people always planned ahead. The women always had stuff to go for the spring camp, summer camp and fall camp. The men went out trapped. They always thought ahead, very visionary.

Another Elder male participant reflected on the time spent preparing and how that influenced the ability of the people to be able to make the best decisions for the future.

He stated,

Her father was the last medicine man in our area and when there was something going on with uh Holikachuk, they needed to, they needed to make a decision for the people, he went out to nature for two months to prepare—to pray, and ask for guidance, and here we just go, ok call, we're gonna have a meeting. Here's the agenda—five minutes and we're done. We don't go out for two months and, you know, so you see the disconnect, and, cause they think, I always like visionary people. I've always associated with them, because they think way ahead. It's like when you deal with this, just on wellness, you have to connect the whole thing—the whole person. What's gonna happen to our people 100 years down the road? ...50 years down the road? You know, what's going to happen to our village corporations, our tribal land? You know, what's going to happen to my grand children? You know...and, are they gonna honor my grandma and grampa, uh, who died, and you know sacrificed their livelihood in that area, but that, that's part of that whole rituals and ceremonies are, and part of the tea partner is ritual and ceremony—care and tending to spirit of one another.

This same Elder male participant discussed how Deg Xit'an people access knowledge from people, animals, nature, and the spirit world and how when we are open can notice the signs that we are given everyday. He stated,

I write short stories, and when I go there and sit, I, and the stories just come to me like that same way. Mmm hmm, so what they say is really true. Nature is a healer, but you have to go there and the rhythm of nature, heals, and other part too is when you're really, really silent, sometimes the, the uh spirit of the trees allow you to hear them talk. Sometimes the spirit of the water, very powerful, allow you to be part of...one with it. Totally powerful. The birds come and, if you pray,

sometimes you pray, and you go out to nature, or, or even in town, who you meet, what you see, what you read, what comes on TV, what you hear on the radio, answers are all around, but we forget.

He goes on to say, “We have answers all around us all the time and we forget how to interpret it.” Being open to signs and accessing knowledge in multiple ways also helps the people to be prepared. Preparing was always a part of life of the Deg Xit’an Athabaskan people. Change was a part of life, being able to adapt to those changes meant survival and success in the world. One Elder male participant reflecting on education shared, “These men knew the change was coming, they knew for us to be able to compete. We had to go to school to compete.” The importance of preparing for the future is still evident among the Deg Xit’an people today, for example, many people still practice gathering berries and plants, and go subsistence hunting and fishing, and put away food for the winter for family and community. The people still prepare for celebrations, gatherings, funerals, and memorial potlatches. This practice is still strong among the people.

Transmitting culture and language. Participants discussed the importance of sharing our stories of our people and experiences, especially with the young people. DXA people have always been an oral society. Stories are how we learn information, values, skills, protocols, lessons, humor, or more. We also have to learn our story to be able to tell our stories. One Elder male participant stated that when you are talking in front of people start with a story because that puts everyone on the same page and engaged because that story has resonated with them in some way. We won’t have a culture if we don’t tell our stories to others so they can pass that on and on and on.

Building physical, social, mental, and spiritual strength. Building strength

physically, socially, mentally, and spiritually was another aspect of cultural practices that emerged from the conversational focus group discussion. As a Deg Xit'an person growing up I heard many stories about the strength of our people. As an adult I recognize it within myself and understand how that strength was passed on throughout the generations both in the cells of my own DNA and also within the stories and spirit of my people. One Elder male participant shared with me something he tells his granddaughter. He tells her, "You come from very powerful women." " You come from some big women, strong women, and you have that in you." Another Elder male participant highlighted what he learned about the resilience of the people by saying, "She told me she survived, and once you survived these hardships, that's where the strength comes from, but it comes from further back—from our ancestors, further back." Another Elder male shared his admiration of the strength of the people using a specific example of our ancestors' physical and mental strength. He stated,

I know a lot of my strength comes from ancestors of course....uhh, I think about, I think about how it used to be.... you know, [name omitted] and I, we didn't know the language and...and tradition in Shageluk was to go in that Kashim and stay there all night. And my dad, of course, wouldn't let us stay all night, but we'd...they had these windows on top and we would watch down there, you know. And the men were gathered, all the young men, around, all the boys, and they told them stories. And what they were telling them was....they were training them actually. These stories, the history was carried on down...but I know, that the young boys told me things that they learned in there, like traveling, you know...like, watching for overflow...and they told stories...how they got stuck in there, they told stories about the thin ice. My uncle [name omitted] told me stories of how, you know they didn't have traps, they didn't have snares, they needed fur, they got a club and they got on that fox track...and they followed it. Followed and followed it for 2 days till that fox started getting tired, and then he started smiling and laughing to himself while he's thinking about it, and how he climbed this tree and he seen the fox out in the lake laying down and he knew he had it...he could tell he had before...by how it staggered around and then of course he went out and then he ran it down. And I think about his strength, what it takes to do that for two days and two nights...camping out and leaving at daylight the next morning...you know after that fox. So our strength comes from our, from our, people...comes

from our senses.

That same Elder male participant continued on discussing how nature enhances the strength of our senses. He stated,

When you go in the woods and you stay out there for two months you know, I fly home but sometimes I have stayed out there for a long time, your hearing becomes sharp, your vision becomes sharp, you can sense things.

An Elder woman participant discussed how strength is gained through cultural practices and through our own feelings of worth and empowerment. She stated,

I think it just boils down to knowing your power...so many of us go through life and we don't know our power, our power to do anything...be it, refrain from alcohol, be it, getting a degree or be it, becoming whatever, it's just knowing your power. And I think if people realize they have the power then they'd find the strength cause they have it within them, that's the human way, the human condition. And I think power is all over, that we gain our strength from, and when you look at it culturally all the setting was there, the native dances, the hunting, the storytelling, and unless we go back and get that it doesn't empower us as much as it would if we just avoided it, you know...cause we got power, we're not accessing it. I think we're in such conflict with this western world where we got to get this title, build these things, own this, and whatever...its such a dichotomy that its hard to, I think, instill in our young people that still haven't found their power.

This same Elder woman discussed the importance of early life experiences as something that shapes our power and strength. She said,

Strength...Like when I hear people say they gave up drinking, or they gave up this, to me there's lots of, lots of strength in something...and that something always goes back to an early age. Maybe that's part of the whole package of where you get your strength. The culture.

Another Elder male participant discussed getting spiritual strength from nature. He stated,

As a Native person, the power, they talk about the seen and unseen, how you get your power...for me its out in nature. When I go to nature it fills, I pray and it fill me up, the power of the water, I go on the water and it just...sometimes the trees, animals and the nature reveal themselves to you and I actually feel their power. When I go on the Yukon, I go out there, that's where I fill myself, that's where I get my strengths, you know, you get it from other human being but for me I get it through nature. Nature's like my church, people go to church on Sunday's and

stuff, I go out to nature and go by the water, go with the wind, the wind clean me out like that, the rain, and when I was in the service, how I ground myself, is I look for water...because I'm from the Yukon.

Another Elder woman highlighted the healing strength of people coming together and crying and laughing together. She said,

One spring they came up, and she and grandma got in a little huddle and they cried together, they did what I call ritual crying—they cried and wailed and cried for what seemed like forever to me. I didn't know what to do. I just kind of sat there quietly, but after they got...stopped crying, they blew their nose, wiped their eyes and started laughing.

Throughout the conversational focus group discussions the cultural practices related to the strength we have in us as Deg Xit'an people was very empowering to all participants and instilled a sense of pride in our ancestors and culture. This concept of strength can and should be discussed today to continue empowering our future generations so they know the power they have in the world and where it comes from.

Theme #2: Traditional Values

Traditional values were discussed as values that were instilled in Deg Xit'an people through the cultural practices that were modeled by our Elders. They include respect, relationships, balance and reciprocity, sharing and caring, and happiness and humor. These values guide the Deg Xit'an way of thinking and behaving and each value was discussed in multiple contexts through the conversational focus groups.

Respect. The value of respect is extremely important to Deg Xit'an people. It is often practiced as respect for elders; respect for nature, land, animals, and the earth; respect for the spiritual world, “the seen and unseen”; respect for ancestors; respect for oneself and others; and respect for protocol or “tending to the spirit of the people and

community.” The Partner tradition discussed earlier emphasizes this value of respect. An Elder male participant stated,

What our people designed years ago was a tea partner that connects how you treat, how you treat the, uh, one another. How the men treat the women. How the women treat the men. How we all took care of one another, even though you’re not related. See, that’s all not there anymore, and the state have what they call respect, you know, big program, Respect, it was part of us, you know, when we’re growing up, how to respect the land and the animals, you know, nev...the men, never trap more, you know, don’t take out the, you got the big animal, and the male, you never take anymore out of there, you know, or, you, you always watch and tended to your trap line, so it’s all this conservation, you were taught that when you were small, always do things, uh, so you’re thinking about your children and future, uh, children, you know, so they have something for the future.

A culture bearer, a male participant, talked about how our society has changed and today we are in such a rush to get places that we forget to pay our respects. He stated,

When you go down river, every graveyard you pass stop, drift, say a prayer, make a little offering. Tear open a sack of tea, break a cigarette, for tobacco, just little things, just take that time to do that. Then on the way back up, take off your hat as you go by. Respect is what it was. She said that nobody does that anymore. We used to do that all the time—drive past a graveyard, or some place special, holy, say a prayer, make an offering. That’s why so many people are drowning. Cause nobody ever do that—in such a rush. So all of us now, that’s what I do.

The value of respect can be seen in most quotes within this discussion section. It is integral to the Deg Xit’an way of life and is closely tied to the importance of relationships.

Relationships. The Deg Xit’an worldview is that the people are in relationship to everything, people, land, animals, water, spirit, and creator. Being aware of the relationships that exist is essential and important to understand for survival and continuity; for example, knowing how to read the river, surviving in the woods by yourself, working and living in extreme cold, how to approach animals when hunting, and how to access knowledge around you are all important skills connected to the

relationships we have in the world. It is also about recognizing that when we move in the world we influence and impact everything around us and vice versa. It is important to have respect for those relationships and know the power of things, for example, knowing the difference between a plant that is helpful or harmful can mean the difference between life and death. An Elder male participant shared his experience in nature. He stated,

There's a serenity, there's a peace, peace out there, and you're right by yourself and you know that you're taking care of yourself and your dependent on yourself out here and its 50 below zero. You don't know how cold it is until you find out you don't get cold. I brought a load to one guy that I had out in a tent and he says how cold is it? And I had a temperature on my airplane said 52 below, he said ok. And the next time I saw him he said you never should have told me it was that cold. But you know, in the, when your by yourself and you can accomplish things and you depend on yourself and like, (omitted name) is saying, you begin feeling the woods, you're out there by yourself and you know that your alive and you get strength from being in the woods. I used to walk in the woods when I started cutting wood for my house, it would be this big tree and I'm gonna bring it home and people made work out of wood cutting, just to haul home you know, it was work. And I made fun out of it, I made an enjoyment out of it, I always had a lot of wood, but I would look at that big tree and I'd thank god for it, you know, its been there for 50 years, I could tell by the size of it, and I'm gonna take it home and its gonna heat my house for a month. So when I am in the woods you commune with nature, you know, and you get strength from that.

Another Elder male participant discussed his relationship to nature and spirituality. He shared,

There are different ways of accessing information because of what you said we are, we're spiritual beings and nowadays scientists and...they're recognizing the teachings of the elders that there's universal intelligence in the plants, and you know you connect with the animals...when I go hunting I can sit there and I see, in my mind the animals I'm gonna get...the birds come to me and give me signs.

This same Elder male went on to say,

My grandma...the first thing and we went and pitch a tent is to go out and get labrador tea for her, the first thing she told us to do, to make that connection to the land before we do anything else.

An Elder woman shared a story about her relationship to the crow. She said,

Mom and pop use to be stressed on the day of travel. [laughter] Scolding, and forgetting things, and making us work...hard, but once we got in the boat and the motors going, we're going peacefully along, everybody gets happy. We sit there. Sometimes I look up at the clouds, and mom believed in...the crow was very spiritual. We watch for the crow. He's flying along, then he turns over and he drops and they said, when he does that we're suppose to say, "gits'an-ghingalnoł ts'i ngighal sits'i ditiłdheyh"...that mean's drop a pack sack of good luck to me...[repeats phrase] and he rights himself up and he flies on, so, we would watch for them, watch for the crow. "Yixgitsiy" we called it.

An Elder male participant shared a story about the relationship he had with the owl and what that meant for him. He shared,

I went trapping with my airplane and pulling a sled on ah, about 12 beaver houses in a circle...I had a little, little, sled like that, it was, with a gee pull on it, a little stick that you could stir it with, and I'd pull it along. And I came to this big huge beaver house as big as this room here, big huge beaver house, and I knew there was a lot of beaver in that house, and when I first came to it I heard this owl up in the tree. I never looked at it, I didn't think to look at that owl but he'd be talking to me he was like giving me information, I didn't know what it was, you know, but I set and come back two days later and I got two beaver and this owl was, before I got there I knew I had beaver cause the owl was talking to me happily. He was whoo whooing happily to me and I pulled out my beaver and I kept coming back and he's always glad for me to come back and, I got, 11 beaver out of that house before I caught a small one. Now its time to pull my set cause I don't want small ones. So I pulled my sets outs and I could tell he didn't like it, the owl didn't like it, so the next time I came back boy he was scolding me from way back there. And I came back and I heard him mumbling up there, so I'm not going to set, you know, I already got all the big ones out of here so I took off and boy he got really angry with me just, so I turned back and I said now what does he want, he must be telling me there's another beaver in that house so I cut a, I cut the hole in, I went and got stick and I shoved it in there, I didn't even clean the ice out, I just shoved it in there, see what this owl's talking about. And I came back the next time and he wasn't as angry with me, he knew I, when I opened that hole there was big air in there it was easy to chop through, there was no, hardly any ice, and on that stick was these great big teeth marks, bigger than the beaver that I had caught, so man I was happy I set and I, you know, and the owl he was singing a little bit louder with me, you know, I really get the biggest beaver I ever caught and two days later here I travelling, way over there, he was just so happy, man that guy was just tuned in and I came and I knew I had a beaver and pulled out the biggest beaver I ever caught in my life that thing was huge, huge beaver, and you know I dried it up and I put it in my little sled, tied it on there and, then I wondered, what is that owl, why, why did he want me to catch this one beaver, what's going on with him. So I walked over, I never looked up at that owl and then I didn't see him then, but I went over to the tree where he was talking from

and on the tree, you know the beaver cut, they cut like a man, they notch the tree, on that tree it was cut halfway through and here was these big teeth marks of the beaver I caught...that's what he wanted, he wanted me to save his tree and his home up there. That's the story of the owl. My understanding that owl.

The value of relationships is highly regarded among Deg Xit'an people today, it is about connection, kinship, reciprocity, respect and love for one another and all things.

Balance and reciprocity. The value of balance and reciprocity were viewed as essential to the health and wellness of the community, once something got out of balance rituals and ceremonies would be performed to get it back into balance. A Elder male participant shared an example of how Elders practiced balance and tended to the spirit of the community. He stated,

I always look at the Elders and really wise people do the rituals and ceremonies, they were designed by our ancestors. Even though they didn't have a doctorate degree or masters degree or anything, they had, they tended to the spirit of the community. If it was too heavy they did things to bring it up, if it was too giddy they bring it down more logically, they balance it all the time, always tending to the spirit of that community. And as Native people we believe in the seen and the unseen and there is a lot of forces that affect the village that are unseen. So by introducing spiritual, or rituals and ceremonies, they tended to these forces that carried the wellbeing with the villages.

This same Elder went on to discuss the exchange of acts among people and the value of those acts. He stated,

To me it was just exchanging, its that energy of exchange, always taking care of each other, you know if someone, uh, did a favor for you, in a sense you did a favor for them, if not for them then their children or grand children. You know it was always a reciprocation, reciprocity or whatever you call that. It was built in to that.

He talked about his granddaughter and relayed his hopes that in the future she will be cared for if he does his part to help out now. He stated,

I just want her to be out in nature, with her, you know, and just reinforce who she is and where she came from, and I, I think about you, and by helping you, that one day you might help my grandchildren too when they need help, you know. So

everything is like a give and take situation.

This responsibility for balance and reciprocity is taken very seriously. In the Deg Xit'an worldview it is important that you give back to your people, community, earth, and spirit world, for all that they have given to you. If not, you can get out of balance and with that may come negative consequences, like health issues or bad luck. In an article by Snow (1981) in a book titled *Handbook of North American Indians*, she stated,

The relationship between the Ingalik and the world of nature was very close. The principal support of human beings was thought to be the various "animal people" on the flesh of which people lived (Osgood, 1959:115). All these animals required respectful treatment or they would no longer be available for food. The function of "songs" or magical spells, was to bring into equilibrium the conflicts that existed among the worlds of the spirit, nature, and society. The songs created good relations between the Ingalik and the spirits of the fish and food-giving mammals. (p. 607)

Ingalik was a term used to refer to Deg Xit'an people. It is a derogatory name that has since been replaced with the accurate name of the people, Deg Xit'an.

Sharing and caring. The value of sharing and caring is about the love we have for others, and ourselves; it relates to reciprocity, respect, and relationships. Every act should be done with the spirit of sharing and caring for others. The value of sharing and caring was highlighted as one Elder male participant discussed the Tea Partner tradition. He stated,

I always look at rituals and ceremonies and a lot of our older people, how do they...I tell a story about your mom [omitted name], impressed me, because she didn't go off to boarding school like we did and I watched how she interact because they have potlatch partners. You know, you were supposed to take care of your partner, feed them and, you know, it's a life long thing....before the Christians brought Godmother and Godfather, they had potlatch partners in our area...and how to treat one another and take care of one another....I used to watch how she takes care of her partners and soon as they come into town, she go there and hug them and [ask] when you come to town? and are you hungry? You have a place to stay? You know, exactly the way she's been taught when she was young.

An Elder woman also emphasized the value of sharing and caring by discussing the Tea Partner tradition. She stated,

I think, my, my mother chose my tea partner, because we had a teacher, and he's wife over there, her name was [name omitted], I think, [name omitted], and she told me, uh, Mr. [name omitted] is your partner, and every time they would have, uh, food passed by each other he would bring me a nice plate of...of food, which I was very happy for, and then mom would help me fix up a plate to send over to him, so he was a white man, but he was my partner, my tea partner, and that's what I remember about that. It...it was a good way to have friends, and they cared about us and we cared about them, you know.

Another Elder woman shared her experience using nature to care for herself. She stated,

You know, but I think it's taking like the river, [name omitted] associates very closely with the river and so do I. As a kid I use to be in the back of the boat and watch the paddle wheel go against the waves, and the water churning up, and I use to lay there and watch it, and I'd think, oh I'm just going to put all my worries into that and it'll just carry it away, but now [inaudible] thinks, what kind of worries did a kid have?...but now I put my worries into that, into the river, you know, and it carries it away.

The value of sharing and caring emerged multiple times in diverse ways throughout the conversational focus group process as an essential aspect to the Deg Xit'an way of life.

Happiness and humor. The value of happiness and humor as discussed by participants held many meanings, it was used strategically to bring joy to the community, to change the energy from negative to more light and positive, to show friendship and love to someone through teasing and joking, to lessen sorrow and grief, and also to tell stories and teach lessons. One Elder male shared the joy the Elders displayed. He stated,

The Elders in Holy Cross, when I first went there...they were a happy bunch, I could remember them, I think about them a lot. I think about the village how it was, the two rows of houses, with, an Elder, almost an Elder in every house, when I first went there.

Another Elder male reiterated a similar sentiment. He stated, "The people were... the people were happy people. The people of years past were way happier then people have,

now, that have everything, have boats and snow machines and homes.” Another Elder male participant talked about the fun the people had with each other, always teasing, he stated, “We were teasing each other, yeah, and he’s an Elder you know, and I wanted to put it right back on him, cause the first thing we do, we just kind of poke at each other.” Humor is healing. It connects people. There was so much healing laughter and teasing in the conversational focus group discussions; it brought lightness, fun, and love to the conversations.

Theme #3: Embracing Challenges by Remembering Who We Are

Life’s challenges were discussed among the conversational focus group participants as challenges Deg Xit’an people face in life that distance the people from their way of life and from wellness and wholeness. The four subthemes that emerged were focused around isolation and disconnection, identity and belonging, historical trauma and grief, and alcohol abuse and addiction. These life struggles are viewed as both things of the past as well as things of the present. One Elder male participant shared that Deg Xit’an people have always had challenges in life and have found ways to adapt in order to survive and that there is a lot of strength and resilience in that adaptation to survive.

Isolation and disconnection. Isolation and disconnection from family, friends, community, culture, nature, and spirituality can create health and mental health issues in any person. People need other people, need to feel a part of something, to feel connected to others in the world on multiple levels; it is human nature. An Elder woman participant shared her experiences and understanding around the power we get from being in

relationship to others. She stated,

That's the crux of it all, cause you look back on your life and I do, and I thought, whoa, so many periods in my life I did not know my power, I simply was just sort of existing, trying to keep food in mouth and keep daughter fed, I didn't know the power I had. And we all have whole bunch of power, we get that through other humans as well, if were alone, like you say, it becomes so, we become isolated and a tendency to not be as flowing and growing as we could be. And I think that's cultural in a lot of ways too because I was always taught not to be outgoing, you know, you have to, according to our culture not seek, what is it, notice...but there's so many conflicts because the nuns taught us...speak up...what's wrong with you, speak up, so we in my era began to speak up. So there's lot of conflicting values when you look at our traditional way and then the Western way.

An Elder male participant shared his thoughts on wellness as stemming from a community coming together. He stated,

I guess the thing for me was wellness comes from a communal, community effort of being together and helping each other, and now it seems like they were pulled, pulling against each other, and we need to get back to the, the old culture—the ways of how people lived back then, uh, and, you know, and I thought maybe that, when you're doing your writing, that, you know, solutions, we need to try to find sol, solutions to this, uh, if, uh, if what you're writing about is saying well, we're well, but then, we're not. We're a long ways from well—together as a people right now, because you know what's going on. We all know what's going on in the village.

Isolation and disconnection are the opposite of the Deg Xit'an value of being in relationship with the world around you. Providing a means for people to connect with the world around them is one key to health and wellness. Deg Xit'an cultural practices include connection and relationship in numerous ways that can be helpful.

Identity and belonging. Identity and belonging instill pride and hope in people and help them feel whole and connected; this is sought after and yearned for among the new generation. Growing up in two worlds, the Deg Xit'an, Athabaskan world and the western world can be challenging, especially when the values compete. There has been so much loss of culture and language among the Deg Xit'an people, loss of Elders and

people, loss of land and fishing and hunting rights. Many people grew up with parents that did not speak the language and that grew up themselves in the missions and boarding schools, where terrible traumas occurred. One culture bearer, a female participant shared,

I've just seen it in, in my family and being scared of who you are, to say who you are, um, or to be who you are, and so I had asked one of my Elders, that, like, how do we do that? How do we get back to who we are, because that's how we are well, is we be who we are, and I said, cause it's, to me it's scary because you know people in my family are dying, and Elders are dying, and what will be left then? ...and the Elder said, "everything you need to know is inside of you." Everything that you need to know is inside of you. It's there, and all you need to do is look for it and you'll find it. I don't need to tell you it. It helps when I tell you it, but I don't need to tell you it. It's there, and that to me was really powerful so I think that's a big piece of what wellness is, just figuring out, realizing, recognizing who we are, and then honoring it, and going after it.

Another Elder male participant talked about the importance of instilling pride in the young people. He shared,

I think [name omitted], hit on a very important word, and that was when he talked about pride. You know, we have to, we need to get some pride back into people—the young people. When I was down there, we, we went down to get, we were going down every summer for awhile, and we went down there and I see these people, you know, are getting welfare checks. They're, you know, they're in their twenties and they're, they're paired up, and their Uncle Sam is, uh, and our taxes are paying for that, and that's all fine and good if they need it, but, what I thought, you know, the way to get pride into people is to get those people that get that check, make em work like an eight hour day, improve the village, and I was thinking they could plant trees all along the road, from the airport up on both sides, you know, they could improve the way the community looks, and, just clean up the village, and, make it, you know, and then they get pride in they're doing something. They're earning their money, and then they got their, they're improving the community to make it look good, and then that pride inside starts, you know, I did this and years later you tell your kids this is what we did.

Another Elder male participant also talked about instilling pride. He said,

I really enjoy listening to all the stories, I mean what we're talking about now, I think its, it helps us to build up our personal, uh foundation, you know, it's a, it's a spiritual thing too, what we're doing, sharing all these stories, it gives you pride in yourselves, you know, when you know pride in yourself, then you do like [omitted name] was saying, you know, understanding each other, you know, our families and, and especially...the Deg Xit'an people.

A young male participant talked about his interest and connection to the culture and to wanting to know more and learn more. He stated,

I'm really interested in uh, I've never actually seen our dancing before, uh, and I, uh, I don't know if you guys remember how it was done or if you want to bring it back, you know, um, but, I, I'd love to see pictures, if anyone has pictures, and uh, you know...uh, the, that's a really big thing, cause, you know I make masks and I...uh, I never knew, uh, you know while I was growing up I never knew who I was on my Deg Xit'an side, I, I'm, you know...my mom's from [name omitted], so we have a lot of cultural...we have masks, we have dancing and stuff. Our language is really alive, but I never knew who I was as a Deg Xit'an so, uh, I'm now finally starting to get to...back to my roots as a Deg Xit'an, Dene, or Athabaskan person, uh, so I really, I really am interested in learning from you guys, you know, if you ever want, if you ever need someone to talk to, or if you want to teach anyone, I'm here. I love to listen to Elders and if anyone has knowledge out there I'm here and I want to learn, and, um, but, yeah, um, I just wanted to say a couple of things about the masks, you know, I, I didn't know what I was getting into when I was making these masks. I didn't know, you know, how powerful they were, cause I'd make masks before and its just making masks, but you know, these masks are, uh, powerful. I've had a couple of experiences with them while making them, and it was just like, wow, I didn't know this was, you know, cause this is, uh, you know, back then, this is a spirituality, this is a way of making prayer, and uh, I didn't, I didn't fully realize that while I was making these masks, and these masks are very, very powerful. They're very sacred, and so, um, I really want to, uh, I want to start making these for dancing, if I...if we can, um, cause I make these for, uh, you know, had to hang on a wall and they're our culture, but I'd love to, make these to be able to use to fit on a person, and if you look at this, it was made to hang on a wall, and that's it. I want to see these to be used, you know? I want my kids and my grandkids to be able to, uh, uh have, you know, say, this is who I am and this is what we do.

There are many Deg Xit'an people that are interested in learning more about their identity, language, history, and cultural practices. They are interested in getting connected with others and feeling that sense of belonging and pride

Historical trauma and grief. Historical trauma and grief was discussed by participants as the efforts and impacts of Western society to colonize and assimilate the Native people, in this case the Deg Xit'an people. They discussed examples related to the great death, missionaries and boarding schools, religion and church, and loss of

traditional ways. This grief is on-going, it is not just in the past, it is very present. One

Elder male shared his struggle with the Catholic Church. He stated,

Struggled with Catholicism for a long time and religion but to me we're forced to go to church, forced to go to confession, forced to pray...I used to sit there in that church, my knees are just hurting, why don't I get anything out of this, it was like punishment you know. Then the nuns were hitting the kids, you know, the abuse, the sexual abuse...the whole religious thing just turned me off. I couldn't figure out how [omitted name] and [omitted name] and everybody else could connect with religion, but I always knew intuitively that I was connected. I was born, I came from the spirit world, I'm living my life for however, it could be taken any minute, as a little boy, as a young adult, in marriage, raise the kids and then...I always know that I'm going to go back to the spirit world. I know that even though people die we retain that they still could call on them like I was asking you to call in your grandpa [omitted name], you know.

Another Elder male participant discussed his experience with the church and the trauma related to it. He stated,

I was brought up to be a good village boy...in the Church and...all those mission boys I went to school with were all...we came...we wanted to be good mission boys, and good alter boys, and, just good, good boys, and we all were beaten into, well not beaten into, but worked into and lived into, and beat into this is the way it is...this is all good, everything here is good, but then when you find out that there were some crimes taking place in the church, in Holy Cross and up and down the Yukon river, and then this goes all over the world, that trust, everything that you gave over to the church, in my opinion, was kind of just pulled out from underneath me.

This same Elder went on to say, "It's a hard thing to, uh, deal with that trauma...that's an ongoing trauma." Many people are torn between being told not to talk about what happened or you will be hurt and that it is important to talk about to heal from it.

Another Elder male participant shared, "Sometimes it's hard to talk about traditional medicine or traditional ways because they were told it was not good, you know." An Elder woman made a similar statement, she said, "It makes me think that now. A lot of the time, when I was growing up, we're not supposed to talk too much about everything." She went on to say, "...not to spill everything out and talk too much because it, we could

get hurt by it.” An Elder male shared his thoughts on this topic of talking or not talking and he stated, “We got to start talking about it. Who else is going to help these young people if we don’t start talking about it so even if I get reprimanded I’m not going to be quiet anymore.”

There was also a lot of discussion about the strength the people had to have to get through these traumas. One male culture bearer stated,

We had to be strong to survive that big death. Whole villages gone, you know, just a few left. We had to be strong. Adapt and survive. It’s like Alaska, the land teaches that. If you don’t adapt, you don’t survive.

Another Elder male participant also shared his thoughts on strength and reclaiming all that was taken. He stated,

[Name omitted] is talking about that strength we have that power we have; [Name omitted] is talking, its really a spiritual time, so, the more we get in line with that the better our lives are going to be. And if we work together and start sharing like this, like what [name omitted] said on the talking circle that he had, you know they didn’t have to go to a psychiatrist, psychologist or anything else and people’s degree’s outside but just within they’re, within our community, the ability to share and care for one another is going to bring about lot of the healing, so to me wellness is the ability to put what our forefathers ingrained in us...when [name omitted] talk about that, um, the work ethic, you know, they gave it away to the welfare, now we got to reclaim...everything that we gave away, our belief system, our medicine, our, all that that we are told is not good for us or against the religion or whatever, we have to reclaim all those.

This same Elder male participant went on to say,

We’re going to start focusing on our strengths and our positiveness. When I talk about wellness for my own self, that’s where I get my energy and um and a belief system that I’m not going to allow anybody to put me down anymore, I’m going to feel what the creator brought me to this earth to be, whatever I’m going to fulfill, by sharing my story and by talking to people...we all have that within us.

Reclaiming and connecting back to culture is a means of healing from historical trauma and was clearly expressed in the conversational focus group discussions.

Alcohol abuse and addiction. Alcohol abuse and addiction came up in the

discussion among participants as a very widespread challenge in the life of Deg Xit'an people. One Elder male talked about how normal it was. He stated,

All I could tell is, you know, what I know in my own life so, one of the things I learned when I finally wanted sobriety and sought to get it, uh, I went to treatment, and you know, I knew that I became part of a big group of, you know that we all drank, and we thought it was the normal way of life, people still do. And we called the other guys that didn't drink, they were, the so very few, that they were the not normal in the villages.

This same Elder male participant shared his road to wellness from addiction. He said,

The road to wellness. But I had to write about myself...I had to write about this, they call it the uh, you know I left a path behind me that was not good, I was not very proud of what, you know, even though that I kept telling myself that I'm doing okay...I've always got a job, I'm always working, I'm taking care of my family...I'm doing okay. They're, you know, I didn't look at what was going on in my life because I thought I could stop anytime and when the time came to stop I couldn't, tried and couldn't. So you know I wrote about all the people I'd hurt in my life and people I need to talk to, the people that weren't here on earth anymore, my dad was one of them, your sister, your mother, was the biggest one. In order for me to get well I had to reach them and get the forgiveness, ask for forgiveness, make amends and I had to learn how to do that. I wrote a whole book, pages and pages and pages of this and I always thought that I needed to share that with another human being and god, in the presence of another human being and god. And this was my life and I didn't want people to know about me, I didn't want to tell, you know, this is what I did, this is how I was.

He went on to share his perspective on getting help and healing. He said,

You don't ask for help unless you have a problem and you need to recognize and admit that you have this problem so, it's a way with the wellness of the people to really find out in their own selves that yeah I want to get better. I can be better than what I am now...There's a lot of talent out there among our people. So it's recognizing that as an individual, yeah I want to get better, I want to get well, I want my community to get well. It's starts with one, but there's got to be two I think.

This same Elder male participant relates this discussion to homelessness. He said,

You know, when I see these homeless in here, you know the foxes have their dens and the birds have their nests and these poor guys down here don't have...and I talk to people about them, I talk to one guy about a brother he had down there, homeless, and I said, you know can you help that guy, can you help him get out of there? He said he doesn't want to come out of there. He said I offered him my

home, you can come here if you don't drink...he'd rather stay there. And I wonder how many are there like that down there, or, for me, would I be homeless if I grew up in Anchorage? You know when I was drinking alcohol would I have been homeless, would I? I looked at the people in Fairbanks near that bridge as happy people, their living a glamorous life, that's what it was to me when I saw them guys. I even went and got a gallon of wine, came out and boy did I have friends, I knew one guy in the bunch, and they gathered around me, man this is, look at all these guys, I'm the, you know they're drinking my wine and treating me really good and I left them, that guy stayed there for a long time before he made it home. Would I have been like that, if I, you know, when I came to Anchorage and finally got sobriety here in Anchorage but I, you know, I felt like it was ah, what I wanted to do. I felt like I wanted to drink because I had, I was an alcoholic I had the disease of alcoholism twenty-five years ago. I found my way out I already told that story but, I wonder sometimes about how many, how many of them down here in the homeless camp are there because they want to be, how many are there because they put up the tent in the woods and are living a life that they want? You know they like that...living out there by themselves. How many are there because they can't do anything for themselves? They need help from someone else that knows how to get them out of there.

Another Elder male participant shared his thoughts on getting sober, stating that being sober does not mean being boring, it means starting to live your life. He said,

You tell kids to stop doing destructive things, but you then tell them, here's what you're suppose to do. So, sobriety means going...stopping whatever you're doing...but that's all they did. They encouraged people to continue on with their lives, but I think that when you do something like that and people stop, they're all stopped, but then you have to continue on living, so you have to encourage them. Well, once you stop, continue your life and try to develop yourself. I remember couple of times encouraging people that you've got to stop, stop and we all have to be sober but when you talk to a bunch of people they're not all...and sober, but when I say sober to anybody they think and picture of someone sitting there sober—not smiling not doing anything except stopped, and uh, but that's not the way people are. Think about our families, our people—how they go to a dance, have a good time. You can just see them smiling, and dancing and they're spirits are whole bodies just exploding with happiness, and you can feel it. Mind, body and spirit happy and living the way they're supposed to be living. This is the way they were designed to live. This is the way they should live. It's complete—mind, body and spirit—being...developing, moving, and enjoying...and that's sobering up, but continue on with life. Yeah, get sober, but continue on with your life. So, wellness is the same way. Talk about [name omitted] getting sick—his chest...get well...get him well. Get him so he's back on his feet and is living his life again. So it's a path towards wellness and getting there, but also coming right back to life, and living as a whole human being. We all do that. We all do that, but we don't really talk a lot about it being a whole human being...and it's interesting

because I think the Western way of life separates us. You know, if you look at people today, they are living their lives like they're in a movie. They live and talk like someone's watching them.

The discussion on alcohol abuse is closely related to the other subthemes of isolation and disconnection, identity and belonging, and historical trauma, and all are important to consider when having discussions about wellness and wholeness. This challenge is also a matter of survival, of life and death for the people, and has to be confronted so that healing can begin. A Holikachuk Elder, Elizabeth Keating, in her thesis titled *A Plea for Understanding: The Role of Native Elders and Spirituality in Cross-Cultural Counseling* (1988) discusses the importance of spirituality in the healing of the people. She stated,

Many of the problems we as Native people face are a result of loss or alteration of our spirituality. We must get back our sense of spirituality and return to a balanced life. Elders tell us that this spirituality occurs in daily life, they try to communicate a lifestyle. We are taught to honor and respect people; honor and respect ourselves; to honor all living beings. We must also give thanks every time we go to the fish net, or we find a berry patch. We must do this quietly, within ourselves. We can also ask for help and protection. Finally, elders teach us that our spirituality is interdependent with the spirituality of others. We can't reach our highest level of spirituality if others can't. We are responsible for their spirituality. (p. 36)

She goes on to recommend that spirituality be a part of treatment programs as a way to know and honor the whole person.

Theme #4: Deg Xit'an Beliefs and Action Recommendations

The final theme of community action recommendations were discussed among participants as actions that help us preserve our way of life and lead us back to the cultural practices (the first theme) that keep the community well. As the participants shared, three main subthemes emerged and include coming together as a community, doing things in a good way, and sharing and caring for self and others.

Coming together as a community. The concept of “community of people that come together” was an awareness of the Deg Xit’an way of life that was discussed by participants in multiple ways throughout the focus groups. An Elder male participant shared,

How the village use to be, when I first got there, in '52, 1952, there wasn't a government. The Elders were the leaders of the people, uh, like someone would come and tell us. They knew what to do, by season, you know, like, I remember when a person came to me and said, [name omitted] it's time to go to, uh, look for eels. It's time to go look for eels. You gather some boys and I'll talk to the, and we'll go look for eels. You know, and we did that together. The people did it together. Nowadays, one or two will go down, you know, it won't be a concert, you know a big concerted effort. So they don't get the eels like they use to anymore. People use to stay down there and they'd be, the way meetings were, when we had a, a, were gonna have a council meeting, there was members on the council. We're gonna have a council meeting. The whole community came to the hall, and it was done in the open. You know, a problem came up, and we, people could chime in. People chimed in and, spoke their peace about how they think it should be, and then the council would decide. Uh, I remember they didn't want, want to make lawbreakers of the, you know the younger generation growing up. They didn't want to send them to jail, so they took care of the problem. The Elders would take care of, and they would call that person, cause, ok, you did wrong. Here's what you did and here's what you need to do now. It's you, for they, and they call it, cause they didn't call it amends, you know to the people, but you know you make it right.

That same Elder went on to say,

He told me about the time that, you know when they all, people died off all over from, well it was later established as the bird flu, when all these people got sick at the same time, and only a few of them were well, and, and they couldn't bury the people fast enough, cause uh, you know because they weren't well enough to take care of them, but you know the, the togetherness and working like that, what I notice about Holy Cross, even up to, to this day, when someone passes away, when you loose someone among the people, that the people ban together. They're strong. They support that persons family, and you could see it there that, there's a degree of wellness that I know of, that I, that I think is, that's when people are well, and uh, you know, and I, and I told him, I told the people, you know we get together, only for, in sad times nowadays. We only get together in sad times. Why don't we get together in have good times? You know. Together. Get the people together.

A younger male community member shared his experience living in the city and his

belief that coming together as a community is healing and important and something he wants to pass on to his children. He stated,

There's...I think too often in Anchorage, we try to...get so busy, I know, I look at myself, I get so busy and just do things myself and I don't give myself out to other people, and I don't involve myself with other people, and, uh, get the benefit of that, and, uh, we're just stuck in our homes and, uh, we don't, you know, I don't get out enough. My mom and dad...my dad, um, when he was living here in Anchorage, one of the things he always did was, uh, like [name omitted] said, you know, um, always ask if you're hungry, and he's always have a big meal prepared. He didn't have a lot of money, but there was always so much food there and he would invite everybody over, and have that community. I remember as a kid, uh, being there, and feeling the love of all the people that came over to visit, uh, all the aunts and uncles and, you know, we...we need to bring that back, that community, uh, and, I guess, uh, I need to bring that back, and I need to get involved in, um, cultural things and learn from the Elders, because, I think there's, there'd be a great benefit there that I could pass on to my children.

All the participants were in agreement when saying that they it made them feel good to come together in these conversational focus groups, they wanted to share the experience with their family members that could not be there. They wanted more of this in the future.

- Participant Wishes. Another interesting development with the conversational focus groups was that most of the participants expressed their wishes for themselves or family and some things they would like to see happen. One young male community member shared,

I really am interested in learning from you guys, you know, if you ever want, if you ever need someone to talk to, or if you want to teach anyone, I'm here. I love to listen to Elders and if anyone has knowledge out there I'm here and I want to learn.

An Elder male participant stated,

Our parents and grandparents and all those people when ever they all lived together and they worked together. I think it's important that, what you're doing, [inaudible] [name omitted] is, I, don't just have these gatherings uh, before uh, funerals. We need to identify a time when we can get together and do these things because I look at my, uh, I would like to have met and really talk to [name omitted], my grandfather. I would like to ask him a lot

of questions. You know, I'm hearing things from [name omitted] and from the rest of us from the, now I, pic, just, just picture this, all of us have the, our grandkids, our kids and grandkids, or know of some younger kids, each one of us here, at one time or another is gonna be a grand parent or a great grand parent. We need to tell something to our grandkids, because, just like I was a young kid, I wanted to talk to [name omitted] and to [name omitted]. I would have loved to talk to them. Ask questions about what, what happened, what was it like. Now I have grandkids and, what I'm doing for them is I'm writing all of my experiences, you know, cause I'm believe it or not, I'm a grampa now, so, yeah I know they say, well please grampa. They don't ask me that now, but at a point in their lives they'll say, gee I wonder what it was like when [name omitted] was, you know, uncle [name omitted], uncle [name omitted] was alive. Well, I'm writing these things down, but what WE need to do is, the same thing. [Inaudible] hit it right on the head and said we need to have a get together, or a gathering of, uh Anvik, Shageluk and Holy Cross especially now.

An Elder woman participant stated,

I wanted to tell you that. I wanted to come. As soon as they told me this was...and who was gonna be here...I wanna be there. [laughter] ...no matter what. Even if I don't say anything, exciting or important. I just like to look at all of you and I know you.

A female community member stated, "I think this was created because I wanted to be able to voice my concerns, and, and put it out there." Another male community member talked about passing the culture on to his children and grandchildren. He stated,

He didn't have a lot of money, but there was always so much food there and he would invite everybody over, and have that community. I remember as a kid, uh, being there, and feeling the love of all the people that came over to visit, uh, all the aunts and uncles and, you know, we...we need to bring that back, that community, uh, and, I guess, uh, I need to bring that back, and I need to get involved in, um, cultural things and learn from the Elders, because, I think there's, there'd be a great benefit there that I could pass on to my children.

A young male community member participant shared, "I wanna also, uh, make sure I learn a lot about my other side as well." And a female community member participant stated, "I was wishing my daughter could be here, so she could learn."

Another female community member participant shared a similar sentiment, she stated, “I think that our youth really need, as well as we need to reconnect that kinship, and, develop it.” Also, an Elder woman talked about what she wished she could have and missed out on. She stated,

I missed out on the naming, and I always wanted a Native name, you know, and I was always asking people, but I know you’re not suppose to do that, you know I was trying. So I would appreciate, at some time too, be given a name, uh, and so I look for that, in that whole process.

Another Elder woman talked about preserving some of her own cultural material. She stated,

Somebody gave me a CD and it’s not all there... whoever did, recorded it, didn’t do a good job, so there’s just parts, but, your mom’s talking, telling a story. He interrupts, and then after awhile she’ll go and she’ll make fun of him a little bit, and I listen to that all the time, and he actually sings a whole stick dance song, and you don’t have many of those left, and I would like to re-record that sometime. I gotta find somebody that knows how to do that.

An Elder male participant requested a gathering, he said, “We need to have a get together, or a gathering of, uh Anvik, Shageluk and Holy Cross especially now.”

Another culture bearer male participant shared the same idea when he stated, “We need to have a, uh, a Deg Xit’an reunion—a Deg Xit’an gathering, and have it recorded because we’re gonna be gone, you know. We aren’t gonna be around here forever.” A culture bearer female participant made another request, she stated, “I wanna tea partner. I want [name omitted] to have a tea partner.” And an Elder male shared his own wish for himself, he stated, “I wanna learn the language yet, that’s still the goal and I’m only [age omitted], I can learn it before I’m, before I get old.” Finally, a male community member participant talked about his experience in the conversational focus groups and what it meant to him.

He stated,

I think it would be uh, a loss on my part if I don't seek out help from the Elders, uh, and I think I missed out a lot, but like I said, it's never too late, uh, you can get in and you can be part of groups and be proactive in, in learning. You're never too old to learn and um, it's why I enjoy listening to [name omitted]. He's, he's just a wealth of knowledge. Every time I listen to him, you know, this is all I can do is listen...oh man, just got to soak it in, and that comes from all you too, that...when I hear you speak, there's, there's knowledge, and there's a wealth of it there, and, um, I have this feeling inside of me that, uh, it all stems from love, the love that...ultimately the love that God gave to us, that we need to give to each other, and uh, I'm thankful for that. Thank you for being here.

Coming together as a community has so many benefits, it can create opportunities, build connections and relationships, create a sense of pride and belonging, bring joy, teach the culture and language, and spark radical possibilities. I believe that the wishes expressed are an important aspect of gathering together that brings hope our people and fulfills a sense of belonging and pride in who we are as a people.

Doing things in a good way. Doing things in a good way means following protocols. It means using rituals and ceremonies when needed and to know when they are needed. Every culture and community has some aspects of protocol that is important to understand and respect upon entering and working with that community. Protocols can be implicit and explicit rules governing behavior of both the “seen and unseen,” in both the physical and the spirit world. Working with people and conducting activities in the community should always be done in a good way, from a good place, tending to both the spirit of the individual and the spirit of the community. In Deg Xit'an scholar Beth Leonard's dissertation titled, *Deg Xinag Oral Traditions: Reconnecting Indigenous Language and education Through Traditional Narratives* (2007), she discusses a story told by Elder Belle Deacon that highlighted the relationship between the DXA people

here on earth and those in various levels of the spirit world. She mentions the process of burning food and clothing to be sent to the ancestors in the spirit world. She stated,

In spite of opposition by early missionaries, the burning of food and clothing for the ancestors are still practiced in the Deg Hit'an area, highlighting an ontology that recognizes obligations to those that have passed to another level; in other words, the living may still contribute to the welfare of gidhagiye or "those who have gone before." (p. 127)

- Tending to the spirit of the individual and community. An Elder male participant discussed below what it means to tend to the spirit of the community. He stated,

They had the, they had a way of tending to the spirit of the community, they, if they, if the spirit was too much, just was way down, they had a celebration to bring it back up, you know, and tea partners was one of them, to bring everybody together and honor the men, honor the women, you know, share, share with the, uh, if they're really good trappers, you know, share the furs with each other, and, uh, so they, they had ways to tend to that spirit.

He went on to say that, "Part of the Tea Partner is ritual and ceremony—care and tending to spirit of one another." Leonard (2007) discussed the importance of family and community to the DXA people. She stated,

As noted in the Athabascan values above, in both traditional and contemporary contexts, the process of becoming a whole person involves commitment and service to one's family and community. The values that place priority on family and community above the interests of the individual remain despite early Western educational efforts to individualize Native American and Alaska Native people (Adams 1995; Reyhner and Eder, 2004). (p. 128)

- Energy. Part of doing things in a good way includes tending to the spirit of the people and community and also being in relationship with the spirit world and how to keep oneself and other safe from harm. It is important to be aware of the energy, positive and negative, that exists in the world and how to manage

it in a good way. Everything in the world has energy. An Elder male participant discusses the importance of clearing out bad energy or spirits when needed, he states, “So, anybody who comes into the building brings different energy. It’s all energy, and, and it could be good energy, bad energy, or something like that but it stays right in the house. We have to clear it out.”

There is correct protocol to do this, there is always a good way to do things. A culture bearer, a woman participant, shared what she learned from an Elder about telling stories in a good way. She said,

When you start a story to, it sounds like we could take a break, but, to not interrupt. The way she described it, she said it was like, it’s like a light was way in front of you. She says that in the tape I have in there, says the light is way in front of you, and it’s like you see that light and you keep going towards that light, and you don’t, you don’t let anything get in the way.

That same participant discussed how she learned that sometimes telling stories lasted for multiple days; people would take breaks, but the story would go on until the end. There are reasons for this and protocol was always followed so that no harm would befall anyone.

Sharing and caring for self and others. The final action recommendation was that everything should be done within the spirit of sharing and caring for others. They are both essential values as well as practices. The Tea Partner tradition is an excellent example of how sharing and caring was practiced traditionally. An Elder male participant shared that in order to heal and be well we have to share our knowledge and success, we have to “pass it on” “give it away.” He stated,

I guess when I first learned that I didn’t need to drink I was free from that alcohol...then I knew that I had God and the lord and it was going to be easier for me. Then I found out the easiest way to stay sober, today is to help another person

that needs...to pass it on to someone else, just exactly like how LaVerne is trying to do today...pass it on to the people. Learn how to get it, keep it, by passing it on, by giving it away...we call it...you can't keep it unless you give it away. So, I think my strength, some of the power today comes from that, most of it, I have to admit is a power greater than me. I always thank god for that he's doing for me what I can't do for myself. I thank him for doing for me what I'm too dumb to do for myself sometimes you know, but the thing is if I quit, if I'm not there, for someone else, like someone was there when I needed it then I won't be doing my part and it's the same way with wellness in the village...what can I do...I'm glad somebody's starting it.

Another male community member participant discussed how he cares for himself and finds internal peace. He said,

Some of the best moments in my life were just being alongside the river, uh, by myself, or with my dad or with my family, um, and now every time I go to a river I have that peace, right here, uh, and, or a lake or a body of water.

An Elder male participant shared the support we get from our ancestors. He stated,

We know that we're sitting here but around us we all these people behind us, our ancestors, are standing here. There are some people that could see the spirits. We were at a workshop and we were telling people we're more than just what we were told we were. We have to start believing in what the older people have taught us. We have help all around us from the creator, God, whoever you want to call him, Jesus, and our ancestors...there always around us to help us. Once we accept that then the help starts coming in.

Sharing and caring are action recommendations because they are built into the Deg Xit'an culture and traditions, it relates back to survival and continuity of the people.

Conclusion

Focus group participants not only shared stories about wellness and way of life during the conversational focus groups, they also talked about relationships among family members, kinship; how they were connected, if their families spent time together; important names of places along the river, burial grounds, sacred spaces, old communities, where people were from; and they shared historical information, when the

mission was built, and how things used to look, and information about our ancestors. The participants helped each other remember and encouraged each other to continue learning and growing. There was so much more happening than just a conversation about wellness, it truly emphasized the radical possibilities of relationships.

Table 2 Participant Descriptions

PARTICIPANT	AGE RANGE	FOCUS GROUP THEY PARTICIPATED IN
Elder man	70-90 YEARS OLD	FG #1 & #2
Elder man	70-90 YEARS OLD	FG #1 & 3 & 4 & Interviewed
Elder man	70-90 YEARS OLD	FG #2 & Interviewed
Elder man	70-90 YEARS OLD	FG #2
Elder man	70-90 YEARS OLD	FG #2
Elder woman	70-90 YEARS OLD	FG #3
Elder woman	70-90 YEARS OLD	FG #3
Elder woman	70-90 YEARS OLD	FG #3
Elder woman	70-90 YEARS OLD	FG #1
Culture bearer woman	40-60 YEARS OLD	FG #3
Culture bearer woman	40-60 YEARS OLD	FG #1
Culture bearer woman	40-60 YEARS OLD	FG #2
Culture bearer woman	40-60 YEARS OLD	FG #2
Culture bearer woman	40-60 YEARS OLD	FG #3
Culture bearer woman	40-60 YEARS OLD	FG #4
Culture bearer man	40-60 YEARS OLD	FG #3 & FG #4
Young adult woman	18-30 YEARS OLD	FG #4
Young adult woman	18-30 YEARS OLD	FG #2
Young adult woman	18-30 YEARS OLD	FG #2
Young adult woman	18-30 YEARS OLD	FG #2
Young adult man	18-30 YEARS OLD	FG #1 & #3 & #4
Young adult man	18-30 YEARS OLD	FG #1 & FG #3

Deg Xit'an Wellness Journey

"Wellness Is Our Way of Life" ~ Deg Xit'an Elder – Deg Xit'an people learn traditional values and how to be in relationship with the physical and spirit world through the cultural practices modeled by our Elders, parents, and community leaders, and seeds for wellness are rooted within us. When we know who we are and where we come from as Deg Xit'an people we are better able to embrace life's challenges. Our ancestors have taught us that the challenges we face in life are viewed as gifts that lead to growth, wisdom, and resilience. When discussing wellness and wholeness among Deg Xit'an people the Elders and culture bearers remind us that the Deg Xit'an beliefs about how to live and be in the world give us insight and direction and lead us back to our cultural practices where we are able to live our values and the journey continues. The Tea Partner traditional practice is one example of how wellness was infused into the Deg Xit'an way of life and will be used as an example that links the four themes below.

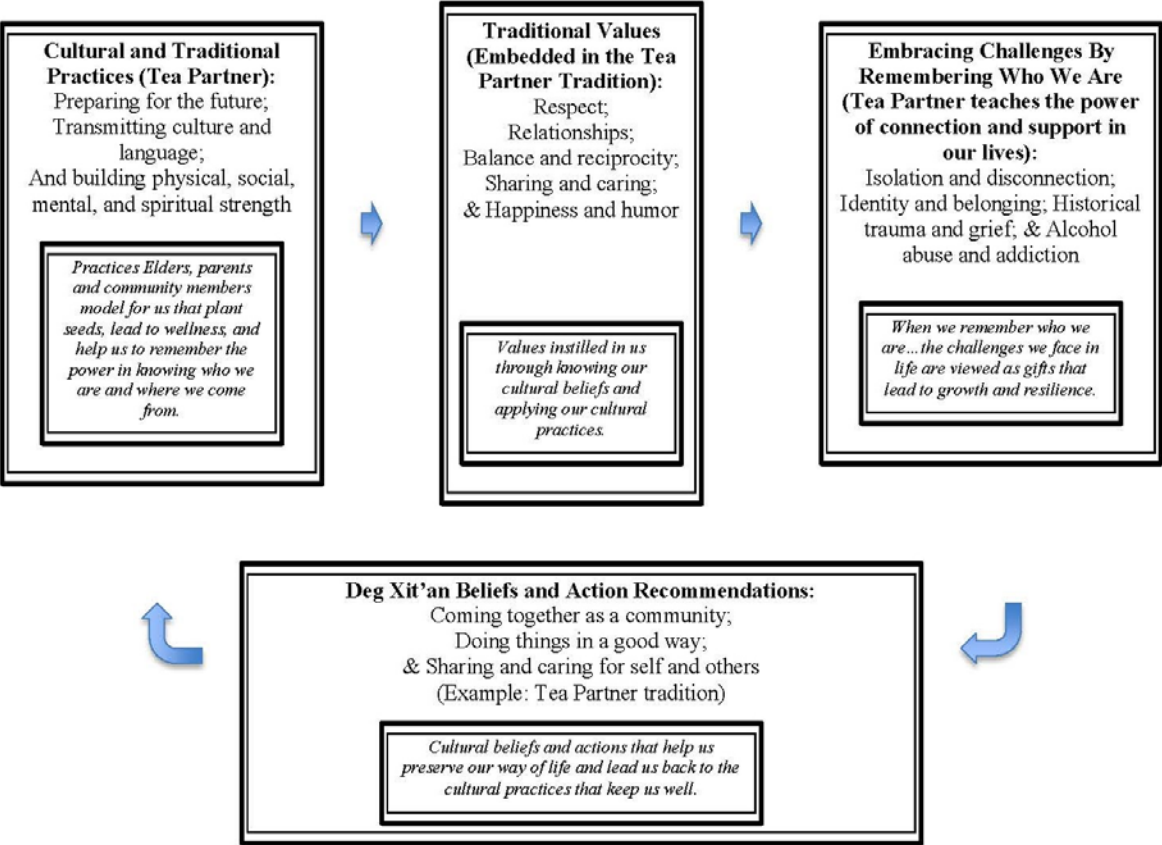


Figure 3 Deg Xit'an Wellness Journey Diagram

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The on-going wellness journey among Indigenous communities can often be observed and understood within the cultural and traditional ceremonies the people currently engage in and have engaged in for generations. This study asks the question, *In what ways do Deg Xit'an, Athabaskan people draw from their culturally unique experiences, knowledge, values, and relationships in the context of their lives to create and maintain wellness and wholeness?* The data from the conversational focus group discussions portray the topic of Deg Xit'an wellness as a lived construct, as a way of life. The themes and subthemes that emerged and that contribute to wellness include: the cultural practices that were modeled by our Elders, traditional values that were embedded within those cultural practices, life's challenges and how the people adapted and grew strength from those challenges, and community action recommendations from participants on how to preserve our way of life and lead us back to the cultural practices that keep the people well. These four themes will be examined further in the discussion section.

Discussion

The theoretical framework utilized for this research study was a combination of social constructivism, an Indigenous model of wellness, and the strengths perspective. Social constructivist theory focuses on how people create meaning through the co-construction of knowledge, through observation, lived experience, and interaction in the context of the environment (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1985; Kim, 2001). The strengths perspective highlights the internal and external capacity and resources of individuals and communities, as well as what is working and what is good. The Indigenous model of wellness as discussed by Weaver (2002) highlights the importance of understanding wellness from a holistic perspective and recognizing that all parts of the whole—social, emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual—must be in balance for wellness to exist. The themes and subthemes will be discussed applying these lenses.

Cultural and Traditional Practices

These include: preparing for the future; transmitting culture and language; and building physical, social, mental, and spiritual strength.

The first theme that came out of the conversational focus groups on wellness was about Deg Xit'an cultural practices. Cultural practices are about the Deg Xit'an way of life, how the people lived their lives, which is consistent with the social constructionist theory that construction of knowledge happens through lived experiences. When talking with an Elder male community member about wellness his first thought was, "it's just the way we live our lives." This idea about the way we live our lives is a very simple but profound notion. The idea being that wellness can be found in the cultural and traditional

practices of the people. The conversations within all the focus groups also reflect this notion of the way we live our lives, there are very specific protocols and practices that were identified that keep us safe and encourage connection and relationship and lead to wellness and wholeness. The Tea Partner tradition is a holistic example of a socially constructed practice that came from our ancestors and is shared amongst the people to create connection and continuity of the culture and people. There are important strengths-based teachings related to wellness that include preparing for the future, this is a recognition that we have to think about and plan for what our grandchildren and great grandchildren will have available to them, what they will know and value, and how they will be connected to the culture, earth, and spirit. How they will understand wellness and be able to plan for their future so the cycle continues. Another aspect of this theme that was very empowering was this idea of the strength of the people. Hearing the stories of the people walking for days to hunt for food, running between villages to send messages, surviving the harsh climate and the even more harsh colonization efforts, and always with a spirit of sharing and caring for others is extremely inspiring. When hearing stories of strength in the people, participants shared a sense of awe and pride and applied that to their own lives. I know in my own experience my aunts and uncles have always told me how strong my ancestors were. Bold. Strong. Resourceful. Healers. Beautiful People. My mother was said to have had a silent strength about her. I believe that this strength runs through each and every cell of my body and permeates my spirit. I can feel it and it drives me forward. This is a feeling that can and should be shared with all Deg Xit'an people.

Traditional Values

The second theme that came out of the conversational focus groups on wellness was about Deg Xit'an values. These include: respect, relationships, balance and reciprocity, caring and sharing, and happiness and humor. Values came across as what Deg Xit'an people feel are important in their lives, what matters to them, what they hold dear to them, and how they choose to act and interact with each other, nature, and the spirit world. This is consistent with social constructivism theory in the sense that social constructivism states that knowledge is constructed through the lived experiences and interaction with the environment or context. The practice of balance and reciprocity among every aspect of life led to wellness and came through as an important teaching. Everything has to balance out. As one Elder participant stated, if the energy in the room was too low or sad, Elders would find a way to bring up that energy, if it was too giddy, they would find a way to bring it down a bit. There was always a balance and reciprocity between men and women, as was discussed about the potlatch partner dances; if the men danced for the women then the women had to also dance for the men. Reciprocity was also connected to the idea of balance; everything was always a give and take. If one community hosted a potlatch then next time another community would pay them back. If you help someone chop wood you can expect that they will give you food or clothing in return for your help. If that reciprocity or balance did not occur there might be illness or feelings of things not right, and then there were ceremonies to put it back on track. There is belief among some Elders that the balance and reciprocity that was lost in the communities needs to return within the mask dances and potlatch partner dances so that harmony and wellness can be restored. This also speaks to the reciprocal interaction with

the people and the environment in social constructivist theory that creates the understanding of how wellness occurs.

Embracing Challenges by Remembering Who We Are

The third theme that came out of the conversational focus groups on wellness was about life's challenges faced by Deg Xit'an people. These include: isolation/disconnection, identity and belonging, historical trauma and grief, and alcohol abuse and addiction. Life's challenges were discussed in each focus group, specifically focused around alcohol abuse or addiction as well as aspects of historical trauma, such as boarding school and mission school experiences and the loss of culture, language, and land. It also included discussions on isolation and disconnection. This is consistent with the social constructionist theory that discusses that learning occurs through social interaction around activities, not just within the individual. I would go even farther to say that the isolation and disconnection and/or the shift to an individualistic worldview could create mental, physical, and spiritual illnesses among Deg Xit'an people. The other aspect to mention here is that the concept of wellness and the challenges people face in life are not opposites, in fact they are intertwined within the Deg Xit'an experience. As one elder shared, our ancestors were always facing challenges and always adapting and growing, there is strength and resilience in that. Colonization was just a different type of challenge and despite all that we have lost we still persist and survive and thrive. Part of the process of building resilience and healing from these challenges is rooted in the cultural practices and values of the people. That is why Elders say we have to give it away in order to keep it; this is referring to the knowledge, skills, and love we have

gained through our positive and negative experiences as a people. Healing has begun across Alaska as Indigenous people are reclaiming who they are as a people and aligning the mental, physical, and spiritual aspects of themselves. An Elder participant calls this an “awakening.” Part of reclaiming the culture and language and traditions is also reclaiming the power of Indigenous medicine, for example, using traditional medicine, such as plants, berries, and other aspects of nature, as well as teaching the knowledge of “healing hands” which focuses on moving energy, and also the power of the mind and asking for help and support from ancestors and spirit guides, among other things.

One final point here...one Elder male participant reminded us, “We are a long way from well.” This remark is important in that this study cannot paint a picture of only wellness and what is working and ignore the struggles and challenges among the people and in the communities. We have to own our struggles and begin working on healing them together.

Deg Xit’an Beliefs and Action Recommendations

The fourth theme that came out of the conversational focus groups on wellness was community action recommendations by Deg Xit’an Elders, culture bearers, and community members. These include: coming together as a community, doing things in a good way, and sharing and caring for self and others (Example: Tea Partner Tradition). This theme is important because it includes directives by the people—knowledge from the people and by the people about how wellness is lived. This is consistent with the social constructivist theory in that, “Social constructivism emphasizes the importance of culture and context in understanding what occurs in society and constructing knowledge

based on this understanding” (Kim, 2001, p. 2). Community action recommendations lead the people back to the beginning, back to the cultural practices that keep the people well. An important action recommendation was coming together as a community. Healing happens when people come together and share their stories and learn from each other and share food and laughter. One Elder female discussed how happy she was to be at the conversational focus group just so she could see the faces of her people. Young people shared that they want to learn from the Elders and that they feel connected and have a sense of belonging when they are part of gatherings. People that have strayed from the cultural practices start remembering what they were taught at an early age and begin making sense of why that was important in their life and in their culture. An Elder male participant stated that he does not want to come together only in times of death and grief, but also in times of joy and celebration. He stated, “Don’t just have gatherings at funerals—it’s important to meet and tell stories that connect us to our history, people, place and culture.” And when we come together use it as a time to learn and document through pictures or recordings so that we have it for future reference.

Implications

Deg Xit’an Community

There is a movement within the state of Alaska and around the world wherein Indigenous people are reclaiming their culture, to include language, traditional practices, singing, drumming and dancing, and connecting to their spirit and spirituality. Community members, young and old, are interested in learning about their culture and language, they are interested in connecting with others from their culture, and utilizing

that knowledge and those practices to live a healthy life. Walters and Simoni (2002) discuss in their article titled “Reconceptualizing Native Women’s Health: An ‘Indigenist’ Stress-Coping Model” the idea of remembering, embracing and reclaiming our “original instructions” as a people and to recognize that culture can act as a buffer between ourselves and the challenges we face in life. Indigenous people want to know their culture and are beginning this for their own personal healing and well-being, and they are also requesting that cultural knowledge and practices be implemented in all types of social service programs and institutions serving the people. Even during these conversational focus groups, as discussed in the results section, the participants in this study were empowered to share their wishes and interests as it related to the DXA culture, including learning the language, focusing on restorative justice, learning more of their culture, to be given a Deg Xit’an name in the language, to pass on what was learned to their children and family members, to learn the songs and dances, to learn how to make DXA masks, to better preserve recordings of songs and dances, to have a DXA reunion, and to get connected with a tea partner today. These are the requests and wishes of the people from this study and through coming together as a community and continuing these conversations we can support these wishes in being achieved. The Deg Xit’an Wellness Journey Diagram shown in Figure 3 highlights how seeds of wellness are planted within us and when we practice our language and traditions and spirituality we are able to move through challenges in life and learn and grow from our experiences. This model is a work in progress and will evolve as more conversations happen with Elders. It can be a guide for individuals, groups, organizations, and the community as a whole.

Social Work Practice

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW), *Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice (2007)*, Standard 10 Leadership to Advance Cultural Competence states,

Social workers shall be change agents who demonstrate the leadership skills to work effectively with multicultural groups in agencies, organizational settings, and communities. Social workers should also demonstrate responsibility for advancing cultural competence within and beyond their organizations, helping to challenge structural and institutional oppression and build and sustain diverse and inclusive institutions and communities. (p. 47)

Social workers have important directives set by NASW and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) around the concept of culture and the importance of culture in our lives as well as the lives of our clients. As discussed in the results chapter, Indigenous people have a lot to share about who they are and how they live in relationship with the world around them, that the social work profession can learn from and apply within their agencies and interventions. As stated in the community implications, people want to learn and practice their culture and traditions AND culture is a buffer for when things get challenging. So, if agencies or clinicians work with Indigenous people, and they do, then this is important to think about when creating policies and interventions and prevention strategies. What this study is also expressing to the profession is that cultural traditions like the Tea Partner can be useful models to implement within a program that can be geared toward someone from any cultural background. The depth of information that exists in the Tea Partner tradition makes it not only a valuable theory to draw from but also a practical tool to use within an agency with various types of clients. The Tea Partner is only one example; every Indigenous society has their own story and/or practice that teaches similar things. Social work leaders can “demonstrate responsibility for advancing

cultural competence within and beyond their organizations” (p. 47) by recognizing the value in Indigenous knowledge for nurturing healthier people and societies and utilizing that knowledge, with permission, in working with Indigenous people.

Another implication for social workers and the profession is related to the importance of working from a holistic perspective, recognizing we are all multidimensional. When an Indigenous client (any client) walks into the agency they are bringing their whole selves with them. They are not pieced apart so that you work only on the physical or only on the mental, social, or spiritual, they are coming in as a whole person with all these relationships that exist with the world around them. Western society and agencies are very siloed, they do not collaborate, and are focused on the individual instead of the family and community. Much of the Indigenous wellness literature highlights the importance of viewing wellness from a holistic standpoint, of recognizing the multidimensionality of the people (Hodge, Limb, & Cross, 2009; Weaver, 2002). This study accentuates the depth of the connections Indigenous people have to all things. For example, eating moose meat or fish or berries is not just about eating food. Eating traditional foods incorporates spirituality, protocol, preparing for the future, respect, reciprocity, doing things in a good way, and so on. It has multiple meanings for the person. When people are away from their homelands or are unable to hunt or gather, their body and spirit yearns for their traditional foods. Clients in an in-patient facility would benefit from having their traditional foods. I believe that as social work professionals we also come into every situation as our whole selves, when we piece ourselves apart or hide away parts of us that can be harmful to us and make us sick. We have to be able to ground ourselves in who we are every day and everywhere.

Another implication for the social work profession is around relationships. Shawn Wilson in his book called *Research is Ceremony* (2008), talks about how researchers should know and practice the ideas of relationality and relational accountability. I believe that social workers, not just researchers, should also become aware of this and put these ideas into practice. Relationality is basically knowing what relationships are important to your client. Not just relationships with people and community, but also relationship with the natural world, animals, seasons, and spirituality. Social workers will be better equipped to find resources or provide interventions when they understand this about the person. Wilson goes on to say that once you know what relationships are important to the research participant/community (in this case to the client), then you should do your best to be accountable to those relationships; meaning, pay attention to the ways in which we are respecting them, utilizing them in our work with clients, using them to better understand the motives and behaviors of our clients, using them as part of our assessments, and so on. This study highlights that within relationships lie possibilities.

Another important implication is to bring Elders to the forefront of our social work classrooms and agencies. Elders have a lot of this cultural knowledge that they carry with them and are often more than willing and happy to share. In my work at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, Social Work Department, we have a Rural Cohort program that is made up of about 90% Alaska Native students living and working in their rural communities. In every class in that program we incorporate and co-teach with an Alaska Native Elder because we understand that this is an important relationship for Native people. We as a department are accountable to our understanding of this important relationship by incorporating Elders into social work classes knowing the positive

impacts they make. The Elders provide safety, guidance, support and are considered a co-teacher of the social work material utilizing their life experiences and wisdom as their CV or resume. This is a hugely successful program and because of programs like ours there are Alaska Native Social Workers in regions of Alaska where there were none only a few short years ago. These graduates are now running programs and delivering services with all the cultural understanding of the people they serve. Indigenous Elders (all Elders) are like libraries, we can learn from them, and apply that knowledge in our classrooms and in our agencies.

Incorporating Deg Xit'an cultural practices, like the Tea Partner tradition, in educational, social, and therapeutic programs should continue to be reinforced and supported where they exist. Where culture is not infused into programming it would be important to have the conversations about the positive implications it can have for health and wellness.

One leading implication for community practice and social work practice includes the recommendation from participants to bring back the Tea Partner tradition. This tradition encompasses cultural practices and values that lead to wellness. It also includes the community coming together, doing things in a good way, and sharing and caring about each other. One Elder woman participant discussed her work within an addictions/AA group where they asked her for suggestions on cultural practices she could share, she offered up a modified Tea Partner ceremony and practice within that group that they adopted. This concept can definitely have positive implications for the addictions field. One Elder male, when referring to his own sobriety, stated, "If you want to keep it, you have to give it away." The idea being that what he has learned and experienced that

helped him to become sober should be passed on to others so that he can continue his own wellness journey. This idea is also encompassed within the Tea Partner tradition. If the profession opens their minds, hearts, and spirits to alternative ways of knowing and doing, together we can make significant changes in the health and wellness of Indigenous people. Within social work education we have an opportunity to share this knowledge with students from all over the world who will be working at some point with Indigenous clients and be better able to relate to their worldview and practices as well as recognize that within their culture there is wisdom for healing and connection and growth. Through this, students can also learn how to utilize their own culture for healing and wellness. There is much Western academic institutions can learn from Indigenous teachings that can be drawn upon in the classroom and beyond. More discussion and energy around this are needed.

Policy

The implication for policy is that organizational and governmental policies should support and fund research and community driven activities that embed cultural practices and values within them, recognizing the benefit that exists in doing so.

Personal

Personal implications include the story of my own wellness journey and the transformation of my own understanding of what wellness means to me as a Deg Xit'an woman. My mom told me the story of the Tea Partner dance when I was growing up; she planted a seed within me to learn about wellness that I am beginning to only truly

understand now. My initial curious and fun interest in her storytelling as a child since has transformed into something much bigger and more important than I could have imagined. I recently went to see a non-Native, White doctor at Chief Andrew Isaac Medical Center, and through our conversation about health and wellness the topic of the Tea Partner came up and she told me that when she was younger and first moved to Alaska her family lived for a bit in the Holy Cross, Anvik, Shageluk, and Grayling region and she was given a tea partner. She was excited to share this and remembered it fondly. I was really excited about the connection and realization of how far reaching this practice went.

I have learned so much about the Tea Partner tradition and the benefits and hope to help my community bring this back in some way; my wish is to have a Tea Partner and be a Tea Partner today and for my son to have a Tea Partner as well. I have learned through this process both in doing the research and writing the dissertation as well as talking to my DXA community that the Tea Partner tradition could have been my theoretical framework for this dissertation. It could have been the paradigm that helps to understand wellness among the DXA. As I remember who I am as a Deg Xit'an woman I am learning how to apply this within research and other scholarly work. It feels liberating and empowering to learn this and to really get the idea that my people's traditions and stories and practices are paradigms and theories that I can use in my scholarly work instead of fitting my ideas always into Western theories and paradigms. I know that these ideas are already known and practiced by many Indigenous scholars and may seem obvious, but to a fairly new scholar and someone who is remembering who I am as a DXA person it feels amazing. I will in the future utilize the Tea Partner tradition as a theory, paradigm, and framework for future articles. In this process my own health and

wellness has shifted and I have become healthier, more grounded, more knowledgeable about who I am and what my purpose is in life and because I am connected to my people I believe the shift is happening with them as well. I look forward to continuing to do work in my community and I know that we as a people are and will continue to be leaders in the area of healing, health and wellness.

Limitations

The limitations of this study are primarily that it is not generalizable to the population as a whole and to other Indigenous groups because of the small number of participants due to this being an exploratory qualitative study. While this study is not generalizable it does, however, have transferability, meaning that readers can take what is meaningful and relevant from this study and apply it as appropriate in their own research and practice. Another limitation is that the numbers of participants is small and, currently, are living in the urban areas of Fairbanks and Anchorage, the two largest cities in Alaska. It would add to the study if more DXA people could participate and it would also be important to talk to DXA people currently living in rural communities and on DXA Ancestral lands. With that said, there is a discussion in Chapter 4 about the relationship Indigenous people have with their ancestral lands, so even though they may no longer be living on their ancestral homelands that connection, participation, and responsibility to place and people always remains.

Future Research

Future research among all Indigenous groups related to reclaiming their culture, language, land, and spirituality are needed. More research should also be done on the effectiveness of utilizing cultural practices, language, and the knowledge of Elders, in educational, social, and therapeutic programs. Future research can also focus on the inseparable relationship between individual and community wellness. Another area of research should look at the idea that wellness is contextual, however, if a cultural group is dispersed in many different locations, what are the impacts of context? Finally, it would be important to do research on bringing back a cultural tradition, like the Tea Partners, and explore the ways in which it can be implemented in various settings like schools, camps, or therapeutic programs. Future research studies can and should also utilize tribal epistemology as a guiding theoretical framework for their study. These future research implications are also lessons that I have come away with and will incorporate into my own future studies.

Conclusion

What was determined about wellness is that it relates to wholeness, the entirety of the human being interacting with their environment. Wellness is multidimensional and holistic. An Elder woman participant stated, “It’s associating spirit, us and the world, and how to connect it all.” An Elder male participant shared a similar sentiment. He stated,

Wellness is actually more about wholeness. Wholeness is just being, uh, a answer to being human, being mind, body, and spirit...we gotta keep that all well...it all works together and so if you make one of it, all of it, something...part of it is not going well, you got to get it well, you got to try to get it fixed so you can keep on developing.

It was also determined among the Deg Xit'an participants that wellness starts with how the people live their lives, their culture practices and values that guide them, and that sharing and passing on that knowledge and those practices are essential as people move through the challenges of the world. Another Elder male participant made that point that, "We are not well yet." This means there is still a lot of work left to do in this area, at least now we have a place to begin.

APPENDIX A

HOLY CROSS TRIBE LETTER OF SUPPORT

9074767132

22 45 51 12/04/2013 1 11
474-6085

Holy Cross Tribe
PO Box 89
Holy Cross, AK 99602
Phone: 907-476-7124
Fax: 907-476-7132

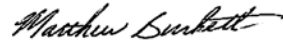
November 25, 2013

University of Utah
Institutional Review Board
75 South 2000 East
Salt Lake City, UT 84112

RE: IRB_00068441

This letter is an official letter of support for LaVerne Demientieff to conduct her research on wellness in the community of Holy Cross, Alaska and with the Deg Xit'an Athabascan people who reside in other communities and across the state of Alaska. The Holy Cross Tribal Council understands the purpose and intent of the study and is aware of the research procedures that will take place for the study. The council has approved this study and gives LaVerne Demientieff full support. If you have questions please contact Rebecca Elswick-Tribal Clerk at 907-476-7124.

Thank You.



Matthew Burkett
Second Chief

APPENDIX B

CONSENT COVER LETTER

*Deg Xit'an, Athabascan Conversations on Wellness:
A Qualitative Study Exploring the Radical Possibilities of Relationships*

The purpose of this research study is to explore the ways in which Deg Xit'an people draw upon culture to stay well, balanced and healthy.

I am doing this study because this research may help develop a greater understanding of the influences of culture on wellness in the future. Another benefit may be that the conversations focusing on relationships, culture, and history may provide a deeper understanding of who Deg Xit'an people are as a people and as individuals and how the Deg Xit'an culture influences our wellness. This research is a means to share positive, inspiring and hopeful stories of our lives with each other.

I am asking you, the participant, to participate in a focus group for approximately two hours with five to six other Deg Xit'an community members. It will include sharing your thoughts and stories about being a Deg Xit'an person and how that influences your individual wellness and how that influences community wellness from your perspective. All conversational/focus groups will be audio recorded.

The risks of this study are minimal. You may feel upset thinking about or talking about personal information related to wellness. These risks are similar to those you experience when discussing personal information with others. If you feel upset from this experience, you can tell the researcher, and she will tell you about resources available to help.

We cannot promise any direct benefit for taking part in this study. However, the hope is that this research may help develop a greater understanding of the influences of culture on wellness in the future. Another benefit may be that the conversations focusing on our relationships, culture, and history may provide a deeper understanding of who we are as a people and as individuals; and a means to share positive, inspiring and hopeful stories of our lives with each other.

We will keep all research records that identify you private to the extent allowed by law. Records about you will be kept in locked offices and on computers protected with passwords. Only those who work with this study or are performing their job duties for the University of Utah, School of Social Work will be allowed access to your information. Your name will be kept separate from your responses from the conversational groups and you will be given an alias. In publications, your name will be removed and protected.

Each conversational/focus group will be audio recorded from start to finish using a hand held recorder. The purpose of recording is to create a transcript of the dialogue to analyze and make meaning of the content. The recordings will be stored in the principal investigators locked office and on a password-protected computer belonging to the principal investigator. Before beginning the conversational focus groups participants will be asked what they would like to see done with recordings and given the option of either the principal investigator destroying the tapes or giving the recordings to the Deg Xit'an, Athabascan Tribe for use as they see fit. Only the principal investigator will have access to the recordings and will only allow necessary parties that understand confidentiality to listen or help with transcription. If participants chose to make audio recordings public or give them to the Tribe, because of possible voice recognition,

participants will be asked to sign a separate consent form to do so at the time of the conversational/focus group. Audio recordings will be stored for one year from the time that they are created unless otherwise directed by participants.

If you have any questions, complaints or if you feel you have been harmed by this research please contact LaVerne Demientieff, University of Utah PhD Student and Principal Investigator at 907-460-2906 or by email at Imdemientieff@alaska.edu.

Contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) if you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant. Also, contact the IRB if you have questions, complaints or concerns which you do not feel you can discuss with the investigator. The University of Utah IRB may be reached by phone at (801) 581-3655 or by e-mail at irb@hsc.utah.edu.

Each conversational/focus group should take approximately two hours to complete. Participation in this study is voluntary. You can choose not to take part. You can choose not to finish the conversational/focus group without penalty or loss of benefits. If you do not want to be audio recorded please do not participate in the research study.

By attending the conversational/focus group you are giving your consent to participate.

Thank you for sharing your stories and your time to this research study. It is greatly appreciated and will be extremely useful in understanding the influence of the Deg Xit'an culture and practices on the wellness of our people.

APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT LETTER #1

10/24/13

*Deloycheet Incorporated
P.O. Box 228
Holy Cross, Alaska 99602*

Re: Deg Xit'an, Athabascan Conversations on Wellness: A Qualitative Study Exploring the Radical Possibilities of Relationships

Dear Director:

I am writing to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a research study about the influence of culture on wellness. This study is being conducted by LaVerne Demientieff at the University of Utah, College of Social Work.

Let me introduce myself. My name is LaVerne Demientieff. My parents are the late Rudy and Alice Demientieff of Holy Cross, Alaska. I grew up in Nenana and Anchorage. Both my parents have Deg' Xitan, Athabascan ancestry. I am looking forward to connecting with my family, community and people through conversations about how our culture has influenced our wellness. I hope to see you soon. Dogidihn (thank you)!

The purpose of the study is to explore the ways in which Deg Xit'an people draw upon culture to stay well, balanced and healthy. The hope is that this research may help develop a greater understanding of the influences of culture on wellness in the future. Another benefit may be that the conversations focusing on relationships, culture, and history may provide a deeper understanding of who Deg Xit'an people are as a people and as individuals and how the Deg Xit'an culture influences our wellness. This research is a means to share positive, inspiring and hopeful stories of our lives with each other.

I believe you may be interested in an approved research study about how culture influences wellness, specifically how Deg Xit'an culture influences individual and collective wellness. You were chosen because you are a Deg Xit'an, Athabascan.

Agreement to be contacted or a request for more information does not obligate you to participate in any study. Feel free to call or email me with any questions.

If you would like additional information about this study, please call LaVerne Demientieff at 907-460-2906 or you can email LaVerne at Imdemientieff@alaska.edu

Thank you again for considering this research opportunity.

APPENDIX D

RECRUITMENT LETTER #2

Date: 01/24/14

To: Deg Xit'an, Athabascan Tribal Member

From: LaVerne Demientieff, MSW, ABD

Re: Deg Xit'an, Athabascan Conversations on Wellness: A Qualitative Study Exploring the Radical Possibilities of Relationships

Ade' (Hello). I am writing to recruit Deg Xit'an, Athabascan community members to participate in a two-hour conversational focus group as part of a dissertation research study about the influence of Deg Xit'an culture on individual and collective wellness. This study is being conducted by LaVerne Demientieff through the University of Utah, College of Social Work.

Let me introduce myself. My name is LaVerne Demientieff. My parents are the late Rudy and Alice Demientieff of Holy Cross, Alaska. I grew up in Nenana and Anchorage. Both my parents have Deg Xit'an, Athabascan ancestry. I am looking forward to connecting with my family, community and people through conversations about how our culture has influenced our wellness. I hope to see you soon. Dogidihn (thank you)!

The purpose of the study is to explore the ways in which Deg Xit'an people draw upon culture to stay well, balanced and healthy. The hope is that this research may help develop a greater understanding of the influences of culture on wellness. Another benefit may be that the conversations focusing on relationships, culture, and history may provide us a deeper understanding of who Deg Xit'an people are as a group and as individuals and how the Deg Xit'an culture influences our wellness. This research is a means to share positive, inspiring and hopeful stories of our lives with each other.

You were chosen because you are a Deg Xit'an, Athabascan over the age of 18-years old. I am recruiting individuals of Deg Xit'an descent and would like to encourage as many elders to be involved as possible. I am hoping to have 4-5 conversational focus groups in the areas of Fairbanks, Anchorage and Holy Cross. If there are a number of people in other areas I will consider holding focus groups there as well. There is a two-hour minimum time commitment and the conversational groups would include around 5-7 individuals, it can be more if that is what is needed. The groups may last a bit longer depending on conversation. Conversational focus groups will be held as soon as enough participants are recruited. Information gathered will be analyzed and used in my dissertation research study as well as shared with the Deg Xit'an community.

Agreement to be contacted or a request for more information does not obligate you to participate in any study. Feel free to call or email me with any questions. If you would like to participate or need additional information about this study, please call LaVerne Demientieff at 907-460-2906 or you can email LaVerne at Imdemientieff@alaska.edu

Please forward to your contacts and spread the word to others that may be interested. Thank you again for your consideration to participate in this research study. Dogidihn (thank you).

APPENDIX E

IRB APPROVAL RENEWAL LETTER #2



75 South 2000 East Salt Lake City, UT 84112 | 801.581.3655 | IRB@utah.edu

IRB: [IRB_00068441](#)

PI: LaVerne Demientieff

Title: Deg Xit'an, Athabascan Conversations on Wellness: A Qualitative Study Exploring the Radical Possibilities of Relationships

Date: 12/16/2015

This Continuing Review Application qualifies for an expedited review by a designated University of Utah IRB member as described in 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research involves one or more of the activities in Categories 6 and 7 (published in 63 FR 60364-60367). The designated IRB member has reviewed and approved your application on 12/15/2015. The approval is effective as of 12/16/2015. Federal regulations and University of Utah IRB policy require this research protocol to be re-reviewed and re-approved prior to the expiration date, as determined by the designated IRB member.

Your study will expire on 12/14/2017 11:59 PM.

Any changes to this study must be submitted to the IRB prior to initiation via an amendment form.

Click [CR_00020685](#) to view the application and access the approved documents.

Please take a moment to complete our [customer service survey](#). We appreciate your opinions and feedback.

APPENDIX F

IRB APPROVAL RENEWAL LETTER #1



IR: [IRB_00068441](#)

PI: LaVerne Demientieff

Title: Deg Xit'an, Athabascan Conversations on Wellness: A Qualitative Study
Exploring the Radical Possibilities of Relationships

This New Study Application qualifies for an expedited review by a designated University of Utah IRB member as described in 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research involves one or more activities in Category 6 & 7 (published in 63 FR 60364-60367). The designated IRB member has reviewed and approved your study as a Minimal risk study on 12/11/2013. The approval is effective as of 12/12/2013. Federal regulations and University of Utah IRB policy require this research protocol to be re-reviewed and re-approved prior to the expiration date, as determined by the designated IRB member.

Your study will expire on 12/10/2015.

Any changes to this study must be submitted to the IRB prior to initiation via an amendment form.

DETERMINATIONS

- **Waiver/Alteration Determination:** The IRB has determined that the request for **waiver of documentation of informed consent** is approved for this research under 45 CFR 46.117(c).

APPROVED DOCUMENTS

VA Consent Forms

Consent Cover Letter

Surveys, etc.

Focus:Conversational Group Interview Script for LMDemientieff Research .docx

Literature Cited/References

References for LMDemientieff Research.docx

Recruitment Materials, Advertisements, etc.

Recruitment Letter for LMDemientieff Research 10:24:13.doc

Other Documents

Off-Site Letter of Cooperation

Click [IRB 00068441](#) to view the application and access the approved documents.

Please take a moment to complete our [customer service survey](#). We appreciate your opinions and feedback.

APPENDIX G

INFORMAL RESEARCH AGENDA

1. What are some examples of how our Deg Xit'an culture has kept us feeling balanced or has given us feelings of wellness or helped us heal?
2. What are some stories of survival you remember either from elders or family members as you were growing up? How has their experience shaped who you are today?
3. How have you managed to survive some of the challenges you have faced in your lifetime? What did you learn from those challenges?
4. When you feel physically/emotionally ill, how do you try to get better? How were those strategies learned?
5. When there is a death or trauma in the community, how does the community cope or heal? How does the individual cope or heal?
6. How do you decrease stress? How does the community decrease stress?
7. What cultural values/traditions do you draw from when you are not well?
8. What is the role of spirituality in maintaining balance and wellness? What is the role of nature? What is the role of community and/or kinship? What is the role of nature?
9. Do you have a role model in your family or community that teaches you how to be healthy? How?
10. How have we learned from our elders about how to be healthy and balanced?
11. What has been lost in the culture and what do you feel should be revived and why?
12. What makes you proud about being a Deg Xit'an, Athabascan?

REFERENCES

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