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# “Until People Are Given the Right to Be Human Again”: Voices of American Indian Men on Domestic Violence and Traditional Cultural Values

*Arieahn Matamonasa-Bennett*

## INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence is a serious social problem in contemporary American Indian communities and has been identified by the National Congress of American Indians as one of the most important issues facing American Indians now and in the future.<sup>1</sup> Examining domestic violence in American Indian communities is critically important for the creation and evaluation of prevention and intervention strategies to prevent further suffering of its victims. Research is key to advancing understanding of the ways in which American Indian people define and conceptualize interpersonal violence and the role traditional cultural values may have in mediating or preventing it.

Despite the fact that men are the primary targets for domestic violence treatment and prevention initiatives, very little is known about the ways in which American Indian men define, perceive, or understand this serious social problem, particularly in the cultural context. This study sought to discover the

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perspectives and cultural dynamics of men from a single cultural community representing different generations who had reported experiences with domestic violence. This research used intensive qualitative interviews and placed their life stories and perspectives at the center of the analysis.

Domestic violence, also called intimate partner violence, has been researched in the United States during the last forty years across a wide range of disciplines, such as sociology and psychology, mainly from a Euro-American perspective.<sup>2</sup> Reflecting the biases that permeate US culture and the social sciences, problems such as domestic violence or substance abuse in minority groups are often cast from a deficit perspective and as intrapersonal phenomena or mental health pathologies independent of historical, sociopolitical, and cultural contexts.

Research on domestic violence within the American Indian population has been poorly characterized historically and is not culturally specific. Much of the research on family and domestic violence continues to be fragmented, anecdotal, and overpowered by poor understanding and inadequate research methodologies. Most researchers working in this area agree that research needs to begin with tribal- or community-specific populations. Despite the increasing recognition of domestic violence as a serious problem within American Indian communities, the literature on domestic violence and interventions is scant.<sup>3</sup>

The importance of understanding cultural and racial differences cannot be underestimated. Less is known about domestic violence in the American Indian population than any other racial group. National survey data, crime statistics, and revictimization statistics do not ordinarily include data on racial groups, while minority data are often combined and reported only as nonwhite, which masks racial differences.<sup>4</sup> There are problems with under-reporting and defining and classifying race accurately, and there is enormous difficulty with collecting data on a national scale that includes both reservation and urban communities.

Current data indicate American Indian men and women experience more interpersonal violence than in any other ethnic group, and per capita rates of violence are much higher than the general population, with rates of aggravated assault that are twice that of the country as a whole.<sup>5</sup> American Indian women are more likely to be victimized by someone of another race than by American Indian males.<sup>6</sup> A survey from the Department of Justice found that women in cross-cultural relationships are at unusually higher risk for violence. This increase may be due in part to differences in culturally defined expectations regarding gender roles and acceptable behavior.<sup>7</sup>

Rates and statistics of domestic violence may actually be higher than reported. Numerous challenges to collecting accurate data exist due to complexities of jurisdiction in reservation communities. Currently, there are

no comprehensive data for women and men living on reservations under tribal jurisdiction since there is no federal or Indian agency or organization collecting this information.<sup>8</sup> Additional problems exist with underreporting by both tribal and federal authorities.

For American Indian people residing on reservations, the complexities of jurisdiction (tribal, state, and federal) make reporting and prosecuting violence very difficult. A 2007 Amnesty International report, “Maze of Injustice: The Failure to Protect Indigenous Women from Sexual Violence in the USA,” cites continued discriminatory practices, the erosion of tribal governmental authority, the gross underfunding of law enforcement and social services, and the failure of authorities to bring perpetrators to justice as the primary causes for the epidemic rates of violence against women in Indian country.<sup>9</sup>

### *Sociopolitical and Historical Context*

Many Euro-American scholars have asserted that domestic violence is universal and has been historically and systematically documented. Feminist theories on domestic violence often cite causal factors in domestic violence to be patriarchal social structures, societal acceptance of male dominance and aggression, and sex-role stereotyping, assumed to be universal for all cultures.

Even though rates of domestic violence in American Indian communities today are very high, this is a recent phenomenon. Several American Indian scholars believe that domestic violence was almost nonexistent in precontact cultures and that when it did occur, it was severely sanctioned.<sup>10</sup> Social, political, familial, and spiritual structures across Indian cultures gave women inherent power and resulted in societies that were far more egalitarian than those found in European cultures. Although gender roles varied by tribes, there was great flexibility and variability for both men and women. Clan connections and relationships assured a family or community response to interpersonal violence. Divorce was an option for women in many precontact societies and men who perpetrated violence against women lost status as warriors, were ostracized, or could be exiled.<sup>11</sup> Because harmony among tribal members was essential for survival, effective systems for mediating and resolving interpersonal conflicts evolved over thousands of years.<sup>12</sup>

The process of colonization and genocide resulted in the systematic devaluing, destruction, and elimination of many traditional American Indian cultures. Tribal governments, tribal leaders, advocacy groups, and numerous tribal-based prevention and intervention efforts have formally recognized the epidemic violence against American Indian women as the result of interaction with immigrant groups and the loss of traditional social structures and values through the process of colonization.<sup>13</sup>

## *Alcohol and Stereotypes*

The use of alcohol as a subduing tool, as a factor in cultural loss, and as an artifact of colonization has been well documented.<sup>14</sup> High rates of alcoholism are a reality in many American Indian communities, and it is therefore necessary to examine the relationship between alcohol abuse and domestic violence. Researchers have noted that domestic violence often occurs with drug or alcohol use by the perpetrator and also by the victim.<sup>15</sup> However, few theorists propose a direct causal relationship despite the fact that they often occur in tandem. Current research indicates that men who have severe alcohol and drug problems are apt to abuse their partner both when they are drunk and when sober.<sup>16</sup> Patterns of alcohol consumption seem to influence violence in that alcohol abuse is more predictive of violence than acute intoxication, although both are predictive. Richard M. Tolman and Larry W. Bennett found in 1990 that binge drinkers have the highest rates of battering.<sup>17</sup> Irene Hanson Frieze and Jaime Knoble asserted in 1980 that the victims and general public opinion provided the main supports for the view that alcohol and domestic violence have a causal relationship.<sup>18</sup> Researchers agree that drugs and alcohol have the potential to exacerbate an individual's emotional instability or intensify interpersonal conflict. The substance may act as a disinhibitor for those already prone to violence or to provide justification or an excuse for it.<sup>19</sup>

An enduring American Indian stereotype is that of the drunkard.<sup>20</sup> While Euro-Americans have successfully used alcohol as a mitigating factor for guilt, for American Indians it does not serve to mitigate guilt due to this pervasive stereotype.<sup>21</sup> Cynthia Willis Esqueda, Lori Hack, and Melissa Tehee found in 2010 that among Euro-American respondents, biases against American Indian men *and* women exist in the interpretation of domestic violence when alcohol is involved. Their findings are important in that, often, those responsible for responding and preventing future violence—police, prosecutors, treatment professionals, and judges—are Euro-American.<sup>22</sup>

Negative stereotypes of American Indian people permeate popular media at a global level. Native men are often portrayed as bloodthirsty savages, treating women cruelly. Scholars have noted negative stereotyping, devaluing of American Indian women, and denial of their rights from the earliest European contact.<sup>23</sup> While these concepts appear frequently in the literature, the possible links among these images, the violence of individuals, and responses to violent behavior are not well understood.

## *The Role of Beliefs and Cultural Values*

Cultural belief systems may create cultural contexts in which violence against women is supported or minimized by the cultures' attitudes or beliefs. In 1999

Janice Sanchez-Hucles and Mary Ann Dutton proposed a model that examined racial and cultural factors that link societal and domestic violence. They assert that men's violence toward women of color can be explained by examining factors at the societal, cultural, and individual levels of analysis, as well as the interaction of all three levels. In addition to the proposed model, Sanchez-Hucles and Dutton consider that there are resiliency factors among ethnic minority families that combat the multiple influences that support violence. They define resiliency factors as those resources that typically stem from individual differences or cultural traditions that are practiced within racial or cultural groups. These resiliency factors include such things as an emphasis on communal values and extended family, flexible gender roles, religion, and cultural traditions of valuing women.<sup>24</sup> American Indian traditional values emphasize complementary, balanced, and flexible gender roles, and cooperation rather than competition.<sup>25</sup> These may be found to be protective factors against domestic violence. Certainly, spiritual traditions that hold women as sacred and powerful may serve to lessen violence against them.

In 1989 David Levinson studied the ethnographic records of ninety societies worldwide for family violence. Of the seventeen North American Indian cultures he studied, he found three with minimal levels of family violence: Iroquois, Fox, and Papago. Societies that lacked family violence were characterized as possessing the following: (a) shared decision-making; (b) equal control over family resources; (c) no premarital sexual double standard; (d) peaceful conflict resolution within and outside the home; and (e) social sanctions and accountability for domestic violence.<sup>26</sup>

In 1996, James W. Zion and Elsie B. Zion reviewed Navajo tradition regarding the handling of domestic violence. Examining Navajo common law and traditions that prevented domestic violence, they asserted that current violence is the product of disruption of traditional lifestyles, economies, and institutions, as well as the introduction of individualism, individualistic norms, paternalism, and patriarchal rule.<sup>27</sup> In 1996 Donna Coker examined the Navajo practice of peacemaking as a useful, informal adjudication method that disrupts nontraditional social and familial supports for domestic violence. Peacemaking addresses both the systemic and personal responsibility aspects of violence and includes the use of traditional stories with gender antisubordination themes to change the way perpetrators and families understand this violence.<sup>28</sup>

### *Perceptions and Current Prevention Intervention*

Understanding perceptions about these traditional values in relation to domestic violence is paramount in light of the numerous violence prevention

and awareness initiatives in reservation communities across the United States and Canada. Many current initiatives rely on the concept that domestic violence is not traditional. For example, in a 2003 study Karen Artichoker and Verlaine Gullickson interviewed male and female Lakota elders and spiritual leaders in South Dakota, most of whom identified domestic violence as a problem brought on by colonization. The slogan, “Domestic Violence is not a Lakota Tradition—Women are Sacred,” is currently being used as a means for raising public awareness of the problem on reservations and in nearby communities.<sup>29</sup>

Beginning in the 1980s with the Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs (DAIP), the nonprofit group Mending the Sacred Hoop in northeastern Minnesota addresses domestic violence from a social change and traditional American Indian perspective. Formed as a nonprofit in 2006, Mending the Sacred Hoop provides training and intervention approaches that address the unique cultural and sociohistorical aspects of violence in Native communities. The materials utilize traditional values of honoring and respecting women and approach the problem of domestic violence as one of colonization. Minnesota’s success with this approach has earned national recognition.<sup>30</sup>

### *American Indian Women’s Perceptions*

Melissa Tehee’s and Cynthia W. Esqueda’s 2008 study examined and compared differences in the perceptions of American Indian women and European American women with regard to domestic violence. The authors hypothesized that due to unique historical and cultural experiences, American Indian women would hold different perceptions regarding the history, definitions, and causes of domestic violence. Results indicated important differences in the women’s perspectives that have implications for prevention and treatment. The authors advocate the need for community-based, tribally controlled, and culturally appropriate approaches to this problem.<sup>31</sup>

### *American Indian Men*

From extensive clinical work with American Indian men in a variety of community settings, several theories have arisen regarding cultural differences that may exist in the phenomenon of domestic violence.<sup>32</sup> These theories inform public policy, community awareness initiatives, and psychological treatment approaches. Given that men are the main target for prevention and treatment initiatives, an important area of research includes examination of their beliefs and perceptions about the historical, societal, cultural, and individual factors that might cause or mediate domestic violence.

## THE PRESENT RESEARCH

Prior to this study, very limited formal data existed concerning American Indian men's awareness, understanding, or perceptions regarding domestic violence. The goal of this study was to give voice to the experiences, definitions, and perceptions of men from a Great Lakes reservation community with respect to domestic violence. This study used intensive qualitative interviews, placing their life stories and perspectives at the center of the analysis. Interviews with male elders sought to clarify and understand the concepts about traditional culture and values and provide a lens for a community-level, culturally specific perspective on domestic violence. The following research questions guided the elder interviews in this study:

1. How do traditional Elders in the community perceive domestic violence (in precontact culture, over their lifespan and currently)?
2. Do Elders think domestic violence is a problem in the community? What do traditional Elders think should be done about domestic violence?

The interviews with the other participants attempted to open the discussion of racial and cultural issues in the lives of American Indian men who had been involved with domestic violence at some point in their lives. The following research questions guided this portion of the study:

1. How do American Indian men with self-identified histories of domestic violence define themselves in relation to their culture and community?
2. How do American Indian men perceive their involvement with domestic violence—particularly with respect to cultural identity?
3. Do American Indian men perceive domestic violence as a problem in their community? If so, what might be done to stop it?

## METHODOLOGY

This exploratory study utilized intensive directed individual interviews with elders and American Indian men from a single cultural community to understand their perceptions of domestic violence within their community. The interviews were conducted to discover the perceptions and beliefs about domestic violence together with racial and cultural dynamics. Based on the literature review and current theories about domestic violence and American Indian culture, the initial predictions and assumptions hypothesized were that the men who identified as “traditional” would be less likely to be violent against their partners than men who identified as more assimilated or acculturated. At the time of the study, the provision of domestic violence

intervention and treatment was based on Euro-American approaches. Given that men are the primary targets of prevention and treatment, the aim of this study was to provide unique cultural perspectives that could inform further research, public policy, community awareness initiatives, and psychological treatment approaches.

The principal investigator (PI) is an American Indian psychologist and had existing relationships in the community that informed the research design and process. The sanctioning of the research by the tribal leadership and participation by respected community elders was essential for this study and is also recommended in the literature.<sup>33</sup> For the protection and confidentiality of the participants, it was requested that the term *Great Lakes tribe* be inserted in place of the official tribal name. The PI agreed to provide a summary of the results to tribal leaders and domestic violence treatment providers serving the study community.

In ethnographic tradition, field research and data collection began two years prior to the formal study, and established a reflexive process (including self-reference, divulging values and interests in the research, and willingness to receive critique) in order to maintain the primary interest in cultural analysis. Preliminary fieldwork was also essential to the research design and process.<sup>34</sup>

### *Participants and Design*

Purposive sampling was used and participants were recruited to the study through flyers posted at the local mental health facility that provided domestic violence treatment and at public and cultural events both on and off the reservation. Recruitment strategies also included brief presentations about the study, and early participants referred other men to participate in the interviews. For reasons of safety and to minimize risk to women and families, men who were currently in treatment for domestic violence were ineligible for the study. Additional exclusion criteria included intoxication at the time of the interview. Consistent with cultural tradition, all participants were given a traditional offering of tobacco just prior to the interview as a sign of gratitude and respect for their willingness to share their views and stories. At the time of the interview, a list of local mental health counselors and spiritual counselors was provided in case the interviews caused distress to the participants. Additionally, participants had the option of attending a debriefing at the end of the study that took the form of a traditional talking circle facilitated by a traditional elder and the PI.<sup>35</sup> The privacy and confidentiality of participants were protected throughout the research process. The participants chose pseudonyms and interviews were conducted in a private off-reservation location that was not used during recruitment. Identifying information was obscured

or removed and participants had the opportunity to refuse the use of direct quotes in the presentation of results.

Nine men identified experiences with domestic violence and self-selected to participate. The participants represented three generations ranging from ages thirty to sixty-eight. Two of the men were elders (men with traditional knowledge, status, and respect in the community) and the remaining seven had varying levels of formal education and cultural knowledge. Two of the nine participants completed school up to eighth grade and one participant was functionally illiterate. Five participants had completed secondary school or a GED program, one participant had an associate degree, and one had a bachelor degree. Levels of traditional cultural identification, assimilation, or acculturation were not measured formally, but rather, participants were asked open-ended questions to describe themselves in relation to their cultural identity (for example, “How would you describe yourself to others when they ask you about your background?”).

All but three of the men lived on the reservation, and the three lived within fifty miles and traveled there frequently. All of the participants had been married at least once, and seven of the nine had been married more than once. All of the participants were living with a wife or female partner at the time of the interview.

This sample consisted of both men who had exposure to domestic violence treatment and men who admitted to violent behavior but had never received treatment. Even though five of the participants reported that they had police involvement and had served time in jail for violent behavior against their female partners, only three of the five indicated that they had been court-ordered into treatment, which consisted of group anger management. One participant received a twenty-six-week domestic violence treatment program in conjunction with substance abuse treatment. The men had all completed treatment prior to the study. The treatment facility at the time of the study utilized standard mainstream Euro-American approaches, and the treatment staff members were Caucasian.

### *Data Analysis*

The qualitative data were collected through loosely structured, open-ended, face-to-face interviews that lasted between one and three hours in length. Interview questions were informed by the research questions, the reflexive process, and fieldwork done by the PI prior to the formal study. Additionally, the PI had several years of prior experience conducting intake/assessment interviews with men referred for domestic violence treatment in an urban mental health center. The questions focused on cultural dynamics while at the

same time allowing for additional themes and concepts to emerge. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were taken during the interview process describing impressions, reactions, or other significant events that occurred as additional data. Once saturation was achieved, evidenced by repetition or the parallel nature of participants' stories, the interviews were halted.<sup>36</sup>

The standards in the qualitative paradigm to ensure trustworthiness are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.<sup>37</sup> Verification strategies were used to ensure that the standards of rigor were achieved. These included reflexive field notes, member checking, an auditor, and the use of triangulation. During the consent process, participants decided if they would permit the PI to contact them post-interview if data needed to be verified. The consenting participants were mailed a copy of their verbatim transcript for review. Only one participant followed up to clarify responses. A supporting researcher served as the transcriber and as an auditor of each of the transcripts. The findings were evaluated against existing literature, and the auditor and PI discussed interpretations of data until they arrived at consensus.

The interview narratives offered a tapestry of personal life stories, opinions, cultural stories, historical and current events, and general social commentary. The methods of analysis included several stages and utilized principles from grounded theory and ethnographic content analysis. The goals for this form of analysis are to discover emergent patterns, themes, and cultural perspectives. Although systematic, it is not rigid and allows for the constant discovery and comparison of culturally relevant situations, styles, images, and meanings.<sup>38</sup>

The analysis began with a careful reading and rereading of each narrative transcript, noting initial impressions, until themes and patterns began to emerge. Core codes were noted on each transcript, theme categories were created based on the initial research questions informing the research, and each narrative was analyzed for responses to the core categories. The data were highly interconnected and often the quotations overlapped conceptually and were relevant for more than one category. These data were double-coded. The core/theme categories were tracked and compared from beginning to end within each narrative and across each narrative by reading separately and repeatedly for each code/theme. Through analysis and comparison, several new "in vivo" codes/themes emerged spontaneously from the data. These included culturally specific terms and meanings used by the participants. None of the research or interview questions referenced alcohol, yet within and across the narratives, references to it were so pervasive that it became a major theme/category. A full description of this aspect of the study is deserving of, and intended for, a separate article. In keeping with the scope and focus of the

present article, references are included when germane to personal/cultural identity and domestic violence.

## RESULTS

Based on the narratives/life stories, the participants were identified as falling into the following four groups: (1) The Two Elders; (2) Nonviolent Witnesses; (3) Men with Very Violent Histories; and (4) Men in Transition. These groupings described and differentiated participants; however, the main themes presented here were found across the sample. The findings of the study were organized into three overarching themes and ten sub-themes that emerged contextually in relation to the following research questions: (1) How do American Indian elders and men with self-identified histories of domestic violence define themselves in relation to their culture and community? (2) How do American Indian men perceive their involvement with domestic violence—particularly with respect to cultural identity? and (3) Do American Indian men perceive domestic violence as a problem in their community? If so, what might be done to stop it?

### *Theme I. Cultural Identity and Traditional Values*

In this category men were asked to describe themselves and how they would describe themselves to others. Levels of traditional identification were defined through several aspects: (a) their knowledge of oral history and tribal customs; (b) their identification with these aspects of culture as evidenced in their life stories; (c) length of time and impact of their exposure to elders; and (d) current roles within the community.

Their narratives included themes of growing up with racism, isolation, alcoholism, family violence, and struggles to define themselves as “Indian” and find their roles in a world not of their making.

#### I.1. I’M NOT A DRUNK: ALCOHOL AND INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY

Despite the fact that none of the interview questions addressed alcohol, each participant included in his self-description his past and current relationship to alcohol as a part of his identity: “They would say I am really into protecting the environment, that I view education as important, and that I don’t drink or do drugs. Sometimes I am brutally honest.” Skin—one of the men with a very violent history—explained, “I don’t drink, I used to be an alcoholic—a long time ago—then, plus I was a drug addict . . . I don’t do that stuff no more.”

Themes of childhood neglect, family dysfunction and violence as a result of binge drinking over a forty-eight-hour weekend (“49’n”) were found across

the sample. The men stated that as children, they “despised alcohol and anyone who drank” and all were adamant about not drinking or wanting to be like the adults around them. During adolescence and young adulthood, however, each of the men told of struggles with destructive drinking and substance abuse patterns that have, unfortunately, become social norms in the community. Eight of the nine participants began drinking between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. As Daniel describes, “so I started doing exactly what I said I wasn’t going to do—getting heavy into alcohol.” After having his own children, his drinking and violence with their mother escalated and he remembered a turning point: “Immediately it hit me . . . Christ! I’m getting like my dad . . . I had resolved when I was younger I was never going to be like my father.”

Kanasa, who was placed in a white foster home as a toddler, told of reconnecting with family on the reservation and experienced “drinking to be Indian.” His story was filled with conflicting loyalties and aspects of “Indianness” in identification with the “drunken Indian” stereotype and eventual rejection of it.

## I.2. POISON THAT RUINED THE NATION: ALCOHOL, COLONIZATION, AND TRIBAL IDENTITY

During the interviews it became apparent that alcohol is highly symbolic of destruction, colonization, and foreign invasion. It “takes over” and the people themselves become something different. It prevents them from being “human beings.” A theme across the sample was that alcohol is not only a symbol/artifact of colonization, it is a protest to it:

They see all these benefits of being [white] and you go on the Indian reservation and 95% of them people—maybe higher—don’t experience the benefits of the society they’re in. And so now, they’re striking out. They are going to do things . . . maybe they’ll drink more, or do less, or become more combative or whatever.

Alcohol. The acceptance of alcohol and acceptance of that behavior, or the denial that goes with it. Denying that it has happened . . . we had our own way then we were a group abruptly stopped. They come in and say “you can’t do this anymore—the way you’ve always been going. We want you to change and be this other person.” But they really threw a curve ball at us when they threw in alcohol—you know on top of everything. So we really won’t know who the hell we are for another couple of generations.

The men’s responses varied in length and complexity, but they all shared the perspective that one cannot be a traditional tribal person and use alcohol. “They all say, ‘I want to be a [Great Lakes tribal person]’ then you stop drinking ’cause that has nothing to do with being Indian. As a matter of fact, it’s a curse to Indian tribes throughout the United States.” Wa-Ni states:

A lot of them [Great lakes tribal people] profess to be traditional—still use alcohol. I mean how can you justify taking one drink if you know that this is the poison that has ruined the Nation? You know, without having a sense of guilt? So, you see in the culture, when we choose to follow our culture, I think we made a big decision in our life that we have to be strong.

### 1.3. WARRIORS AND HUMAN BEINGS

The men had a clear sense of the negative stereotypes of themselves as “drunks” and the “savages the books made us out to be.” Additionally, they had a sense of the roles men held historically. Their stories included struggles and challenges with trying to define their roles in contemporary reservation life. The term *warrior* was used so frequently in the preliminary fieldwork and early interviews that the question, “What does it mean to be a traditional Warrior?” was included. “Warrior” was a complex construct including the abstract ideal, concrete behaviors, and ways of being. Themes that resonated within and across the sample were that the “warrior” protects and preserves the culture, individual and tribal rights, the environment, and individuals within the tribe and family. None of the responses combined “warrior” with physical violence.

I think it's sobriety and the way of life. A warrior today is not the same as what a warrior was last week, or last month or last year—or five hundred years ago. A warrior today is a whole different context—and I am speaking from the context that we're intelligent human beings. We are intelligent. We know that violence, and we know that war is not good for our health.

Daniel, who had a college degree, described a modern-day warrior as “heavily armed” with education:

We can't fight them with bows and arrows and stuff. You've got to fight them with intellect. You've got to fight them with education. Now if you want to be heavily armed, you have to be heavily educated. And that is the new direction in tribal society that we should all embrace—while still holding on to your culture.

While not all of the men identified themselves as traditional warriors, they *all* identified themselves as “traditional” or “becoming more traditional” in terms of cultural identification regardless of where they lived, their roles in the community, and their apparent level of knowledge and exposure to cultural traditions. The three youngest men in the study—Men in Transition—all reported that they were in the process of seeking out traditional elders and mentors to connect deeper with their Indian identity. The most traditional men expressed a desire to “educate” the non-Indian community to combat negative stereotypes and preserve their culture.

*Human being* was a common term across the sample that was frequently used in conjunction with *warrior*. These terms represented a state of spiritual and social development in which one is living in harmony with traditional tribal values. The values included humbleness, humility, consistency in words and actions, sobriety, education, and reciprocity. Colonization is referenced as not allowing the people to be “human beings” and alcohol is also referenced as preventing people from becoming “human beings” again. The Elder So-Say states, “And after 30 years of drinking, I had to go back to my elders and ask the medicine man how I could be an Indian again. He laughed at me and said, “You are an Indian, but what you have to become again is a human being.”

## *Theme II. Perceptions of Domestic Violence*

In this category, the men were asked to define and describe domestic violence in their lives and in the community. They were asked not only if it were a problem, but also if it were a new problem: “Do you think this was a problem in the old days? What was different about that time?” They told stories of their parents fighting when they were children, fighting in their own relationships, and stories about people they knew in the community. Across the sample, domestic violence was described as physical violence that *always* involved alcohol. Daniel describes his childhood:

My parents had a good relationship except when they were drinking. This is a huge problem because it was so obvious growing up here. It seemed like the more and more they drank, the more problems they had. They were always fighting. Alcohol was the catalyst—because somehow they quit being *human beings* . . . in my case, my father wasn't a violent person—but he hollered at my mother when they would come home from a weekend of drinking. Otherwise, during the week we had five pretty cool days.

### II.I. A DISEASE OF THE OUTSIDE PEOPLE: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IS NOT TRADITIONAL

When asked about “the old days,” the concept of domestic violence as *not* being a part of traditional culture was found throughout and across each narrative. The responses ranged in complexity and sophistication from that of Bob: “It's almost like . . . like city violence;” to that of Joe: “You know life's not perfect, so you have those types of situations—but I think for the most part there was just respect” and Skin: “I don't think they did that back then—she had too many brothers, uncles and relatives;” to more complex explanations of tribal values, “codes” and structures that mediated violence (for example, matriarchal extended families and traditional values of balance and harmony

in interpersonal relationships). As might be predicted, the more complex explanations were from the elders and men with more formal education. Daniel explains:

When you pick up the values of the outside people, you also pick up their diseases. And this [domestic violence] is a disease that is frequently associated with the dominant society. When you go back and look at our old society, you didn't have them issues.

It was dealt with firmly and swiftly . . . the clan and family members would take measures to immediately stop that . . . we lived in a safe society.

Tom also described domestic violence as result of contact with the dominant society:

People didn't do that . . . that was like taboo. You know, not taboo as far as speaking about it—but doing that act. People didn't do that. You know, you were actually shunned from society if you did that. People talked more and expressed concern. People spoke against that. Well now, they don't say anything. Silence! Again they've lost what we used to do a long time ago—we are doing what the dominant society does. They tend to cover things up and hide them, not talk about them. We've picked up all that stuff.

The Elder So-Say links both alcoholism and domestic violence to a loss of social structures:

Today we don't have the family structures—I believe that's why we have so much drug use, alcoholism and domestic violence—because there is not family structure anymore. There is a code but that code has disappeared—the structure has been lost.

And Elder Wa-Ni emphasized traditional values of respect, balance, and harmony as keys to survival:

It's a value system. Not the one of our mothers and fathers and uncles and grandparents or great grandparents lived in—when you mention culture it takes me mentally back to a time when the people were migratory. So it had to be before contact . . . and that value system there—that it was so strong that it held people together. You know, their ethics if there was such a thing. Their relationship to one another and the environment. That's where I go back. I like to think that people lived out of respect for one another. You respected not only the people you were around—but the environment you lived in equally.

Kanasa, one of the youngest men in the study also included the value of respect in his response:

I don't think that [domestic violence was traditional]. My belief is that any traditional man had great respect for the woman. Because of her place. Her place in the nation. Her place in the home . . . because she was the life giver.

You know, beating up women and slapping them around and calling them sluts and whores you know that's a way of life. That's the way it's always been? But NO! We have to change it back. We have to stop the clock. Change it back to the way it used to be. To be respectful, to show the other people that we're not the savages that the books made us up to be. We are respectful. We do have a culture that we want protected.

Daniel stated he wanted to tell other men that it is “morally wrong to do that” and that, “you are defying your culture . . . hurting your own people. That's wrong — you're a brave . . . she's not your enemy . . . our enemies are out here!”

## II.2. THE NUMBER IS GROWING, NOT SHRINKING

Across the sample the men indicated that domestic violence is increasing in their community. Daniel states, “Oh yeah, it's a big problem. You could do a statistical analysis of that. Go look at our jails—look at our system—look how many people are in there for domestic violence. That number is growing not shrinking.” The Elder So-Say states, “In my lifetime I think it has gotten worse. I think it has to be dealt with. I listen to my scanner-police radio and I would say that sixty to seventy percent of police calls are domestic violence. And the Elder says, “Yes, it's worse—and it will probably get a lot worse until people are given the right to be human again.”

Additionally, the men's stories indicated that this problem is intergenerational and a “norm” in the community. Tom states:

It's not just a Native American problem—it's a problem as a whole. It seems to be the norm—how they grew up with this. People come up in such a way that they don't know any different. I kind of realize that now. This is all they know. This is all they've come up with . . . the only way they know how to handle things—by hitting people—beating them up. I was a product of that . . . people on the reservation are stuck—they're always seeing it on a daily basis.

The men with very violent histories—KC and Skin—both talked about the ways in which using violence against women *and* men was first learned in their families and community, and then was reinforced by the time they spent in jail and in the military.

## II.3. TWO PEOPLE FIGHTING

The men in the sample most frequently referred to domestic violence in nongendered terms (“people” rather than men or women), and descriptions of it most often also mentioned mutual combat with alcohol. Bob says, “Every once and a while I'll hear somebody fighting . . . the tribe gets paid in the

middle of the week and they start drinking and then usually somebody's fighting." Joe describes domestic violence as, "Two people fighting, violent. Verbally and physically, throwing stuff . . . probably hitting . . . one hitting each other, both hitting each other." Additionally, issues of social violence were brought up in tandem, indicating that these may be viewed similarly.

An unexpected theme throughout the responses was the notion that women's violence against men was a hidden and increasing problem in the community. The men described some, but not all, of their domestic violence incidents as mutual combat. They told stories in which women were violent against men: "It's more common than we know . . . more common than it used to be . . . if there is a woman if she is not brought up right, she will use violence the same way a man does. . . she'll start beating on that person." Bob told of being in a relationship with a woman who was the violent aggressor towards him. The elders both expressed concerns that women's violence was increasing. The Elder So-Say stated:

The women are just as bad as the men sometimes. I've heard of guys getting beat up and stabbed—all kinds of things. So, it's not just a man thing—domestic violence—and I think that's being brought out more and more—that women too can cause a lot of harm . . . some stuff is pretty hideous, but it does happen.

#### II.4. ALCOHOL WAS ALWAYS INVOLVED

Within each interview and across the entire sample, alcohol was indicated as the cause of violence and numerous other social problems in the community: "Statistically speaking I can only point one finger and that would be alcohol" and, "More times than any—you know, it's the alcohol." The men described their parents' violence, their own violence, and others' violence as linked to destructive drinking patterns. Skin tells of his parents' drinking and violence and his own violence:

I used to put my head under the pillows—just to not hear that. That violence all the time. Be crying—I wish they wouldn't do that—I would wish they wouldn't drink. I didn't like it when they drank . . . I think that's where the violence started in the family so when I got older I started doing it—you know the same thing my dad did . . . I didn't know I had that much anger in me . . . it kinda flashed back on my ma and dad when they used to fight . . . But I didn't realize I hit her that hard.

These men understood their own violence as a result of alcoholism. They all expressed remorse for their behaviors in their responses and took responsibility for the drinking that resulted in the violent actions and other "bad" or "stupid" actions they regretted in their lives:

And the lady confronted me—I'd seen pictures of the damage that I did to her . . . I couldn't believe it because I was sober—that I could do that kind of a thing.

So one of the things I know myself because of being an alcoholic—that when I did strike a woman it was not because I didn't like her—it was because I was drunk and jealous.

But when I was drunk I retaliated and I did have to go for counseling for that. I used to like to fight—because of my own stupidity and every time I did something wrong I was drinking.

KC—one of the men with a very violent history—tells of how he disconnects from his violent past:

But for me to go back and try to reconstruct these [violent] scenarios in my mind wouldn't be a benefit to me, because there are so many things that I've done in the past with alcohol. I mean, every single time that I did something that I was not proud about or didn't feel good about, alcohol was involved. Alcohol was always involved. So pretty much in my own mind I've been able to take these doors and shut them.

As mentioned previously, alcohol is highly symbolic in the narratives. Each of the men, regardless of the level of traditional knowledge, understood alcohol as an artifact of colonization. The first example below is from the most traditional Elder So-say, and the second, the least traditional participant, Skin:

The reason we have so much domestic violence on the reservation is because of alcohol, because of sex, because of not understanding what a man and a woman's responsibilities are . . . I believe greed and control is the biggest factor for our condition . . . The non-Indian was the cause of it. They say the West was won . . . but I believe it was won by I. W. Harper and Jim Beam and things like that.

But then they brought alcohol around here . . . I think when they brought it up to this reservation, that's when they really got violence you know. Because I don't think they did that a long time ago to the woman. Until alcohol came along.

### *Theme III. Addressing the Problem of Domestic Violence*

During the interviews, the elders and participants were asked, "What should be done about domestic violence?" They offered opinions and insights into the ways in which the community should address this problem, as well as sharing their own healing journeys, seeking help for their alcoholism and interpersonal violence.

### III.1. A COMMUNITY EFFORT—NOT BY PROFESSIONALS

Across the sample, the men stated that treating domestic violence through sobriety needed to happen from within the community by a return to traditional values, rather than involving outside (non-Indian) help and professionals.

It can't be done by a few professional people either—that's community effort and that's called responsibility.

It has to be something else that's going to stop that behavior. And again, it's people not tolerating that in your community—that's going to alter that behavior. Not jail. Jail might exacerbate that [the violence].

By teaching about how to be true [Great Lakes tribal people] . . . going back to being more human beings. You know it all starts with spirituality and connection to the earth and your family members—what's slowly eroded away here.

Members of our society need to go back to what works. You know people can deny their own history. But our history is there for 10,000 years. The tribal societies lived in ecclesiastic harmony. If we go back and look at that and [ask], "Why did that work?"

The men who had participated in treatment by professionals indicated that it was a negative experience due to racial differences and issues of trust. Skin explains:

I never trusted them [the white counselors]. I never trust a white man—that's why I went back to treatment three times . . . I was in treatment three times and that was with all white counselors. And those white counselors—they tried to make me cry because all those other people they would cry . . . but I was in there, they try to break you down but they could never make me cry.

That's why I went back to treatment three times. I finally went to Thunderbird. That's where I worked on my alcoholism and domestic violence . . . We always had these talking circles . . . we all shared . . . you have to get to know people and there is healing there.

So-Say, the Elder, had worked with sobriety and violence issues with a number of men in the community in traditional talking circles and ceremonies. He found that the professional treatment that emphasized power and control issues in domestic violence was "out of tune" with traditional Native values:

I tell them . . . it isn't a control thing. If you control something then you are not in tune. You should be in tune. You don't have to control—controlling is like what you are already fighting. You try to control somebody. But if you are in tune with the Great Spirit—in tune with yourself—control doesn't have anything to do with it.

Joe, the other participant who had had formal treatment, explained the importance of racial and cultural differences in treatment:

It is really important to have Indian men in the group providing treatment 'cause you can talk better to an Indian person than you can talk to a white guy, Black guy or Mexican. Because you know, he's an Indian, he knows your culture and where you come from.

### III.2. THE HEALING JOURNEY: ELDERS AND CEREMONIES

Each one of these men's narratives contained stories of "turning points" and a healing journey towards sobriety and nonviolence. They all spoke about how traditional values, spirituality, ceremonies, and elders played a significant role in helping them redefine themselves and change their behaviors. They believed that they could find solutions to these issues provided that the elders are allowed the freedom and autonomy to help the community. For each of these men, healing began at different ages/stages of life. The younger men in the study (Men in Transition) had most recently begun the journey to sobriety and better family relationships through identifying with traditional elders and tribal values. Daniel tells about his "turning point":

An Elder told me, "When you first picked up the bottle—when you started drinking . . . and you start staggering, you thought that was funny. That flag should have gone up IMMEDIATELY. . . people should always know if you drink or take drugs, you are out of balance. There is something wrong because we always lived in perfect balance and harmony." . . . And that was a great turning point in my life—because I got to enjoy life then . . . got to see through that alcoholic fog that won't let you experience the reality of things.

The Elders were down to earth and I could see that—humbleness and humility. It had a great effect on me . . . I think I've helped my people. I am an example of what can happen if you put the bottle down.

Skin talks about the value of sweat lodges for healing:

But if I go into a lodge you know, there are Indian people around there if I did something wrong you know, or somebody died or something—that's how I'd let my feelings out in the lodge . . . it's dark and no one is judging you . . . you just go in there and stay and it's safe. There ain't nobody going out and going around the reservation and saying "This guy was crying . . . or this" you KNOW you are not supposed to do that . . . I'd go to a sweat before I'd go to an AA meeting . . . I used to go to AA meetings all the time . . . until I started going to sweats.

KC also describes the benefit of sweats and talking circles:

There is a different talking when you are speaking from the heart. I mean, it's very hard sometimes to do that . . . even very close people. The only time I liken it to . . . the only time we ever do that is when we are sitting in or coming out of a sweat lodge or we have a talking circle . . . it's a whole different talk that they're coming to.

### III.3. STORIES ARE MEDICINE

The elders spoke frequently about how sharing traditional stories and their own stories of healing and sobriety were “medicine”—a method for helping others in the community. Additionally, the men shared that they participated in the study because they wanted their stories to be heard in the hope that it might help others. KC explains:

If you told somebody you were in jail for beating up somebody—you know right away you could be ostracized . . . when maybe telling them that would also inspire them to maybe begin to speak from their heart. But everything in a [healing] context. If people want to begin to speak the truth, begin to open up—there aren't any questions that it can be helpful.

Skin believed that sharing stories in a talking circle or sweat was the best way for “treating domestic.”

I would share my story—I would tell them how I was violent first. You know, tell them about how I was violent to all of these women—all these relationships I was in . . . because they probably did the same thing that I did you know, everybody has got anger problems. Then I would ask their story—if they would tell me their story. And I'd listen to them. I'd tell them how I'd become nonviolent. I would tell them you don't want to be violent around Indian children—because Indian children are precious.

KC concluded his interview with a story of forgiveness and healing:

We were at a ceremony. We had both stopped drinking and she had a pipe and I was getting a pipe. There were four of us going out [on a vision quest]. Up until this point, we had not spoken to one another—I was [years ago] pretty violent with her. We sat down and we were lighting the pipe; we were saying the things we had to say. And she spoke from the heart and she says, “[KC] I just want you to know that I forgave you for all of those things.” I mean I could feel the weight being lifted off of me. And I spoke to her for the first time [since the relationship ended due to violence] and we're now the best of friends. Once we sobered up, we were just two different people.

## DISCUSSION

This study explored domestic violence from the perspective of American Indian men from a singular cultural community. This was a heterogeneous group with respect to age, level of education, status in the reservation community, status in the mainstream community, level of cultural identification, and levels and types of violence in their histories. This heterogeneity is true for batterers in the general population as well.<sup>39</sup> The narratives held themes of intergenerational

family violence and dysfunction, alcoholism, racism, isolation, loss, deep grief, and remorse. However, each one of the narratives also contained strong themes of healing and hope found through connecting with elders, learning spiritual traditions, and strengthening cultural identity.

All of the participants believe that domestic violence is a serious and increasing problem in the community for men *and* women, and that it was *not* part of traditional, precontact society due to “codes,” family structures, harmony, ethics, tribal values, and absence of alcohol. This perception is consistent with cultural oral history. The study community has had a long history of matriarchal and extended family structures honoring and valuing women as “givers of life,” and women have held on to leadership roles within the community despite the imposition of outside values and structures over several hundred years. Traditions within the original cultural clan system utilized elders and extended family members to mediate interpersonal conflicts and provided protection for women from potentially abusive spouses. These traditions are similar to other American Indian cultures, such as the Navajo peacekeeping tradition mentioned previously.

Alcohol was cited as the overwhelming cause or catalyst for domestic violence in their lives and in the community. In the general literature, this is referred to as “disavowing theory,” in which personal responsibility is avoided and alcohol is blamed for the violence.<sup>40</sup> Caution should be used when interpreting this finding as merely “disavowing” due to the complex sociohistorical context of alcohol in Indian communities. These men all understood alcohol as an artifact and agent of colonization.

None of the research questions referenced alcohol, but it is an overarching theme throughout the narratives and is highly symbolic. The men referenced their past and current relationship with alcohol when describing their own selves. All the men expressed that one could not be “traditional” and use alcohol, and that using it prevented people from maintaining their true cultural identities, adapting to the realities of reservation life and being “human beings.” For at least the last two hundred years in American Indian communities, alcohol has been a religious, spiritual, and political idiom, and this concept is well documented in the literature.<sup>41</sup>

In terms of recovery, the men varied in terms of stage and length of time, but all believed that returning to traditional spiritual and cultural traditions were keys to sobriety and nonviolence. Prevention and intervention efforts that have focused on the revitalization of traditional culture as a means to sobriety have supported this view. The men were replacing the assignment of an alcoholic identity with a more positive view of themselves as “traditional” men. These findings provide support for current substance abuse and domestic violence treatments that emphasize traditional values and indicate that alcohol

use and destructive drinking patterns should be addressed in the assessment and treatment of domestic violence. Participants in this study agreed that their own healing was initiated by a readiness to change and a sense of urgency about breaking negative drinking patterns and violence. The men stated that this issue needs to be addressed from within the community by its members, and that they already have the solutions and means to change if given “freedom” and “autonomy” and the “right to be human again”—with “human” and “human being” as synonyms for “traditional tribal person.”

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For the men who participated in this study, there are important aspects of traditional cultural identity, values, and healing methods that have helped them with issues of interpersonal violence and sobriety. What was most striking is that all of these men envision a precontact past when violence against women was rare and socially unacceptable, which provides a foundation from which to build a nonviolent future. They believe that as individuals, they have the power to change their community by becoming more “traditional.” Additionally, they believe that the community has the answers and keys for change—if given the freedom and autonomy to be “true Great Lakes tribal people” and “the right to be human again.”

The participants represent a small singular cultural community, and clearly larger-scale studies are needed to investigate whether men from other American Indian communities share their beliefs and perspectives on domestic violence and traditional cultural values. The findings here do provide support for Native-initiated programs such as *Mending the Sacred Hoop*, which centers on traditional cultural values and spiritual philosophies as a means to address violence against women and children.

Recommendations for those researchers and practitioners working on prevention or treatment initiatives in American Indian communities include the need to recognize the importance of building on the strengths and value systems already embedded in the cultures themselves. This means involving elders, spiritual leaders, and cultural practices as part of the healing initiatives, as well as allowing the community to have a sense of ownership and responsibility for its evolution, continuation, and success. This is not only culturally sensitive and congruent, it is empowering.

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