ADDRESSING HISTORICAL TRAUMA TO IMPROVE NATIVE NUTRITIONAL HEALTH

Karina L. Walters, MSW, PhD (Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma)
Associate Dean for Research & Katherine Chambers Hall Scholar
Co-Director, Indigenous Wellness Research Institute (iwri.org)
University of Washington School of Social Work
Water

I am the water, the water is me
“Yohmi cha okhina bachoha puta ka ithana kia ahofobi ont ia yummano keyu tokoke”

“The breeze that ruffles the stream knows not the depth below”

From "Iti Hishi Yumma Isht’ chi’thaiyana-li Hoke": A Leaf that Reminds me of Thee- first poem translated into Choctaw William H. McKinney, 1878
How do traumatic stressors and events become embodied in our physical and mental health as well as in our risk behaviors?
INDIGENIST STRESS-COPING MODEL

Walters & Simoni, 2000; Walters, Simoni, & Evans-Campbell, 2000
Social and historical inequities can become embodied.

Bodies tell histories and stories just as bones illuminate important information about the everyday lives of our ancestors whether or not these stories live in our consciousness.

Critics contend that HT effects are negligible once lifetime rates of abuse are accounted for- Amassing evidence at cellular level that powerful stressful environmental conditions can leave an imprint or “mark” on the epigenome (cellular material) that can be carried into future generations with devastating consequences.

- Evidence that neurobiological toll of stress on descendant generations' health...
  - Maternal psychological and nutritional stress during pregnancy can lead to bio changes that predispose offspring to diabetes, CVD, hypertension and PTSD as adults

- Studying the embodiment of HT and corresponding health consequences allows us to determine the forces driving intergenerational patterns of health and disease.

U.S. Settler colonialism is a distinct type of colonialism that functions through the replacement of indigenous populations with an invasive settler society that, over time, develops a distinctive identity and origin narrative that requires erasure of the original inhabitants.

“Settler colonialism normalizes the continuous settler occupation, exploiting lands and resources to which indigenous peoples have genealogical relationships.” (Cox, 2017)

Settler colonialism is a structure, not an event.

Historical trauma consists of the genocidal/ethnocidal events (land dispossession, chattel slavery etc.) that perpetuates US settler colonialism as well as the settler identity/origin myths.

LESSON LEARNED-SETTING THE CONTEXT FOR HISTORICAL TRAUMA:
U.S. SETTLER COLONIALISM
OKWA NAHULLO– NOT REALLY ABOUT "RACE"
Historical trauma conceptualized as an event or set of events perpetrated on a group of people who share a specific group identity with genocidal or ethnocidal intent (i.e., destruction of traditional lifeways, culture, and identity).

The resulting trauma is often conceptualized as collective, in that it impacts a significant portion of a community, and compounding, as multiple historically traumatic events occurring over generations join in an overarching legacy of assaults.

HTR does not manifest in all exposed—most are resilient—protective factors can buffer impact within and across generations.

- Pratt modeled Carlisle and off-reservation boarding schools on school he developed at Fort Marion Prison in Florida from 1872-1875 where Native prisoners of war were held.

- 1879 first off-reservation boarding school Carlisle “Kill the Indian, Save the Man” Policy
  - Proposed forced removal at early age with no return until young adults.

- By 1909, 25 off-reservation boarding schools
  - More than 100,000 Native children forced to attend these schools.

- Attendance mandatory or parents would be imprisoned.
  - In 1895, 19 Hopi men were imprisoned at Alcatraz for refusing to send their children to these schools.

BOARDING SCHOOL PERIOD 1879-1935 +
RELOCATION, ALLOTMENTS AND RESERVATIONS
Environmental and Spiritual Traumas
IMPACT OF HISTORICAL TRAUMA

- Rooted in Genocide, Ethnocide and Epistemicide
- Disruption in our ability to fulfill our original instructions
- Disruption in our relational ways of being
- Disruption in our spatial obligations and relationships
- Break down boundaries: physical, mental, spiritual, land etc.
- Create systems of dependency on colonial nation state

- Focus on Healing:
  - Original Instructions
  - Relational Restoration
  - Narrative Transformation
RESULTS: HT AND MENTAL HEALTH

- In main analyses, lifetime physical abuse, sexual abuse, military service and their interactions with generation of trauma were used as covariates to control for the effect of lifetime trauma on retrospective reporting of trauma from past generations.

- **PTSD** (PDS; FOA, 1993)
  - Overall trauma across multiple generations was associated with elevated PTSD ($\beta = .13$, $SE = .05$, 95% CI= .04-.21, $p=.01$).
  - Direct attacks across multiple generations were also associated with PTSD ($\beta = .20$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI= .11-.28, $p=.001$), but not disruptive HT events.

- **SUBSTANCE ABUSE**
  - Greater alcohol-related problems in the past year
  - Greater likelihood of using cocaine in the past year
  - Greater likelihood of other stimulant use in the past year (e.g., Speed, Dexedrine)

- Microaggression results: Identity matters
RESULTS: DEPRESSION SYMPTOMS
Wind Transformation
PARADIGM SHIFT

Kekailoa Perry in Island Voices, 2002
“We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we [they] used when we [they] created them.”

– Albert Einstein
The “tagging on a feather” approach keeps the Western view intact.

“Scientists cannot simply take Western structures of knowledge, and ‘Add Indigenous and Stir,’” (Grossman, 2014) and expect a perfectly Native-flavored synthesis of the two ways of knowing.

There must be an equalization of power and valuing of both knowledges.

Tagging a feather approach will “lock Native ways of knowing into a subordinate status, or extract Native knowledge to assimilate it” within Western education, and “thereby rob Native and non-Native people alike of important tools” (Grossman, 2014).
YAPPALLI:
CHOCTAW ROAD TO HEALTH

Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma Team
Sandra Stroud, BA (Choctaw), Yappalli Project Director
Kristi Brooks, LCSW (Choctaw), Yappalli CNO Co-PI, CNO Director, Behavioral Health
Rachel Davis (Choctaw), Yappalli Coordinator
Chad Goggins, Yappalli Logistics Coordinator
*Kari Hearod (Choctaw)- acknowledgement of her development of this project

University of Washington-IWRI Team
Karina L. Walters, PhD (Choctaw), Yappalli Principal Investigator, Director IWRI
Rebecca Marin Cordero, PhD, Yappalli-IWRI Program Director
Katie Schultz, MSW (Choctaw), UW-IWRI, Doctoral Student, RA

Univ of Minnesota-RICH Team
Michelle Johnson-Jennings, PhD (Choctaw), Yappalli Co-Principal Investigator, Director RICH
Miigis Gonzalez, MPH (Ojibwe), UM-RICH, Doctoral Student, RA
The ten states with the largest American Indian populations in 2000
IT’S A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE: CHA\NSPO IKhVNANCHI

- Flip the Script: Health promotion focus – Indigenous Knowledge and Original Instructions
  - Not suicide prevention…etc.

- Not services focus, but focus on sustainable community change

- Growing from OI
- Relational Restoration
- Narrative Transformation
GO DO IT!

- Decolonizing/indigēnizing research methodologies
- Experiential knowledge and return to Place
  - Over 10-days in June, selected by the elders/community
- Expected Outcomes: mapping of our trails, health promotion model, feasibility/logistics, and curriculum for further piloting
Chief Harkins 1831 "Farewell Letter to the American People"

“I could cheerfully hope, that those [Choctaws] of another age and generation may not feel the effects of those oppressive measures that have been so illiberally dealt out to us; and that peace and happiness may be their reward. Amid the gloom and horrors of the present separation, we are cheered with a hope that…nothing short of the basest acts of treachery will ever be able to wrest it from us, and that we may live free.”
Preparation: Approach to Each Other

- Choctaw Relationship Principles
  1. aiokpanchi (welcome/gratitude)
  2. holitobli (honor)
  3. haklo (listening)
  4. chun\nkash aka (humility)
  5. vlhtoba (reciprocity)
  6. anukchito (confidentiality)
  7. Sa-anukfillii (self-reflection)
COMMUNITY BASED PRACTICE RESEARCH (CBPR)

Ceremonially Based Practice Research CBPR+

Patricia Gonzalez - CBPR+
WHAT IS THE CHOCTAW ROAD TO HEALTH?
Women-led-culturally sanctioned

4 Parent-child/youth pairs

Researchers = Participants

Triangulation

Dreams

Archival research

Oral history [dresses bones]
IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE-HAKLO - LISTEN

- What is said may be very important to your life.
- Listen Haklo is to remember that the medicine given to us is still out there.
- We have just forgotten to listen for it.
- It is to be at peace with oneself.
- To be quiet and soft in spirit.
- To stop trying to out speak others.
- To hear and communicate - To understand.
- It is about sharing from the spirit and taking the time to honor another human being.
APPROACH TO TRAIL

- Elder/traditionalist permission/support
- Fasted
- Abstained
- Walked
- Sweat on Choctaw Land
- Medicine instructions
- “know how they took care of the trail”
➤ Trail and ceremony
➤ Sacrifice and giving back—earn knowledge
➤ Trail will bring up things that still need to be worked through
➤ Approach each morning-day-prayer, reflection as we walk
➤ Not the drama, but the love

RELATIONSHIP TO TRAIL
YAPPALLI METHODS: 2 PILOTS

- Qualitative data gathering—many methods
  - GIS and blogging
  - Focus Groups and Individual Interviews (pre and post)
  - Journaling
  - Digital Stories

- Participants given pedometers, journals, cameras

- Followed curriculum developed for each day along with daily reflections on major themes and Choctaw words to incorporate throughout the trail route (10 days)

- 13 Choctaw walkers, 5 Native allies, 3 non-Native allies
WALKING FOR THE VISION
TRAIL SONG

- Hina ushi pisalih  Bok Chitto onalih
- yayalih  yayalih
- Chukka chitto pisayachih  lukfi Houma nowalih
- nowalih  nowalih
- Sa alla ahnilih  himosa alla ahnilih
- Yakpalli  Yakpalli
- Hina ushi pisalih  Nani Bok onalih
- yayalih  yakpali
- Yohmi ho!
Microaggressions

Sacrifice-giving back

Medicines
LAUGHTER AS MEDICINE
TRAIL OBSERVATIONS

- Importance of experiential earning knowledge
- Transforming the trauma
- “I heal others when I keep or make myself healthy”
- Relational healing and Reconnecting to land and ancestors
- Narrative Transformations - Choctaw-specific understandings of health emerged - Shilombish and PTSD
QUALITATIVE TRENDS

- Relationships to self, others, tribe
- Cultural connectedness, “pride”
- Embodiment, Balance, caring for self
- Transformation from trauma to love
- Importance of land-based/experiential process
- Pushing through...
PILOT 2

- Naming and Mentorship
- Were at table and elders say do it!
- Test curriculum - Run through it again
- Different time of year - weather and bugs
- Shorter time on trail - is it just as effective?
YAPPALLI INTERVENTION: DEVELOPING COMMUNITY HEALTH LEADERS

- 150 Choctaw women from tribal districts (30 per 5 districts)
- Health Leadership Model to Facilitate individual and community-level changes
- 2 month preparation/curriculum before 10-day walk
- Ancient iksa to guide health change model and steps toward healing
- Naming ceremony and initiation into “societies” for health within all districts
- Start with women to restore balance and health-traditional and family oriented
Obesity and ATOD abuse are increasingly prevalent, costly and deadly—fueling a twin epidemic in Indian Country.

Importance of addressing obesity and ATOD simultaneously is supported in part by recent research at NIDA which has noted that the same brain mechanisms that fuel drug addiction accompany compulsive eating behaviors and the development of obesity.

Behavioral patterns seen with obesity/food addictive behaviors share core elements with drug addictive behaviors such as intense cravings preceding risk behaviors, continued engagement in problematic behaviors to deal with emotional stress despite adverse consequences or engagement in short-term gratification over longer term health interests.

While Native women experience factors that put at risk, there are number of cultural factors such as spirituality, traditional health practices, connectedness to family etc. that may mitigate health risk behaviors.

WHY ATOD & OBESITY?
YAPPALLI CURRICULAR FRAMEWORK

**Information/Knowledge +**
- Cultural Knowledge Immersion-Chanspo Ikhnanchi
- Relational Restoration & Narrative Transformation
- Ceremonies/naming/vows
- Leadership Development
- 3 MI sessions + 8 Iksa Based groups +2 day camp + 10 day Trail of Tears Walk

**Motivation +**

**Behavioral Skills +**
- Managing stress, strong emotions, identifying triggers
- Tools to cope with cravings
- Addressing trauma and health consequences
- Self-care skills and accessing supports
- Leadership & community organizing skills
1. What kind of ancestor did my ancestors envision me to be?
2. What kind of ancestor do I want to be?
3. What kind of ancestor do I want or envision future generations to be?
Emphasizes a Choctaw-specific holistic approach to health and wellness—builds on OI, interconnectedness across generations and time.

- Incorporates cultural restorative and generative activities such as:
  - incorporating the Choctaw language throughout the curriculum,
  - learning about Choctaw heritage and clan systems as well as women’s roles (e.g., responsibilities for restorative ceremonies)
  - participating in ceremonies (naming and vow-making) and other cultural practices, creating traditional materials
  - using cultural metaphors for behavioral changes (e.g., historical clan responsibilities).

- Incorporates experiential, outdoor activities to promote collectivity cohesion, improve relational worldviews and connectedness to nature—the elements—the land and the environment.
- 2 cases of soda – now none
- No veggies – now some
- 1000 steps to 10 miles
- 3 liters a day to water
- Mobilizing community to action
- 100 gathered to embrace and celebrate
- Songs sung and recognized in taking this vow

Impact on staff/us
CIRCLING BACK-WATER & FIRE

- Possum
- Crow
- Buzzard
- Spider
- Love
- Power
- Vision
- Responsibility

Photo: Adapted from Bear Medicine Walker
HOW WONDERFUL IT IS THAT NOBODY NEED WAIT A SINGLE MOMENT BEFORE STARTING TO IMPROVE THE WORLD.

Anne Frank