

The following is the abstract of a Dissertation exploring the transition from suicidal crisis to community activism.

And I Live It: From Suicidal Crisis to Activism Among Members of the Kwakwaka'wakw and Coast Salish Nations

It has been argued that suicide is a consequence of the colonization of Canadian Aboriginal peoples. This qualitative study examines resilience in previously suicidal Aboriginal people who are now fulfilling community roles directly and indirectly related to suicide prevention (i.e., enhancing resilience). The study begins by examining the notions of suicide, psychopathology, resilience, and social activism, as well as the psychological research process with Aboriginal people through the lenses of clinical, cultural, and postcolonial psychology. Following this, the results of research interviews with 8 Aboriginal activists who had demonstrated resilience in the face of suicide are presented. Utilizing a grounded theoretical approach, the interviews were analyzed through an iterative process of categorization that produced interrelated themes. The analysis revealed that suicide-related resilient Aboriginal activists live in an integrated self/community life-world. Divided into seven spheres in this study (i.e., self, family, individuals, community, outside community, nature, and spirit), the participants' conceptualizations of self and community were ultimately indivisible. Within this experiential and existential life-world, the activists described mutually reflexive self/community engagements (i.e., experiences or activities that enhanced harmony within and between the spheres of their self/community life-world, that is, within their psyche, within their community, and between the activists and their community) that conflated the usual distinction between personal resilience and social contribution. Four foundational categories of engagement were identified: connection, empowerment, identity, and vision. Three types of self/community engagements (each with four modes of engagement) emerged from the categories. They included: grounding engagements, which rooted the activists in each of the four foundational categories of engagement; activating engagements (including care, respect, responsibility, and culture), which served as motivators for the activists; and healing engagements (including integration, cleansing, transformation, and transcendence), which were specific to the participants' healing process. Suicide-related resilience was a product of the healing journey and was ultimately expressed in wellness and living in a good way. However, within a colonized context, engagement in resilience-enhancing activity is recognized to be an act of resistance, and the promotion of community resilience—a traditional cultural role—is activism.

The complete paper or a briefer “highlights” version is available by request at darien@thira.ca.