Toward an Applied Developmental Science for Native Children, Families, and Communities

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ABSTRACT—This article summarizes current knowledge in applied developmental science for Native children and adolescents. Included are brief reviews of research documenting disparities in health and education, exploring cultural factors in development, and moving toward evidence-based interventions for Native children. Opportunities for campus–community partnerships are made evident, especially in the area of intervention development that seeks to bridge cultural knowledge and strengths to address persistent disparities in health and development.

KEYWORDS—Native American; applied developmental science; community-based participatory research

The goal of this contribution to the present Special Section is to identify some of the substantive ways forward in applied developmental science for Native children and adolescents in the United States and Canada (Spicer, 2010). As will become apparent in the course of our discussion, the knowledge base for these communities is probably the least well articulated and developed of that for any North American population. Thus, a wide variety of research projects can make very real contributions to understanding Native children’s development and improving outcomes. On the other hand, research that proceeds in ignorance of the social, cultural, and historical dynamics that shape the lives of Native children and families may make little progress in addressing key questions and may even result in worsened outcomes. Accordingly, we seek to underscore the balance that investigators need to strike in understanding strength and adversity in the lives of Native children. We begin by summarizing data on disparities that exist between Native children and children of other groups in health, development, and education. We then turn to emerging work on some of the mechanisms that shape these outcomes and that may offer important insights for future intervention research. We conclude with some ideas we think might shape future research in applied developmental science for Native communities.

DOCUMENTED DISPARITIES IN HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT

National data consistently document that relative to other children in the United States, Native children are at heightened risk for a variety of adverse outcomes, especially with regard to child maltreatment, substance abuse, and suicide. Native children rank second to African American children in the rates of child maltreatment (Administration on Children and Families, 2007), and Native families encounter additional disparities when they come to the attention of Child Protective Services, receiving significantly lower levels of mental health services relative to need than do families from other racial and ethnic populations (Libby et al., 2007). In the area of health disparities, substance abuse among Native adolescents has probably received the most attention, and recent sophisticated comparative analyses from community samples underscore continued cause for concern in this area (Whitesell et al., 2007). But the most striking indication of the problems Native children and adolescents experience is probably seen in suicide, with Native youth ages 10–24 continuing to have the highest rates of suicide of any U.S. racial or ethnic group (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009).

Given these adversities and broader indications of risk in Native families and communities (Beals et al., 2005), it is not
surprising that Native children continue to experience problems in school (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Analyses from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort indicate some of the ways that early risk for school failure may manifest and grow over time (Marks & Garcia Coll, 2007). Importantly, these dynamics do not generally appear to be different from those seen in other U.S. minority groups, but they underscore the significance of disparities in education parallel- ing those in social and emotional health noted above.

It is essential to recognize that these adversities occur in cultural contexts that have survived centuries of profound disruption, and in communities that are actively engaged in trying to create very different futures for their children and adolescents. Recent developmental research has called explicit attention to some of the positive dynamics in Native children’s development, pointing the way to cultural and community-based intervention models informed by evidence.

**RESEARCH ON CULTURE AND CHILD AND ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT**

Native communities have long insisted that their cultural traditions can and should form the basis of successful interventions for children and adolescents. However, they have only recently been joined in this advocacy by developmental and intervention researchers. In this section, we focus on developmental research that has the potential to illuminate points of intervention. In the next section, we turn to models for intervention research.

For the purposes of this summary, we date an emphasis on the impact of culture on Native children’s development to the work of Barbara Rogoff, whose careful comparative study highlighted not only the unique ways in which Mayan parents interacted with their children but also the positive impact that their different styles of “guided participation” had on outcomes for Mayan children (Rogoff, Mistry, Concu, & Mosier, 1993). In a related observation, Greenfield and her colleagues have developed an important distinction between socialization for interdependence or independence, which draws in important ways on her work in Native communities (Greenfield, Keller, Fulgni, & Maynard, 2003). As Niles and his colleagues observe, a richness of societal interrelationships, interchange, and interdependence that is rarely found in the dominant society is often available to American Indian children and families (Niles, Byers, & Krueger, 2007), but this orientation toward interdependence is accomplished in ways that preserve a high degree of respect for individual autonomy (e.g., LaFromboise & Low, 1993), underscoring the complexities of self and identity formation for Native children and adolescents.

Identity is widely regarded as the major developmental task of adolescence (Erikson, 1968), and research on these issues in Native communities has tended to focus on interrelated constructs of ethnic identification, ethnic or cultural identity, ethnic pride, spirituality, acculturation, and bicultural identity during this developmental period. Two considerations shape research in this area. First, many Native adolescents are forming identities within at least two sociocultural contexts—that of their local, ethnic group and that of the broader society. There are implicit value and belief contradictions between these two contexts that can complicate processes of identity formation. The degree to which Native adolescents may become acculturated to the broader society may be influenced by various factors, such as the cultural dynamics where they live, the degree of traditionalism in their families, the extent to which their school supports their culture, and their exposure to the media and Internet. Second, identity constructions of today’s Native adolescents must be considered in the broader context of long-standing processes of colonization that have counteracted traditional values, beliefs, and lifestyles that serve as the substance of ethnic identity. In short, identity formation of Native adolescents is context dependent, dynamic, altered by time, and occurs across a range of proximal and distal contexts—all of which are essential features of research on this topic (Markstrom, 2011; Phinney & Ong, 2007; Trimble, 2000).

A bicultural orientation has been of keen interest in the research literature in which the independence of local ethnic group and broader societal identifications has been confirmed (Bryant & LaFromboise, 2005; Gotowiec, 2000; Moran, Fleming, Somervell, & Manson, 1999; Oetting & Beauvais, 1990–1991; Oetting, Swain, & Chiarella, 1998; Weaver, 1996; Weaver & Brave Heart, 1999; Whitesell, Mitchell, Kaufman, Spicer, & the Voices of Indian Teens Project Team 2006). An assumption that greater adjustment is associated with those who possess a bicultural identity has been found by some researchers (Moran et al., 1999; Oetting & Beauvais, 1990–1991; Whitesell et al., 2006), but not others (Gotowiec, 2000; Jones & Galliher, 2007). Consistent with findings among other ethnic groups, higher adjustment has been shown among Native adolescents who score high on measures of ethnic identity (e.g., Jones & Galliher, 2007; Newman, 2003; Rieckmann, Wadsworth, & Deyhle, 2004).

Research on early childhood has emerged more recently than that on adolescence and tends to emphasize dynamics other than identity. Recent research by Sarche and colleagues (2009) underscores the extent to which the social and emotional development of Native toddlers is shaped by a variety of potentially modifiable parental factors, including social support and mothers’ cultural identity. Of particular interest here is the finding that children whose mothers score higher on Indian identity (one of the components of the orthogonal identity measures discussed above) tend to have lower levels of internalizing problems and higher levels of competence, suggesting that community concern with the development of Indian identity for the sake of the next generation constitutes an important point of intervention.

Unfortunately, none of this basic research has drawn on state-of-the-art developmental science to pay explicit attention to parenting or peer processes using observational measures. Nor have investigators yet looked at cultural differences in the emergence...
of self and identity in early childhood in Native communities, an examination of which is crucial for resolving questions of the role of culture in the formation of self and identity (e.g., Thompson & Virmani, 2010). It is also not yet clear how this work differs from that with other U.S. ethnic populations who also have to negotiate the development of an ethnic self in the midst of more general U.S. cultural currents. Fortunately, work underway promises to shed light on parent–child interaction and early self-development (in separate studies led by Sarche and Spicer), as well as more general models of identity formation in childhood and adolescence (in recently funded research by Whitesell). While much of this ongoing research will likely underscore similarities in what is emerging from other U.S. minority-status populations with interdependent orientations, we hypothesize that Native socialization practices will strike a unique and previously undocumented balance between independence and interdependence (given the high degree of respect for children’s autonomy) and that the practices through which Native identity is cultivated will reveal unique processes of racial and ethnic socialization (especially with regard to the role of religious and spiritual practices). We know that all of these cultural socialization practices unfold in the context of the severe stressors discussed earlier, which means that sorting out influences on child and adolescent development in Native communities requires painstaking attention to multiple influences. But such work is essential if researchers are to meet Native communities in their desire for research that can inform interventions.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERVENTION RESEARCH FOR NATIVE CHILDREN

All who are engaged in research in Native communities are confronted with the consistent criticism of research that it has done little, if anything, to address the profound disparities mentioned at the beginning of this article, or that its efforts in this direction have been carried out in ways that were incompatible with the unique cultural contexts in which Native children live and seek to thrive. Many programs in tribal communities operate under a dual mandate to restore children to cultural integrity and to eliminate existing disparities in health and development. As the research on identity reviewed above makes clear, sometimes these goals are in conflict, but frequently there are also underutilized opportunities for integrating efforts to restore children and adolescents to lives of cultural integrity that may also offer hope for addressing the profound disparities that we have noted. Given the nascent state of developmental research in Native communities, it is not surprising that much of this work has only recently been funded, but here we attempt to highlight promising directions that may be worth further investigation by developmentalists in partnership with Native communities. In this regard, two recent federal initiatives deserve special attention for their commitment to developing partnerships for intervention research and evaluation that are grounded in the development of culturally consonant approaches to both intervention and research: the American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start Research Center (AIANHSRC) and the Circles of Care Initiative.

The early development of Native children has frequently been fashioned and subjected to a contrasting set of values and emphases drawn from a non-Native perspective (Niles et al., 2007). In recognition of the unique cultural demands of research on Head Start in Native communities, the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation at the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) has, since 2005, funded AIANHSRC, which coordinates activities in a consortium that involves researchers at six universities and early childhood program directors from 12 different tribal communities. Central to the AIANHSRC’s work is a commitment to community-based participatory research, including the development of Native researchers and tools for the appropriate assessment of Native children, families, and programs. This effort represents the first federally funded initiative designed to build the kinds of relationships and tools for culturally appropriate research that have, to date, been lacking, with an aim toward supporting future research on what works for whom in Native communities. Of particular concern in the work of the AIANHSRC to date has been the need for tools that assess the true strengths and weaknesses of Native students and teachers. Toward that end, the AIANHSRC has begun systematic ethnographic and psychological research examining the value of the package of measures used in the Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) and Baby FACES studies sponsored by ACF, which have formed the basis for many of the measures used in national Head Start research, for example, the Head Start Impact Study (Administration on Children and Families, 2010). Close examination of teaching practices, from both psychological and ethnographic perspectives, is designed, in particular, to shed light on possible cultural differences in language socialization (e.g., Ochs, 1986) and their implications for understanding cultural approaches to early childhood intervention (e.g., Howes, 2010).

In the area of mental health, one of the most promising recent initiatives has been the Circles of Care Initiative, funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. The overall purpose of this program is to provide tribal and urban Indian communities with tools and resources to plan and design a holistic, community-based system of care to support mental health and wellness for their children, youth, and families. Consistent with an emphasis on creating collaborative, community-based efforts, the Circles of Care program is predicated on having community leaders and members work in partnership with child-serving agency directors and staff members to formulate methods to reduce stigma, improve relationships between provider groups, address service capacity issues, and increase cultural competence in the overall system, whether it be tribal, county, state, and/or federal. By facilitating an equal partnership between the community and those staffed on the project, in which the community has power to shape all aspects of the work,
the goal of this initiative is to help repair some of the fractures, distrust, and resentment previously associated with research in Native communities. While this effort does not support impact assessment, reports on the efforts to develop community-based models of evaluation have been very encouraging, suggesting that they have been quite productive in addressing some of the major tensions detailed in other contributions to this Special Section (Freeman, Iron Cloud-Two Dogs, Novins, & LeMaster, 2004).

One final intervention development initiative deserves special attention here: the American Indian Life Skills Development Curriculum (AILS), which has become widely disseminated. The AILS was originally designed, at the request of the Pueblo of Zuni, to reduce suicide among Native youth (LaFromboise, 1995). The primary goal of the AILS has been broadened to include assisting Native adolescents in developing the tools they need to effectively deal with life’s challenges. The AILS addresses essential risk factors associated with adolescent suicide, and it reinforces an empowerment perspective to assist youth in prosocial behaviors such as solving problems rather than trying to escape them through avoidant coping (e.g., social isolation, substance abuse).

According to a recent National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2009), the AILS embodies generic principles of health behavior change and an appropriate level of cultural sensitivity. The process of culturally tailoring the AILS came about through extensive input from Zuni tribal members to assist the researchers in examining key aspects of helping and problem solving in Zuni culture and to establish community support for an evaluation of the intervention (see LaFromboise & Lewis, 2008). The first evaluation of the AILS, which employed a quasi-experimental design, found that it was effective in reducing hopelessness, increasing confidence to manage anger, and increasing problem-solving and suicide-intervention skills (LaFromboise & Howard-Pitney, 1995). The second evaluation of the AILS verified the reversal of a 20-year suicide rate at a boarding school in Oklahoma, with no deaths by suicide noted since implementation of the AILS in the late 1980s (May, Serna, Hurt, & DeBruyn, 2005). These efforts to develop intervention research in Native communities are relatively new, but they underscore the possibilities for doing this work in the kinds of collaborative partnerships argued for elsewhere in this Special Section. We close by emphasizing what we see as some of the major lessons for future applied developmental science in Native communities.

TOWARD A NATIVE APPLIED DEVELOPMENTAL SCIENCE

As the other contributions in this Special Section make clear, intervention research is both required as researchers seek to partner with communities to achieve valued ends and fraught with potential problems if researchers do not learn from centuries of misguided policies in tribal communities. Most fundamentally, we take it as axiomatic that all intervention research must be based on goals articulated by Native communities. We know from experience that many of these goals may well be represented as incompatible—for example, success in school and professional life may be seen as incompatible with integration into traditional family and ceremonial life. But rather than presume, as did the historical efforts at forced assimilation noted in the Introduction to this Special Section, that success in tribal systems of meaning and practice are incompatible with the educational and occupational systems of the United States, we encourage investigators to explore the possibilities for, as well as the limitations to, efforts to promote success in both arenas.

That said, we also have learned that any and all efforts to improve the futures of Native children and adolescents must be based, first and foremost, on a careful analysis of the social and cultural contexts in which they live, lest the problems of previous efforts be perpetuated. We therefore argue for the primacy of understanding the particularities of specific Native cultural contexts before moving to consider what elements of these are shared with those from other populations, be they other tribes or other racial and/or ethnic populations. Accordingly, there remains an urgent need for ongoing basic research on socialization practices in Native communities.

Finally, we argue that there is a continuing need for the most methodologically rigorous research possible. By no means do we want to imply that this research can only be quantitative and experimental. Given the absence of good measurement approaches to many constructs of greatest interest in Native communities (such as religion and spirituality, the social information-processing demands of life in extended family households, or nonverbal patterns of parent-child interaction), there is an obvious need for descriptive and inductive ethnographic research. At the same time, we know that Native communities are increasingly under pressure to implement evidence-based practice, and researchers have, to date, generally not conducted the kind of research that community members require to support advocacy for cultural approaches. Moreover, we argue that a true partnership between developmental researchers and community members requires the simultaneous advocacy for research and for community concerns. Indeed, as this review of the literature makes clear, what seems to be most required in this dawning of applied developmental research for Native communities is the strongest possible commitment to the best possible research, but only insofar as that work is directed by the concerns of communities for the futures of their children and adolescents. We close, then, by highlighting what we take as the major messages that this review of the literature and current research emphasizes.

1. Basic descriptive research on actual socialization processes in Native communities that can inform intervention development is notably lacking.
2. Rigorous intervention development and evaluation efforts that build on insights about cultural socialization are required to begin to address often dramatic developmental disparities experienced by Native children.

3. True partnerships between tribes and campuses, based on recently articulated models in national programs, show promise for advancing applied developmental science in Native communities.

REFERENCES


