



# National Resource Center for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian Elders

## *Year 2: Qualitative Report*

### Alaska Native Elders and Abuse: Creating Harmony by Voicing Traditions of Listening

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January 2006

Dear Reader:

The National Resource Center for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian Elders (NRC) at the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) has completed its second year and is pleased to send you its four papers: (1) Alaska Native Elders and Abuse: Creating Harmony by Voicing Traditions of Listening; (2) Achieving Best Practices in Serving Alaska Native and American Indian Elders; (3) Achieving Best Practices in Long Term Care for Alaska Native and American Elders; and (4) Boarding School: Historical Trauma among Alaska's Native People.

These papers are intended to provide information to decision makers on all levels in the Alaska Native community statewide and regionally, to the State of Alaska, to various federal offices in Washington, D.C., to all Title VI programs and to all the federally recognized tribes so that culturally appropriate Elder health care services and programs can be designed and implemented with input from the Elders themselves. By extension, the information provided here would be of interest to the many American Indian tribes and Native Hawaiian Elders. Dr. Josefina Carbonell, the Assistant Secretary on Aging, has directed the NRC to concentrate its efforts in Alaska in the first, second and third contract years. We recently were informed that there is funding for the two resource centers for the 2006 contract year.

This project started with meetings between the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC) and the NRC Alaska. A memorandum of agreement was reached to have a joint Alaska Native Elder Health Advisory Committee. This committee has met four times to give direction to both organizations in the first and second year. The ANTHC board has approved the Joint Elder Advisory Committee to meet three times a year. In the second year, individual interviews were held with Elders from the following cultural groups: Inupiaq, Athabascan, Yup'ik, Sugpiaq, Aleut, Tlingit, and Tshimshian. The interviews were transcribed and coded by the Alaska Natives into Psychology students supervised by Dr. Kathy Graves. Cultural consultants from all of the regional areas were also included to review the final comments in the paper entitled, "Alaska Native Elders and Abuse: Creating Harmony by Voicing Traditions of Listening."

This project, also referred to as "Voices of Our Elders," is funded by the Department of Health and Human Service through the Administration on Aging (AoA) in Washington, D.C., Grant No. 90AM2752. The NRC is officially located at the College of Health and Social Welfare (CHSW) at the University of Alaska Anchorage. The NRC started in the fall of 2003. Dean Cheryl Easley of CHSW traveled with the NRC staff to many of our regional meetings. The strategic focus chosen for the College is gerontology.



Listening sessions were held by the AoA through the Title VI programs, and the Title VI representatives (mostly American Indian and Alaska Native Elders) voiced several concerns to be addressed by the two National Resource Center to provide pertinent information to Native American and Alaska Native decisions makers who provide health services to their Elders. The Elders were concerned with Long Term Care issues and preventative health programs that identify best, promising, and emerging programs. The Elders were also concerned with Elder mistreatment and how to address this issue by the communities themselves. The two National Resource Centers have been successful in meeting the directives of the Listening Sessions by the papers drafted by the two NRC staffs. Electronic copies of Alaska NRC reports have also been sent to various pertinent organizations listed above, namely the Title VI programs, and to all the federally recognized tribal organizations. The work of the NRC is designed to provide information to help decision makers meet the expressed culturally relevant needs of their Elders. As such, the Alaska NRC does not conduct research but disseminates health information vital to Elders for culturally appropriate health programs.

The NRC is one of two resource centers in the nation. The other is the National Resource Center for Native American Aging, which has been in existence for over twelve years, located at the University North Dakota in Grand Forks, North Dakota. They conduct surveys on the status of Native American Elder health programs and related issues across the nation. The surveys are in response to the needs expressed by individual tribal organizations. The tribal organizations passed a tribal resolution asking the North Dakota NRC to conduct various surveys.

The NRC is interested in receiving your comments and thoughts on the information presented in the four papers. We invite you to view them on our website: <http://elders.uaa.alaska.edu/>. We would also welcome your comments or questions at our e-mail address: [afjwl@uaa.alaska.edu](mailto:afjwl@uaa.alaska.edu) or call Mr. Jim LaBelle at 907-786-4303.

Sincerely,

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## Executive Summary

The purpose of the project is to allow Alaska Native Elders the opportunity to share their ideas about the origin of abuse of elderly and to share ways to reduce and control occurrences of abuse. In order to be more culturally appropriate, the research team decided to use the terms “respect and disrespect” rather than “abuse.”

The study group consisted of three Alaska Native Elders from the five main cultural groups in Alaska, for a total of fifteen respondents. These Elders were recruited utilizing snowball sampling. Through interviews, the Elders were asked a series of questions about the role of Elders in their community, Elder disrespect, and how problems can be addressed. These open-ended interviews were then analyzed using a qualitative approach, which allowed the hypotheses to be drawn directly from the raw data.

The findings indicate that, from the Alaska Native worldview, origin of respect is connected with the tradition of listening, or oral tradition. The tradition of listening has relevancy in the modern world. The cycle of respect has been broken and, as a result, there has been a dramatic increase in disrespect. There are culturally appropriate ways to approach the problem of Alaska Native Elder abuse or disrespect.

Community and personal stability is connected with the tradition of listening. The structure of the oral tradition is holistic, balanced, and interconnected. Elders hold a central role, and harmony and balance are maintained through acceptance of one’s own value and the value of all creation, including the natural world.

When there is a lack of balance, harmony, and connection with others and the natural world, disrespect or abuse is present. The most prevalent types of abuse toward the elderly mentioned were emotional disrespect and financial exploitation. It was very difficult for Alaska Native Elders to discuss abuse of the elderly, probably because of the history of having their beliefs, practices, and values dismantled and replaced by Euro-American social, political, religious and justice systems. In the past, there were systems in place which helped to maintain harmony and balance, while controlling unacceptable social behaviors. For many Elders, the Western system of justice enhances the unbalance and disharmony.



*"We need the elders more than any other  
time because of what we're facing now,  
with the chaos in the world..."*  
-Aleut Elder 2005

**Table of Contents**

**Executive Summary** ..... i

**Table of Contents**..... ii

**I. Introduction** ..... 1

**II. Methodology**..... 3

**A. Project Team** ..... 3

**B. The Participants**..... 3

**C. Data Collection Procedures** ..... 4

**D. Data Analysis Approach** ..... 4

**III. Thematic Analysis**..... 6

**A. The Definition and Role of Alaska Native Elders**..... 6

**B. The Impact of the Tradition of Listening**..... 8

        1. Stability and harmony through wisdom of the past ..... 8

        2. The listening paradigm and enhancing skills ..... 9

        3. The tradition of listening relevant today ..... 10

        4. Ancient wisdom is still available today ..... 10

**C. The Structure of the Tradition of Listening**..... 11

        1. A holistic approach and the tradition of listening ..... 11

        2. Interconnectedness among community members ..... 11

        3. Role of Elders in the tradition of listening ..... 12

        4. Body language and the tradition of listening ..... 12

        5. Trusting instincts and intuition in the oral tradition ..... 12

        6. Training begins before birth ..... 13

        7. Training continues during sleep ..... 13

**D. The Tradition of Listening and Respect**..... 13

        1. The relationship between listening ability and respect ..... 14

        2. The cycle of respect ..... 14

**E. Teaching Youth Cultural Ways** ..... 15

        1. The work ethic enhances success ..... 16

        2. Alaska Native children are disciplined without harsh punishment ..... 16

        3. Remind youth of the ancestors who came before them ..... 17

        4. Teaching respect through stories ..... 17

        5. Helping the elderly is a reciprocal process ..... 19

**F. Disrespect of Elders** ..... 20



1. Emotional Abuse is a significant form of disrespect.....	20
2. Many Alaska Native elderly experience verbal abuse.....	23
3. Elders are overburdened with caring for youth .....	23
4. Physical violence and substance abuse .....	24
5. Financial exploitation of the elderly.....	24
<b>G. Disruption of the Cycle of Respect .....</b>	<b>24</b>
1. “Spiritual sickness” is transmitted between the generations.....	25
2. Matters of the spirit have been diminished .....	26
3. Loss of language has diminished the connection between Elders and youth.....	26
4. Traditional spiritual beliefs were lost or went underground .....	26
5. Aleut people negatively impacted by historical trauma .....	27
<b>H. Alaska Natives Live in Two Worlds .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>IV. Discussion .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>A. Research interview protocols with Elders .....</b>	<b>28</b>
1. Need research topics on the strengths of Alaska Natives.....	28
2. Maintain a positive attitude with Elders.....	28
3. Listen more than talk.....	28
4. Take time with the Elder .....	29
5. Present the Elder with a gift.....	29
6. Respect Native protocols.....	29
7. Allow Elders to speak in their Native language.....	29
8. Take frequent breaks .....	30
9. Check for accuracy.....	30
<b>B. Cultural holocaust .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>C. Healing from the Cultural Holocaust.....</b>	<b>31</b>
1. Cultural resilience.....	32
2. The tradition of listening: a powerful preventative apparatus .....	33
3. Ceremonies and rituals .....	34
4. A Yup’ik perspective: positive affirmation .....	35
<b>D. Elder abuse .....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>V. Data Limitations.....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>VI. References .....</b>	<b>39</b>





*“... If I don't listen...I will have nothing...”  
-Cup'ik Elder, 2005*

## **I. Introduction**

The population of elderly in America is increasing dramatically. In Alaska, this trend among Alaska Natives holds true, with more people reaching advanced age compared to the past. Saylor & Doucette (2004) reported a dramatic increase (62%) over the past twelve years of mostly frail Alaska Native elderly who are 85 years and older, compared to 13.2% for the non-Native population (Hetzl & Smith, 2001).

With an increasing population of elderly comes a growing concern for abuse of the elderly. Segal (2004) suggested that studies are needed to determine how abuse is viewed and defined by Alaska Native tribes. In 2004, the National Indian Council on Aging reported that there is little known about the scope and nature of abuse and neglect in Indian country. Buchwald and Tomita (2000) reported a rate of abuse that ranged from 2% to 46%, with the probability that socioeconomic factors are responsible for the variation.

In rural Alaska, fewer family members and others are available to care for the elderly within the community. Branch (2005) recommends an expansion and improvement of personal care and community-based services in rural Alaska. Branch stated that there has been an ongoing decrease in the number of state grants, as well as a lack of adequate Medicaid reimbursement, resulting in the unavailability of personal care services in many areas of the state. The lack of health care in rural Alaska has resulted in an increasing influx of elderly to urban and hub areas.

The National Resource Center for American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian Elders (NRC) has been charged with empowering Native communities to incorporate traditional and contemporary health practices that have the potential to effectively support and treat elderly within community health care systems. In 2004, the project team began a dialogue with Alaska Native Elders directed at deepening their understanding of abuse of the elderly. In the first year of the project, the team found that abuse of the elderly is an immediate concern for all regions around the state; however, the extent and nature of the abuse is yet to be established.

The 2005 project is aimed at better understanding the issue of abuse of elderly Alaska Natives. This report is intended for Western practitioners, Alaska Native health organizations, and those involved in program design and policy making. These concepts can serve as a reparable base of training for health professionals who will be working in a more coordinated and integrated system of care. This report is also directed at health practitioners who strive to gain a deeper understanding of the need to integrate, respect, and make space for Alaska Native culture. Social workers and other behavioral health providers can gain an understanding of the importance of supporting the Alaska Native cultures to maintain their uniqueness and integrity.

With this in mind, the NRC invited Alaska Native Elders from across the state to express their ideas about the origin of abuse of elderly, and to share ways to reduce and control occurrences of abuse. The purpose of this report is to:

1. Provide Elders the opportunity to contribute their understanding of the issue of abuse of Alaska Native elderly.





2. Empower communities to begin to address the issue of abuse of the elderly in a traditional and culturally appropriate manner.



*“A lot of our people are turning to our  
elders and getting them more and more  
involved. That’s what makes me happy.”  
-Inupiat Elder, 2005*

## II. Methodology

This report synthesizes the extended conversations with Yup’ik/Cup’ik, Athabascan, Aleut, Inupiat, Alutiiq, and Tlingit Elders. Original data from Elders were used to identify major themes.

While the purpose of this project was to deepen our understanding of abuse of Alaska Native elderly, the team decided that utilizing more culturally appropriate terminology would improve the approach. Directly addressing abuse with the respondents did not result in the responses the project was targeting. A team member suggested using the more culturally appropriate terms “respect and disrespect” rather than the term “abuse.”<sup>1</sup>

With this in mind, the team asked the respondents the following questions:

1. What is your definition of an Elder?
2. What is your definition of traditional respect for Elders?
3. How do you define disrespect?
4. How can communities address these problems?

### A. Project Team

As was the case in the 2004 report, the project team involved in the design, data collection, and analysis and report-writing in year two of this project are primarily Alaska Natives. The project team members have heritage from Cup’ik/Yup’ik, Athabascan, Inupiat, and Alutiiq cultural groups, as well as American Indian cultural groups.<sup>2</sup> The team members made every effort to ground the project in respect for the knowledge shared by the Elders.

### B. The Participants

The participants in the second year of the NRC project are primarily from urban or hub areas of Alaska. Due to the lack of medical care in rural and remote villages in Alaska, Alaska Native elderly are often forced to move to urban and hub communities to be near advanced medical care. This group of Elders living in urban and hub areas of Alaska were targeted for this report. For a few of the participants, living in urban Alaska was a family choice, rather than the need for medical care.

Three Elders were drawn from each of the five culturally distinct groups of Alaska Natives: Inupiat, Yup’ik/Chu’pik, Tlingit, Athabascan, and Aleut/Alutiiq, for a total of fifteen participants.

Thurman, Allen & Deters (1998) stated that there has been a history of mistrust for American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) people with regards to the government, health officials, and

<sup>1</sup> Jim LaBelle, NRC Research Associate

<sup>2</sup> Project Team: George Charles, Yup’ik; Kathleen Graves, Alutiiq/Athabascan; Jim Labelle, Inupiat; Louise Shavings, Cup’ik; Elizabeth (Cookie) Rose, Athabascan; Kim Lemming, Miami Tribe of Oklahoma; and Pat Frank, Athabascan.



mental health providers. Issues of confidentiality, quality of care, and depersonalization are prevalent. Due to the history of mistrust, it is vital to use AI/AN culture bearers from the communities in order to gain useful information.

The participants engaged in the project are valued within the Native community and have acquired advanced knowledge about their tribal norms and values. Some of the respondents have held highly visible political and directive positions in local, tribal, and health agencies. Several of the Elders engaged in the project are often invited to speak at local, statewide, and sometimes international conferences and workshops, and are viewed as leaders in their community of origin. Several of the respondents are known as Alaska Native storytellers, healers, and spiritual leaders, and are involved in teaching indigenous knowledge to their tribe, community, and families (pages 8-9).

The project team relied upon word of mouth and snowball sampling to locate and engage the respondents in the project. Snowball sampling relies on referrals from initial subjects to generate additional subjects. The ages of the respondents ranged from 55 to 87 years. The minimum age of 55 years of age was chosen to follow guidelines for age limitations established for federally funded programs for the elderly.

### **C. Data Collection Procedures**

The interviewers introduced themselves and gave the Elders a brief introduction to the purpose of the project. Each respondent signed an informed consent form. The interviews were held either in the Elder's home or in a public place. Due to technical difficulties, a few of the Elders required a follow-up home visit or phone call when tapes of interviews were lost due to recorder malfunction.

The duration of the interviews was approximately one hour, and each respondent received a \$50 gift. The interviews were semi-structured interviews with the same set of questions that were asked of each respondent. Each interview was recorded and transcribed at a later date.

### **D. Data Analysis Approach**

The interviews were open-ended in nature, which allowed for a qualitative research approach to be utilized. Qualitative analysis allows for the hypothesis to be derived directly from the raw data. As the coding process begins, concepts emerge from the data and are then linked together. The team developed hunches about the ways in which the concepts were linked together. The conceptual frame that emerged was refined into the hypotheses. These hypotheses were then validated and examples of direct quotes from the Alaska Native Elders were used to support the conceptualizations.

Further, a grounded theory approach was utilized to analyze the data. The aim was to allow our Elders, who are our culture bearers, to describe in their own words what respect and disrespect means, how it is manifested, and how to address the issue. This approach allowed for a systematic analysis of the words, phrases, and concepts described by our culture bearers.

Three levels of analysis were utilized within the grounded theory paradigm (open coding, axial coding, and selected coding) to break down the data, conceptualize it, and put it back together (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding allows for broad themes from the data to emerge; axial coding allows for similar themes to be merged together into subcategories; and selected coding





allows for refining, filtering, and integrating the data into an explanation or theory which is grounded in the data. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and downloaded into the qualitative software, ATLAS.ti.

Cultural consultants from each cultural region were engaged to provide guidance in understanding the concepts, cultural beliefs, historical events, oral stories, terminology, and rituals. The cultural consultants were selected for their advanced knowledge of Alaska Native cultural ways, their ability to speak their Native language, and their connection to the Elder wisdom. When the final draft of the report was developed, the consultants were contacted once again to verify the accuracy of the analysis. The cultural consultants were given a one time fee of \$100 for their participation in the project.<sup>3</sup> In addition, to ensure inter-rater reliability, an independent reviewer analyzed a sample of the interviews and found similar results to the findings presented in this paper.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cultural Consultants: Floyd Guthrie, Tlingit; Rita Pitka-Blumenstein, Yup'ik; Anna Frank, Athabaskan; Vickie Hikes, Inupiat; and Larry Mercurief, Aleut

<sup>4</sup> Shelly A. Wiechelt, Ph.D., Research Assistant Professor, University at Buffalo, Buffalo, New York.





*“So if you don’t listen to your elders,  
you’re like a boat without driver; Without  
an anchor and it (will) drift all over.”  
-Yup’ik Elder, 2005*

### III. Thematic Analysis

This section presents preliminary, substantive findings, and interpretations based upon the consideration of the conceptual relationships among categories drawn from the raw interviews. The conceptual relationships are presented to depict the overall picture from the 15 Elder participants from the five main cultural groups in Alaska.

As the team anticipated, the Elders’ approach was subtle and indirect, yet very powerful. Hence, the respondents did not straightforwardly attend to the matter of abuse or disrespect of the elderly. Instead, the Elders conveyed detailed descriptions of time-honored teachings passed through the Elders from the ancestors.

The primary findings from the analysis of the interviews center upon the Alaska Native Elders’ cultural understanding of the origin of abuse among the elderly. Drawn from the data, the conceptual frame that emerged has been refined into the following hypotheses:

1. The tradition of listening, or oral tradition, is connected with origin of respect and disrespect of Alaska Native Elders.
2. The tradition of listening has relevancy in the modern world.
3. The cycle of respect has been broken and, as a result, there has been a dramatic increase in disrespect.
4. There are culturally appropriate ways to approach the problem of Alaska Native Elder abuse.

The hypotheses will be validated, and examples of direct quotes from the Alaska Native Elders will support the conceptualizations.

#### A. The Definition and Role of Alaska Native Elders

The respondents clearly defined the role and function of Elders within the community<sup>5</sup>. Elders are known for maintaining a healthy lifestyle and a wealth of cultural wisdom and good judgment.<sup>6</sup> They explained the role of an Elder in the following manner:

*“...elderly is when a person is old. But the Elder is a wise person because they experienced life, they went through the mill...”*

*“I think Elder sometimes can be young. Elder is the one that is mature, has wisdom to make right decisions, had experience in life...”*

<sup>5</sup> Craig (1986) affirmed that to the traditional Inupiat, a long life was attributed to the Life Source giving an extended life to those who have abided by the traditional teachings from the Elders.

<sup>6</sup> Hamilton-Cannelos (1986) stated that chronological age alone does not necessarily make one an “elder.” For her project, the Elder respondents were identified by the community as Elders due to their advanced knowledge of traditional norms and values.





*“...I think an elder is integrated in your tribe that’s older than you, or you have the great knowledge of your affiliation of dance and stories. We’d honor them...”*

Not all elderly Alaska Natives are viewed as Elders, particularly when the individual does not live a healthy lifestyle and does not maintain a wealth of cultural knowledge. The chronological age of the individual is not necessarily connected with the ability to hold the role and status of Elder within the community<sup>7</sup>. When elderly Alaska Native people do not live their lives by these standards, they are not identified by their community as Elders, as explained by participants in the following manner:

*“...It doesn’t necessarily have to be a person who has reached a certain age... Some people age and grow old and whatever happens, they end up dying...”*

*“...there’s elders (elderly) who people don’t show respect because they’re abusive, maybe they drink too much, they don’t do things right...abuse their family...”*

Athabascan Elders will not offer unsolicited advice; Elders need to be engaged and their advice requested. Elders will not interfere by imposing their knowledge on others, but are happy to assist when asked. Acculturated Alaska Natives may realize that there are protocols in place, whereby the Elders are available for support when asked.

*“...It’s a curious way how it happens because the elders don’t come forward and start telling people what to do. They wait until they’re asked...”*

*“... An Elder in life is there and is willing to help and has a wealth of knowledge and natural education, is willing to pass it on, if they are asked. They are not going to intrude on someone’s life. There’s a triggering mechanism, I guess, you have to ask for help or advice or assistance...”*

An Athabascan Elder explained that there is a traditional way to ask for help from Elders. The respondent explained that instead of directly asking for help from the Elder, a plate of food was offered, which served as an outward sign or symbol that the Elder’s spiritual help was needed. The nonverbal request for spiritual help was implicit in the action of offering the food to the Elder. There was no need for words.

*“... You don’t just go over and ask them...Bringing the food and then those elders would advise you on who to talk to...So we asked them in the traditional way was just bringing that food, taking a plate of food. You put food on it and bring it to an elder and you give it to them...So we asked them in the traditional way was just bringing that food.”*

*“...these outward signs or symbols that indicate a deeper knowledge and a deeper understanding of the social, spiritual needs of people. It’s an interesting thing...Our spiritual and social inquiries and needs. The outward sign in this case was just bringing that food on a plate and not saying anything...with that plate of food and put it down there and sat down. He looked at it, looked at me. We didn’t say a lot. But it was a sign. After he looked at me a couple times he kind of got the message. I could see it.”*

<sup>7</sup> In the 2004 NRC report, ‘Conferences of Alaska Native Elders; Our Dignified View of Aging’ Alutiiq Elders stated that respect is based upon chronological age. Alutiiq Elders are held in high esteem and given special treatment given their advanced chronological age.





## **B. The Impact of the Tradition of Listening**

Nearly all of the respondents cited the significance of the tradition of listening, or oral tradition. Of the 15 Elders engaged in the project, 13 of them mentioned the importance of listening. Three Elders interviewed and several cultural consultants identified the tradition of listening as the most important value of Alaska Natives.

*“...listen...that falls into our number one value which is respect for young people and ourselves and our elders...”*

*“This...listening and hearing...this respect is deeply ingrained in all indigenous peoples, this respect.”*

Many elaborated upon the process of the oral tradition or listening which involves intent, mindfulness, observation, expansion of intuitive knowledge, and immersion. The majority of the Elders interviewed affirmed the importance of ‘the tradition of listening’ as a highly structured system which holds an essential association to the relationship between respect and disrespect of elderly Alaska Natives.

*“...It is good to pay attention; it is good to listen to others.”*

*“...(Elders) tell you something over and over long enough, it's gonna make sense. Grandpa said things over and over...he felt strongly in his traditional values...”*

Vital to teaching the tradition of listening is the discipline of the physical body and mind. Restricting body movements and giving exclusive attention to the Elder storyteller is a component of the tradition of listening. Self discipline and delayed gratification are strengthened in this process while the mind and body are quieted. During storytelling, children are strengthening positive thinking skills by connecting with the possibilities in life. Their cognitive ability for creative imagery is enhanced.

*“...(in the past)...when our Elders are talking, we can't move (around), we don't whisper, we don't look around, we just stay (still) and listen. We did that because we first heard it in our home that was taught to us in our home. At that time, the Elders, the grandpas and grandmas, used to talk to children including their own grandchildren, with their playmates, they would sit, no sound, no one gets up to drink water, no one goes out (leaves). That's how much they respected their elders...”*

### **1. Stability and harmony through wisdom of the past**

The Elders provide balance and harmony within the community through their connection to the ancestral wisdom of the past. In the past, when harmony was lacking in a community, the entire community was at risk. The interdependency among the members of the community helped Alaska Natives survive in a very harsh environment.

*“Respect I think had much to do to enable all of us to live in as much harmony as possible”*





Without this connection, there is an increased lack of equilibrium and constancy among people, which can result in an unbalanced earth, as explained by an Athabascan Elder. There is a Arapaho proverb that states, “When we show respect for other living things, they respond with respect for us.” This proverb supports the corresponding unbalanced nature of the earth, in response to unbalanced people.

*“We’re all supposed to be balanced. And, if we aren’t balanced then things start going wrong, they start going awry. People notice that things are out of balance...it’s not only in your personal lives but it spreads out across the earth. The earth itself, if it’s out of balance it will put its self back in balance through its own natural processes; governments, everything else, in all things.”*

The tradition of listening gives birth to respect of Elders, which provides direction and strength. Several of the Yup’ik Elders utilized the likeness or analogy of a boat without an anchor as a metaphor for the connection and stability that one can derive from listening and learning to respect Elders.

*“You’re the one that operates that drifting all over; the boat and you learn how to anchor it. So if you don’t listen to your elders, you’re like a boat without a driver, without an anchor and it drifts all over. That’s why Elders used to tell us to listen when they tell stories.”*

*“...This is what stability; respect the Elders like an anchor line on a boat. It keeps the boat safe; prevents it from drifting aimlessly all over the place; Likewise, the young people they drift aimlessly all over the place, twiddling their fingers. Don’t know where they’ve been and don’t know where they are, where to go.”*

## **2. The listening paradigm and enhancing skills**

The skills related to the Alaska Native listening paradigm may be attained through repeatedly listening to the stories of the Elders, which have been handed down from the ancestors. The experience of listening to Elder storytelling, or the oral tradition, allows for observation, development, and self-directed performance of the skills. Attainment of the skills involves a highly mentally active process by which cognitive abilities are strengthened; and, if one doesn’t listen to the Elders, one learns by trial and error. It is essential for Elders to pass the traditional knowledge to the next generation so that the members of Alaska Native tribes can have long, productive, and joyful lives.

*“...If I don’t listen to my parents, my teachers, I won’t have nothing. I won’t have knowledge...”*

*“...They say that if I listen to my parents, I will have long life, longer life, happiness. Otherwise, I won’t have a long life. This is what I experienced...”*

Self discipline and delayed gratification are strengthened in this process<sup>8</sup>. Repetition of the stories increases the probability of the ability to recall the story at a later time, and the meaning

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<sup>8</sup> Hamilton-Cannelos (1986) described that for Yup’ik people the delay of gratification, self-discipline, and individual accountability are components of learning Yuuyaraq (becoming a human being) and are linked to the prevention of suicide.





can be applied to the ever changing situations, emotions, and needs of the listeners. When experiencing a time of difficulty, connecting with the teachings from the stories will support the healing process.

*“...learned by listening to the stories by the Elders. Go to story telling and my mother story telling every evening and learn to respect the elders by respecting them. We don’t ask questions, we just listen. And these stories tell the same thing over and over...”*

*“That was our school by listening. They talk about the legends, myths, and the morals of the stories of how to have a good life. This is how to listen and pay attention.”*

*“...You just watch them and they never even watch you. If you make a mistake, you correct ...”*

### **3. The tradition of listening relevant today**

The teachings shared by the respondents have protected Alaska Natives for many hundreds of years and have relevancy in today’s modern, technological world. The tradition of listening is believed to be a vibrant and alive paradigm which has significance and implication in the contemporary world. The principles involved are pertinent and critical to the future and survival of the earth, tribe, and community.

*“...the villages are dealing with a complex world right now...the Elders completely understand...”*

*“So the elders always remind us. Like they point to me and say this man has 8 great grandchildren, maybe nine. They too have all the life skills, survival skills of the ancestors. They too have the answers, solutions that they would need to survive...”*

### **4. Ancient wisdom is still available today**

The Elders tell us that despite the historical disruptions to the dissemination of cultural knowledge experienced by Alaska Natives, the wisdom has been protected and is available in the food, songs, drum, language, and ceremonies. A Tlingit Elder explained that the information is stored in the permanent memory of Alaska Natives (see “Trusting instincts and intuition in the oral tradition,” p.12).

*“...when you eat Native food from your culture that you have never had before, your body knows and your spirit knows...”*

*“...That’s what I hear, the Tlingits singing. (Tlingit Language) That’s what it say, it all left us, they understand. It will be brought back again. So that’s where I come in, is trying to remind the people. And let them listen to this song, when they open this box on knowledge and wisdom...”*

*“He (brother) said he could always hear the drums that called him and I told him the drums called me too. Even if you’re not raised around the culture, it’s something in you that calls you and he felt it too.”*





### C. The Structure of the Tradition of Listening

The structure of the 'Tradition of Listening' is holistic, balanced, and interconnected. The tradition of listening, or the oral tradition, is connected with teaching through the stories, which have been passed from the ancestors through the Elders. The stories contain the guidelines for the experience of living a happy life, enhancement of family cohesiveness, balance with the natural world, and ultimately survival. The tradition of listening is connected with the mental, spiritual, and physical balance within the individual community and with the natural world.

#### 1. A holistic approach and the tradition of listening

It is essential to take into consideration the interdependence among the parts, or a holistic perspective, when delving into the concept of listening from the Native worldview. The beliefs involved encompass the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the self. Balance and harmony with the natural world is maintained in this process. These interdependent quadrants of the being cannot be precisely separated.

From the Western perspective, listening involves focusing on the cognitive act of hearing attentively, or the ability to hear and focus upon something.

*"...There is a real difference between hearing and listening..."*

*"...you should and you have to know the difference between listening and hearing. Hearing is just being able to hear noises, sounds, voices, whatever it is, and indicating that yes you hear something."*

Whereas, the tradition of listening goes much deeper than simply being attentive and hearing. The tradition of listening involves intent, mindfulness, observation, expansion of intuitive knowledge, and immersion. Listening involves opening your mind, spirit, and heart so that the information becomes integrated into being.

*"Elders, they ask you to listen. The other thing is they ask you to open your mind. So what they're saying while you're listening will get to you so that you will put it in your mind in your memory to understand that you can reflect on later in life it will come back to you."*

The separation of the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects of listening is inappropriate, from the Alaska Native listening paradigm.

*"...Our (Native) school is for the soul. It's no different then physical and spiritual things. Their anatomy is the same way, how you treat it..."*

*"...I think that the traditional and cultural ways of dealing with a person is that they recognized that a person is comprised of mind, body, and spirit conducted their life..."*

#### 2. Interconnectedness among community members

It is also important to keep in mind that the self is viewed as encompassing others into the self, with an interdependent self with permeable boundaries and less differentiation (Berzoff, 1996; Markus & Kitayuma, 1991; Roland, 1998). The individual is not the focus, but rather the entire





group is the focus and how the individual supports the family and the tribe, and their connection to all people and the natural world.

*“...Peace in the community is very important, that’s a Cup’ik value. Stick together, help each other. Here’s something bad too from individuals.”*

*“... we’re all connected. And ultimately we do see that we are all connected either earlier or later.”*

### **3. Role of Elders in the tradition of listening**

Elders take on the role of instructors and leaders within the oral tradition, teaching values. The values are intrinsically connected with becoming a healthy human being and assist with maintaining a positive life-path and balance and harmony with the natural world. The Elders stress the importance of mindfulness and learning by observation, which are components of the tradition of listening. Elders intuitively know when balance is needed and they will restore the balance by singing a song and/or telling a story.

*“...When elders are talking to you, you listen to them. They are your teachers...”*

*“This is our traditional education. Traditional education is subtle and indirect. You learn by observation and listening by people telling their experiences or stories.”*

*“...The stories and legends were methods for teaching us how we should live and how we shouldn’t live...”*

### **4. Body language and the tradition of listening**

Increasing knowledge about body language is a fundamental element of the tradition of listening and can serve as a protective factor. By attentively observing and immersing oneself in the tradition of listening, we begin to know others through their facial expressions, gestures, and movement. A Yup’ik Elder described the manner in which these tools help us throughout our life to understand others and assist us with our emotions and health issues.

*“...how you learn to today, I’m an elder so when I’m working with the people, I do exactly what the Elders told me. I watch their expressions, listen to their voice and ah...and ah their facial and their gestures in their body movements. And you’ll know if they’re not telling you real things. That’s why I do the healing by listening.”*

### **5. Trusting instincts and intuition in the oral tradition**

Learning to trust our instincts and intuition are necessary elements of the oral tradition, which can enhance our balance and connection. We can connect with our internal sense of knowing, which can guide us through life’s difficulties. When we lack our ability to listen and quiet ourselves, we cannot recognize and trust our instincts, or our internal sense of knowing. In this way, we are lost without an anchor. Without this connection, we are at risk.

*“We don’t listen to our Elders, our instincts. Instincts are our elders but we argue with our instincts. Yeah. So you question the instincts. That’s the reason why Elders used to tell us “don’t ask questions.”*





*“Can you change the weather when it’s bad? No. We are the natures. Our Elders are nature. Our being is nature. Our instincts are our nature. But we learn to question; should I or shouldn’t I? And when it says do it, we go ahead and don’t do it. When our instincts says do it and we didn’t do it then we feel I should’ve done it. I should’ve go ahead and do it, afterwards.”*

## **6. Training begins before birth**

We begin teaching the tradition of listening prior to birth. The fetus, as a human being, is beginning to listen, observe, and connect with the feeling of love from the outside world. One of the Tlingit Elders interviewed expressed it this way:

*“... My mother used to sing this song while I was still inside of her. And she talks to the children, tells them the story. She’s training the unborn child. So, she’s a teacher. So when the baby is born, he already has a start...”*

It is the vibration of the love and compassion in the voice of the mother that has a positive effect upon the fetus. The positive impact of the connection with the vibration from the voice can be connected with providing a safeguard for the unborn. An Aleut Elder explains the process in the following manner:

*“And so the elders would talk to a fetus inside the womb because they know the vibration of their voice that is the most important aspect of what they’re sharing. Especially when it comes from a place of love and compassion.”*

## **7. Training continues during sleep**

Elders remind us that after birth the training continues, even while asleep. The Elders will gently whisper the stories of the survival skills and ancient songs in the ear of the slumbering child. A Tlingit Elder tells us that the child will retain the information in their unconscious memory or permanent memory:

*“I did not have grandparents. They died at an early age. So all I had was three great uncles. They conveyed all their skills, life skills, survival skills, answers, solutions. So I have it. They used to talk to me when I was asleep. Real quietly, talk in one ear then the other. So that’s how they trained me.”*

*“...we grew up in an orphanage...they did not allow us to talk our language or sing songs, or tell stories. They forbade us. So we grew up without this knowledge. We do not know the songs, the stories...it’s all in your memory, everything your great, great, great uncles all told you, It’s lost in your memory...While the babies were asleep, the elders would be singing songs, ancient songs. They would tell stories while the children were asleep.”*

## **D. The Tradition of Listening and Respect**

There is a fundamental connection between the tradition of listening and the capacity to accept and express respect for the self and others. While the tradition of listening may seem simplistic on the surface, it is connected with a complex set of values and way of life. The multifaceted





core set of behaviors, beliefs, and concepts are fundamentally interlinked with the development of respect and disrespect of Alaska Native elderly and the maintenance of balance and harmony with the natural world.

*“...Respect toward an Elder, to be able listen to them...There is a real difference between hearing and listening...When you listen is when you take things inside of you assess them...”*

### **1. The relationship between listening ability and respect**

The ability to listen (in the traditional sense) is ultimately connected to the ability to respect. When an individual lacks the ability to listen in the traditional manner, disrespect is present. Within this context, respect is intrinsically linked to the tradition of listening. From the Alaska Native paradigm, respect is understood to mean understanding, accepting, and following the ancestral wisdom as a guideline for the life-path.

*“Because I respect my grandmother, I learn from her. If I disrespected my grandmother from my father’s side; I wouldn’t listen to her, I wouldn’t be gathering those things. Today, I still gather those, summer time for winter use; the sour docks, pond greens, and berries that grow. Because I respect my grandmother, I learn those things from her. She taught me. If I didn’t listen to her words; my late grandmother \_\_\_\_, I wouldn’t be doing those things.”*

### **2. The cycle of respect**

The Yup’ik, Inupiat, Tlingit Elders, and cultural consultants stated that the cycle of respect involves honor and love<sup>9</sup>. The first component of the process begins with external experience of being loved, honored, and respected by others. Next, the individual internalizes the experience. Finally, there is recognition and acceptance of those attributes by others.

#### **a. Feeling loved and honored by others**

The cycle of respect begins by Elders and adults giving love, honor, and respect to the young. The Elders intrinsically know how to activate others and, therefore, recognize when the child is ready to listen and seize the opportunity to connect with the child.

*“... we (adults and Elders) also need to listen to young people, they have challenges that we never had...we can learn from them too...”*

*“... Elders respect us first, before we learn to respect them...”*

Elders quietly discipline with honor and love toward children. Within this worldview harsh words and physical punishment are inappropriate. When teaching children, Elders speak from their heart, connect with the child, and project the vibration of love from their voice.

*“...grandfather...felt that is was a very harmful thing to do to punish a child...”*

<sup>9</sup> The Aleut and Athabascan Elders interviewed did not describe the respect in the same cyclic manner, yet this does not mean they do not hold the same belief. Follow up with the Aleut and Athabascan Elders is needed to determine whether not to this is the case.





*"...my grandparents never hit me, they never jerked me..."*

**b) Internally recognizing and accepting intrinsic worth and value**

In order to respect others, Elders remind us that we first need to recognize that we are valuable and worth love, honor, and respect. Without the recognition and acceptance within, we cannot engage in the reciprocal relationship with our Elders. When Elders and adults treat the young with love, honor, and respect, the children can recognize and accept these things within themselves. They connect to it and, ultimately, begin the process of recognizing and accepting the natural world, Elders, and others in a mutual, reciprocal manner.

*"How can you respect if you don't respect yourself? Because you are very important person to yourself. You come first. Then give your specialness (sic) to others."*

*"It explains what the respect is. You have to learn to respect yourself; listen to you."*

**c) Others recognizing and accepting our capacity to honor and love them**

When an individual recognizes and accepts the love, honor, and respect internally, Elders and others will intuitively recognize and accept these attributes. This is a reciprocal, cyclical process by which respect, love, and acceptance is shared, which creates harmony within, with others, and with the natural world.

*"...so respecting elders, things seemed to have harmony..."*

*"... the elders say that nothing is created on the outside unless it's created on the inside first..."*

There are exceptions to this process, which involve a caveat whereby the individual has experienced extreme disrespect for extended periods of time, either as a child or adult. When these individuals are given respect, they reject it because they have built up a defense of resistance and fear which protects them from the pain related to life experiences of being disrespected. Disrespect involves lack of understanding and connection to the ancestral knowledge and traditions. The disrespectful person is separated and unbalanced from the natural world, ancestral wisdom, and the Elders.

**E. Teaching Youth Cultural Ways**

The Elders give detailed descriptions of the components of teaching the ancestral wisdom to the youth. Elders are concerned because some of these components of disciplining children have been forgotten or lost. When the children were removed from their homes during the boarding school era in Alaska, the cycle of loss of traditional parenting began. This cycle of loss continues today because many parent and grandparents do not know the ways of traditional parenting. Hamilton-Cannelos (1986) included this quote from a Yup'ik Elder:

*"...They said to turn over the teaching of our children to them...Now look at our children!"*





## 1. The work ethic enhances success

Pingayak (1976) related laziness and sleepiness as welcoming a poor way of living life. Sleeping all day will not allow you to take care of your responsibilities, which could lead to illness<sup>10</sup>. There is an obligation to uphold the Native work ethic to maintain family honor and individual accountability. Children are taught age appropriate tasks at a very early age.

*“... this is what my dad used to say: ‘Now if you’re a lazy woman, teenager, you’re not going to have nothing.’ I never used to talk back to my parents if though they tell me things. In my mind, I used to tell myself, ‘Okay dad, as long as you are living, I’m gonna try to remember your words, I’m not gonna try to be lazy.’”*

*“ My grandpa used to say that if I’m lazy, besides sleeping all the time, I won’t have a future, I won’t have nothing. That always come to my mind, try not to be lazy.”*

## 2. Alaska Native children are disciplined without harsh punishment

Traditional child rearing practices do not value harsh restrictions and strict discipline. As was found in 2004, Elders reported that yelling and striking children are viewed as wrong and indicate that the adult in the situation is immature. Strict discipline and harsh punishments of children is considered disrespectful of the child’s soul and spirit.

*“...he (grandfather) allowed me a lot of latitude. No punishment...I learned faster...”*

*“...they (Elders) never hit or punish children...”*

A Yup’ik Elder explained that negative parenting crushes the creativity of children, resulting in children feeling negated and separate.

*“...Don’t do this splits the atom. It reverses creation. Don’t do that results in negation, denial, and separation.”*

Traditional Native parenting is balanced with discipline which helps to regulate behavior, teach restraint, and establish authority and boundaries in relationships. When discipline is lacking, children are without structure and guidance. According to an Aleut Elder, the lack of discipline might be related to historical trauma. Parents are reluctant to discipline to try to make up for what happened to them historically, or to appease parental guilt when working outside of the home.

*“...I was amazed there was no discipline in any of the families (in community of origin). They were just...I guess, because of what happened. People seemed to be afraid to discipline their children. I mean, I’m at fault too, with my two younger kids. Cause I started working when my two young sons were still kind of small, first grade, second grade. To make up for not being home for them like I did with my other kids, I gave them anything and everything they wanted. I think that’s what happened today. From our experience we don’t want our children to be without if we’re able to give them. But we do give them anything.”*

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<sup>10</sup> Hamilton-Cannelos (1986) reported that a person who sleeps in late would get into trouble or in a mishap while hunting, according to Yup’ik Elders.





### 3. Remind youth of the ancestors who came before them

Elders remind youth to bear in mind the ancestors who came before them. It is vital to connect the children with the ancestral knowledge which has protected Alaska Natives for thousands of years. Those who came before us experienced many struggles which have contributed to enhancing our lives today. Elders stated that we need to remind children that the ancestors sacrificed so that our lives would be better today.

*“...I remember my grandmother always telling me to recognize the ones that were before us...I always try to remember those before us and remember that a small group of people stood up for us and fought for those rights...”*

### 4. Teaching respect through stories

Through the stories of survival, youth are taught how to respect the earth, the animals, the plants, the weather, and other people. The Elders teach through the stories of ancestors and their own stories of survival. The oral tradition teaches about respect for all that surrounds us: the earth, animals, and families and communities.

*“...That’s the way. The reason why we have to respect the elders; they went through that path. They only tell you from their experience. They didn’t go to school, they didn’t write everything. They didn’t write down instructions what they’re life is going to be. They only tell us through their experience how to survive. How to respect animal, plants, weather. That’s the old world and now we’re trying to go back to that old world and if it’s a good path. Most of it is good path...”*

The stories hold the mythology of Alaska Natives. The stories, told by Elders from the ancestors, teach us how the world began, how to survive, social values, and cultural connections. The stories teach respect for the self, earth, animals, plants, and others. The stories comfort children.

*“...we figure things out through the stories; the morals to the stories. And they tell us not to make fun of people. Like story of the devil fish and the fox. And fox was telling you; you ugly, you’re ugly. And cause of that. Fox turn red when he got embarrassed and then he went to somebody’s campfire. That’s why he got dog feet; when he got embarrassed, only one that’s white is the end of the tail. Cause when she got embarrassed, she got red and then she got embarrassed, she put her face in the fire; charcoal and that’s why he got black face, I mean dark face. So all those things like that is morals. It fires back when we do it to the human people. People, those elders are telling us stories and the morals are true...”*

*“... Because it’s comforting. Telling a preschool child of bedtime stories I think is the best time to remember things because you sleep through ‘em; carry them in our sleep. In the world, the storytelling is biological instinct. I think it’s same thing as building a campfire.”*

The survival skills are taught by listening, observation, and participation. Parents and grandparents teach the skills to the youth. Sometimes, grandparents take over parenting when alcohol and lack of parenting skills is involved within the family.





*“The Inupiat way; like I said my dad showed us by living it, course as a child growing up we didn’t understand (that he was teaching us) we were participating. We went out hunting and fishing and then when there was somebody in need in the community he would go help that individual and so we learned in a traditional manner by observing, participating, and listening.”*

*“The kids that I knew lost their parents due to alcohol. So it was the grandparents that raised them. So the grandparents conveyed, through their stories, conveyed all the life skills, survival skills to their grandchildren. They gave them life skills, survival skills. They gave them, conveyed all the answers, solutions that kids would need to survive in this era. Era that we call space age is still that way. So these are my teachers. They were not even thirty years old but they were raised by grandparents. So they had all the knowledge of the grandparents.”*

Teaching the traditions begins in the home, with parents and grandparents teaching children how to become “real human beings” (one who respects self, others, and the natural environment). The instruction needs to begin early in life to increase the probability of a positive impact upon the child.

*“Behavior is you start at home, how you treat your brothers and sisters and how you behave towards your mom and dad at home. At home that was first taught in the family; they teach their children. They don’t want to teach their children until they get older. It’s wrong, it’s very, very wrong to teach them when they get older. It’s now and the parents being example at home.”*

*“...I was so thankful that my first son caught a mukluk and also with my youngest son caught mukluk, the same thing happened. And those elder ladies and guys were so happy, they started teasing my boys that they were great hunters and my boys learn it from their father who used to love to hunt. Those things makes the elders spirit go up and make them happy. It also makes your children happy too, they have smiling face, they’re happy. Little things like, put your family together more, I think.*

The Yup’ik/Cup’ik Elders mentioned that, in the past, males were trained in a community house, or *qasgiq*. The community house served as a place for ceremonies, singing, and dancing. When boys reached the age when they could leave their mothers, they moved to the *qasgiq* to be trained to become men. The community house served as a social and spiritual center.

*“...(Traditionally) Eskimos do, they have what they call qasriq--a meeting place where elders are together, they talk to young people, young boys how they should hunt, respect the sea, respect the atmosphere, how it was made and watch the weather very closely...”*

*“...Because Eskimos need to watch the weather very closely. Because the only way that time was by hunting; subsistence hunting. And when they are talking to young people, there are some boys that don’t want to listen to elders are saying and when somebody, a young man steps out of (qasriq), try to go out, a guard, somebody stops them right there. And let them go back and listen to elders say about life. Okay, other things; let me see...and also they listen and follow the traditional Cup’ik teachings. They listen to the elders’ fathers.*





Traditionally, Yup'ik/Cup'ik girls were trained by their mothers, separate from the males. They were trained about becoming women, how to assist in the transmission of the culture, how to enhance their mates' hunting success, and how to preserve and prepare food for their family and community.

*"...We (females) were taught at home and the boys were taught at Qasriq (men's house). And the boys would go to the qasriq and the men that were in there taught them also. As we know, Yuuyaraq; the way of life."*

*"It was my mother who taught me how to live life. What she taught me was about marriage life and how I should raise my children or how to prepare my husband when he's ready to go out to sea out to land wintertime so he'll survive..."*

*"... And one thing; well this was what my mother used to tell me; now you're growing up and you have two brothers who are growing; this was when I started my menstrual first time. 'Don't you ever step over your brother,' because if you ever do that, "jumajistullu-ggu," that means that the animals that is to get will be so scared that he won't be able to get. That's what my mother used to tell me..."*

## **5. Helping the elderly is a reciprocal process**

The traditional training of children involves training them to help the elderly. This is a reciprocal process by which they will be helped when they become elderly.

*"They said this man next door is a friend of your uncle. So, you have to, he's way past 50, so he can't do much by himself. So they always ask now you go help him. Pack water for him, cut wood, chop wood. Pack it in his house before it gets dark. So that's how they said. This is the old way. One day you are going to become an elder. If you don't help the elders now, so when you become an elder nobody is going to help. So that's how they trained us..."*

A Cup'ik Elder reminds us that sharing resources with others is an essential value among Alaska Native people.

*"...That way, sharing. I love sharing; sharing food or anything; something, even what I make with my hand like sewing. And from that I know that some of my children have learned and they do that."*

*"...And my children; my six children were in school, if husband got some seal after hunting, then I would ask one of them (children) to bring one of them; an elderly woman and after I've cooked I would ask one of them to bring them to an elderly guy. Whenever they do something, they do that, they share and it makes my heart so happy because they've seen me doing this when they were growing up. Bring some food or some meat to elders..."*

A Yup'ik Elder reminds us that learning from experience involves acceptance. When things are negative, we need to learn to accept this experience. In the same manner, we need to learn to accept the positive experiences in life.





*“... so, when elders tell you, learn from experience and things like that. The missing link to that is, you have to learn to accept. Learn to accept what’s good and what’s not good. They’re the same thing.”*

## **F. Disrespect of Elders**

For Alaska Natives, the primary emphasis is placed upon maintaining a balanced, harmonious, and interconnected relationship with others and with the natural environment. The needs of the individual are secondary to the needs of the group (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). When there is a lack of balance, harmony, and connection with others and the natural world, disrespect or abuse is present. The most prevalent types of abuse toward the elderly mentioned were emotional disrespect and financial exploitation.

*“...Definition of disrespect, not living correctly. Out of balance with nature or out of balance with other people.”*

It is difficult for the Elders to talk about disrespect of the elderly Alaska Natives. Many of the Elders interviewed grew up at the time when traditional structures, practice, values, and beliefs were systematically dismantled and were replaced by Western social, political, economic, religious, and justice systems. In the past, there were time-tested Alaska Native systems in place that controlled unacceptable social behaviors. There were non-confrontational methods of resolving conflict. Many of the Elder respondents grew up with a system of justice that helped to maintain balance and harmony, while healing the victim and allowing the offender to regain trust within the community (Mirsky, 2004).

*“...(grandfather) mostly talked about how to get along...as Native people we’re not conflictual [sic] people...in old Native communities, you use other people to resolve conflicts...things got worked out without anybody getting super angry...if things got really bad...the punishment was shunning, nobody talked to you...banishment...”*

The Elders are concerned that the Euro-American justice system causes further imbalance and disrespect. They are reluctant to put their families and communities at further risk by reporting abuse of the elderly. As a result, there is a pervasive reluctance to turn family members into law enforcement and the Office of Protective Services, with a goal of insuring the longevity of the tribe. The Elders were reluctant to directly address the issue of abuse, which appeared to be connected with a desire to protect the youth. Some expressed fear that directly addressing abuse of the elderly would trigger the epidemic of suicide among at-risk youth.

*“...I think there might be a reluctance to put blame on a family member...they don’t want to blame anybody...”*

*“...Elders will not knowingly say something that will harm a member of their family or even someone they don’t know...”*

### **1. Emotional Abuse is a significant form of disrespect**

A majority of the Elders interviewed mentioned emotional abuse as one of the most widespread forms of disrespect experienced by Alaska Native Elders. Emotional abuse is connected with Elders feeling as though the Native way of life and traditions are not respected by non-Natives





who come into their communities. Elders are disrespected by Western institutions. Native protocols, songs, stories, regalia, advice, and knowledge from Elders are often disrespected.

**a. Lack of respect for the Native way of life and traditions**

Elders reported that outsiders that come into rural communities often misunderstand the Native way of life. The non-Natives may be critical of the food they eat and the manner in which they live, and may take an ethnocentric stance toward the Elders' lifestyle.

*"...Okay, they don't know nothing what goes on in our village but they come in and tell us how to live. They never experience our food, they never experience our life but they come in and try to change what we are. And that's disrespect..."*

*"...And they have no secrets; everything is special there to them and when somebody comes and criticizes them, that's disrespect. And try to change their lives, how to live..."*

**b. Lack of respect for Elders' knowledge and advice**

It is the Elder's role to pass on the knowledge from the ancestors to the community and family. They protect the culture by fulfilling this obligation. The Elder respondents discussed that sometimes Elders are treated as though they lack intelligence.

*"...when you don't pay homage to your elders, when you no longer view their advice as important..."*

*"Disrespect; when you disrespect your elders, and they tell you what you ought to do as you grow up, if you don't listen to them, if you don't do what they tell you to do; the words, you forget and you don't use them; that's disrespect!"*

When the ancient knowledge and advice of the ancestors, which comes through the Elders, is minimized and ignored, it threatens the strength of the traditions that have protected Alaska Natives for thousands of years. When the offenders are Alaska Natives themselves, it is a form of self-hatred since they are ultimately disrespecting who they are and their heritage.

*"So it is important to respect our Elders. They told us that if we don't listen to what our grandparents and parents say, then we are disrespecting our way of life; like 'allerkutet' (what to do) and 'inerkutet' (what not to do)."*

*"...well the absence of respect in today's society, we don't listen to our elders..."*

**c. Western institutions lack respect for Native Elders and protocols**

The culture bearers interviewed have many occasions to interact with institutions, such as health care facilities, schools, churches, and conferences. The Elders respect and maintain the protocols of the institutions. Yet, some of the respondents reported that the institutions do not follow Native protocols when Natives are invited to share their culture knowledge.

*"...So, all of us when we work in the office, we have to go under the protocols of that government, but we never follow the protocols of the Elders."*





*“Because we’re living in two worlds. It’s to respect them and respect ours. I’m talking Native way; Native protocol.*

Some of the respondents reported that healthcare professionals treat them in a disrespectful manner because they assume they do not understand their bodies.

*“...just cause you’re Indian, they (medical staff) treat you like you don’t understand. It’s your body, you know what it needs and what’s wrong with it! But they act like you don’t understand.”*

Some Elders reported that using the prescription phone-in system is difficult to manage when their eyesight is fading and they have arthritis. The also said that long waits for medical care are difficult for Elders who are not feeling well.

*“The hospital, I moved back up because I didn’t have any hospital coverage down there and here we get total care which is great. But for an elder after waiting to get this and that and get prescriptions, its very tiring. They should hire more to get more help. They want us to use the phone-in prescription; now, to do that I can barely use the phone, I can hold it like this or that but all these numbers you have to put in and push--yes, no--and I have at least 14 different medicines I take. I can’t do that on the phone. That lady upstairs, she’s 80, she can’t do that. Some of them can’t even see the numbers to call in. It hurts to sit; a lot of us have arthritis.”*

*“...One time I went to get a blood draw every month so I called and just for them to take a tube of blood out of my arm, I wait half an hour, 45 minutes and one time I was so sick with the flu or something and I waited and waited and waited and I found out that they didn’t even sign me in. That happens a lot...”*

**d. Non-Natives lack respect for Native traditions**

Non-Natives often lack respect and understanding for Native traditions, songs, and regalia. Non-Natives sometimes view sacred cultural traditions as a form of entertainment. For Alaska Natives, the songs and regalia are connected to the spiritual belief system and it is offensive when the spiritual nature of traditions are not recognized and respected.

*“...Nobody understand those lines (tattoos). They look at them like decoration. They don’t know the meaning of them. Or the earring here. Whatever. They think they’re decoration. Our dances are not decoration. Our dances are not decoration. It’s not entertainment. It’s moral. If you want to know about respect and disrespect, you should figure it out from that. Which is respect and what is following.”*

**e. Emotional needs of elderly neglected**

Respondents frequently mentioned that Elders’ emotional needs are often neglected. Some mentioned that nursing staff and family members ignore their physical and emotional needs. Others mentioned that another form of emotional abuse is to place Elders in extended care facilities and not visit them.

*“They don’t even take the time to smile...recognition of their presence...”*





*“...Like in the store and the kids are rowdy and you’re behind them and they don’t care if they could knock you over. They don’t say excuse me and a lot of them forget to say please and thank you.”*

*“A lot of times we lock them up in old folk’s homes, pioneer homes, you know we don’t encourage our young ones to spend time with them...Instead of utilizing their knowledge and their willingness to help us, we ignore them...”*

#### **f. Elders sometimes viewed as a burden**

When caregivers, family member, and friends either consciously or unconsciously communicate to Elders that they are a burden, Elders are emotionally hurt. It is the traditional role of the Elder to pass on knowledge to the next generation. When they are viewed as a burden or an imposition, instead of being respected as a leader with knowledge to share, cognitive dissonance occurs within the Elders. Elders serve as mentors and teachers, and it is our responsibility to utilize their wisdom and to honor their knowledge.

*“They treat them like they’re nuisance. Like their children that they don’t really know what they want, what they’re saying. I think that’s the saddest part, you know...I think the people think of them as a burden, or an old fool that doesn’t know what he’s talking about. Yes, he’s still kind of stuck in the past but he has a lot of wisdom...They have the history, which is not written. The kids used to disregard...We didn’t bother listening to the stories, which in essence gave us our history. Today we know we should have listened. Cause it’s not written down anyplace.”*

*“...When you leave them out of your life then when you are doing that then you are truly disrespecting them...”*

### **2. Many Alaska Native elderly experience verbal abuse**

Verbal abuse was a frequently mentioned form of abuse experienced by Alaska Native Elders. This of form of abuse is difficult for the elderly to discuss.

*“...It’s hard for them to talk about it, verbal abuse...”*

*“...But it’s the verbal abuse that they suffer. And you know your self, physical abuse you can take; it’s the mental and verbal abuse that’s really devastating for the elders.”*

### **3. Elders are overburdened with caring for youth**

When Elders are overburdened with caring for youth, they may experience physical, emotional, and financial strain. Many Elders are providing full-time care for their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, while the parents are unavailable due to substance abuse or lack of parenting skills. In the past, there were strict roles, boundaries, and responsibilities for each stage and age of the Native lifecycle. Due to colonialism, the roles and boundaries are not being taught and practiced today. Many children and grandchildren unknowingly, or sometimes knowingly, violate the role of the grandparent and great-grandparent by leaving their children with them for extended periods of time.





*“...and some are saddled with great-grandchildren...not because they don’t want the children but they are challenged with vibrant active young children for long periods of time which is a hardship for them.”*

#### **4. Physical violence and substance abuse**

Alaska Native Elders are at risk of physical abuse when their family members or other caregivers are engaged in substance abuse.

*“...some of children don’t want to help them but give them a hard time by drinking alcohol excessively or not listening to them...”*

*“...they were taught in living helping each others but then this liquor spoil the families and the family always been drinking and she was the one that told me that, beat her up when they’re drinking. And that thing started when they’re drinking.”*

*“Today the families they are all drinking. Raising hell and Cain. So the elders, sometimes they beat them up, throw him out. That’s because the alcohol is in charge.”*

#### **5. Financial exploitation of the elderly**

Financial abuse of Alaska Native elderly was the most frequently mentioned form of abuse reported by the respondents. Family members may take advantage of the elderly who depend upon the young generation to care for them. Elders are at risk for financial abuse at the hands of those in control of their finances.

The poverty rates among Alaska Native families could be a contributing factor in the financial exploitation of Alaska Native elderly. Half of Alaska Native families have incomes below \$30,000. In rural areas, where Natives make up 60% of the population, income is especially low. Rural areas also have a higher cost of living than urban areas. Alaska Native poverty rates are at 20% compared to 7% for non-Natives<sup>11</sup>. For some families, the elder’s social security check is the only source of income.

*“...taking advantage of them...elders say that the only time that the grandkids come is when they know my social security check is here.”*

*“...the time some of the families start changing. You know, some of the families’ children start depending on their folks to living there with them.”*

*“Money-wise I used to see kids take their parents’ money just for their own use and they’d have to do without, not a whole bunch cause it’s a small town. I’ve seen it happen, take their social security check because a lot of them didn’t speak English, so sign it with X and they’d keep part of it without asking. I saw it a couple of times.”*

#### **G. Disruption of the Cycle of Respect**

The cycle of respect has been disrupted due to historical trauma, rapid acculturation, and present day trauma. Due to colonialism, Alaska Natives were forced to give up everything that

<sup>11</sup> Poverty rate statistics for Alaska Natives were retrieved from the Alaska Federation of Natives website on October 25, 2005 at: <http://www.nativefederation.org/ance/purpose.php>





identified them with their culture. The traditional structures, languages, ceremonies, spiritual beliefs, and values were systematically dismantled and replaced by Euro-American social, political, economic, religious, language, and justice systems. Droby (2000) stated that the process of devaluing the Native identity has oppressed the heart, soul, and spirit. A disruption of positive Native self-concept has led to alcohol abuse, domestic violence, depression, and suicide as attempts to take control of the turmoil of a sabotaged, defeated, shamed, and oppressed self (Droby, 2000). Richards & Morgan (1991) stated that extreme forms of stress can negatively impact the Alaska Native's mental health.

According to Soule (1987), when the traditional culture came into contact with the Euro-American culture, the harmony of the traditional culture was disturbed. This damaged the Alaska Natives' self concept, and many began to have difficulty believing in themselves and their abilities. Alaska Natives are struggling to connect to the new culture, and their life may lack meaning and may not feel rewarding. In order to feel good about themselves, people are driven to connect with others. They need to feel they have power over their lives and need to have a sense of identity, belonging, power, and meaning (Soule, 1987). When the traditional values of Alaska Natives came into conflict with the new ways of life, Alaska Natives may keep their conflicted feelings inside, which creates stress and tension. Alaska Natives may experience a feeling of isolation, helplessness, and failure (Soule, 1987).

Hines (1978) reported that, "The older Alaskan Natives...have probably been subjected to one of the most extreme transitions of any generation in history without leaving their Native habitat or state."

**1. "Spiritual sickness" is transmitted between the generations**

Elders voiced concern that there is a "spiritual sickness" related to the history of Alaska Natives which is being transmitted from one generation to the next.

*"I think we would do well if we would ask ourselves in introspection about why we treat the elders that way we do. If it's negative and abusive, It's because there's a legacy of spiritual sickness that's been transferred from generation to generation and the elders understand that. That legacy we have to make the decision to stop with our generation. To the extent that we don't, the next generation is going to suffer that legacy and they're gonna go through their stuff."*

Due to historical trauma and rapid acculturation, the Native ways of knowing have been challenged and sometimes weakened. There is a direct link between the cultural breakdown and the process of colonization and rapid acculturation.

*"...lots of conflicts while trying to transition to the Western..."*

The traditional lifestyle, structures, and belief systems which helped Alaska Native people maintain a balance between the mind, body, and spirit have been challenged and weakened. There has been a loss of ceremonies, songs, dances, kinships relationships, and healing systems. The balance and harmony with the natural world has been compromised.

*"...there was a lot of conflict in what and how people believed in and lived...one of the most dramatic changes was a cash economy from a traditional lifestyle...they discovered they had a lot of time on their hands; stove oil and diesel were now*





*handy...didn't chop so much wood anymore. The canneries introduced alcohol to them as they had money. So that's what they did with their free time."*

## **2. Matters of the spirit have been diminished**

Due to colonialism, the understanding of the matters of the spirit has been weakened, underutilized, and unacknowledged.

*"...Right after the first contact of non-Native people with Native people, there was a diminishing of understanding of spirit..."*

## **3. Loss of language has diminished the connection between Elders and youth**

Loss of language has impacted the harmony and connection between Elders and the youth. Elders reported in 2004 that the loss of language is connected with the loss of culture, identity, and direction in life. Without the knowledge of their language, the learning process is altered and there is a disconnection between the youth and Elders today.

*"...forbidden to speak their language...severely punished by school superiors..."*

One Elder reflects on her decision not to teach her language to her children. She seems to regret her decision, yet she made the decision with the intent of helping them have a better life.

*"Today, I realize I have made a big mistake by not talking to my children in Cup'ik but only in English all the time. This was my mistake. I wanted them to be able to converse well in English so that they could have good jobs...My father did not care much for school and my having to hide and read perhaps affected the way I decided the fate of my children's speaking in English rather than Cup'ik. I wanted my children to be competent in English speaking..."*

## **4. Traditional spiritual beliefs were lost or went underground**

Because missionaries often misunderstood the spiritual practices of Alaska Natives, the practices became taboo. The practices that survived during this time period often went underground.

*"...When the missionaries came up, my father become a Christian...they do the Eskimo dancing there...used to go across and watch when they were doing that. They catch the time they were still doing this, shaman. And while they were dancing, a man they see through the wood, there was a little tiny hole, it go through and ever since then it wasn't good to become Christian to watch. So that's why our family never teach us all that, just to go to church."*

*"Yah, it was more like underground. The churches had some say about it. But we began to realize that they could no longer stop us from potlatches and so on. We discovered somehow the church system lost their divine power and authority. They can't stop us. Even to this day..."*





## 5. Aleut people negatively impacted by historical trauma

Aleut Elders have been profoundly impacted by colonialism and historical trauma. Many experienced evacuation and relocation. When they were returned, they discovered their community was devastated by the military's destruction.

*"...They didn't prepare for us. They just, the Navy came one day, you know. They said they bombed Dutch Harbor and the Japanese captured Atka...Then they chased us out of the village cause they were afraid the Japanese would bomb the village. While we were in the camps they burned the village...The Navy burned the village..."*

## H. Alaska Natives Live in Two Worlds

Today, Alaska Natives live in two worlds, which can create both opportunities and difficulties. When Alaska Natives leave their community of origin, they experience delay related to acceptance back into the community.

*"...I went back home to Atka, like I said, in 81 to live...But I wasn't really accepted. It took me a good two years to fit back into the community..."*

Elders talked about needing to respect the modern government, Western education, and written communication, which has moved from the oral tradition.

*"...But we're in the modern world; we have to also respect our government. The education today is very important and the paperwork is very important."*

Biculturalism causes problems with identity. Gaining acceptance in both cultures can be challenging.

*"...Back then it was very hard 'cause the Indians didn't want to do anything with me cause I was white, and the whites didn't want anything to do with me; half and half. Course it doesn't matter any more now a days with the intermarriages but it hurt when you're a kid. It wasn't my fault! I was born that way but that's how I was treated. Maybe that's why I'm nice to everybody."*

Alaska Natives who move from rural areas into urban settings need help adjusting.

*"...the village elders never live in the apartment, stop sign, so you instruct them when they come into town. You have to watch the light--when it's green, it's okay to go, when it's red, stop, or when it's yellow, prepare to stop. That's why when the villagers come into town they rent a car and in the villages you never see any restaurants. So you gotta direct them, tell them."*

The respect for Elders, plants, animals, and the earth are reinforced through rituals and ceremonies, which help to bring us back to harmony. From the Native perspective, ritual and ceremony are connected with respect for the earth, plants, animal, and people and help increase the likelihood that individuals will quickly bounce back from difficulties; yet, Western Christian doctrine views them as pagan rituals and cult activity.

*"The White man call them cult, but we call them ritual."*





*“...respect the elders like an anchor line on a boat. It keeps the boat safe; prevents from drifting aimlessly all over the place.”*

*-Yup'ik Elder, 2005*

## **IV. Discussion**

The discussion section discusses the thematic analysis in light of pertinent literature and details recommendations for interviewing Elders, responses to abuse of the elderly, and healing from historical trauma.

### **A. Research interview protocols with Elders**

It is vital to develop interview procedures for engaging Alaska Native Elders in research that are respectful of Native protocols. The National Indian Council on Aging (2004) stated that a factor leading to resistance to research is a lack of culturally sensitive and appropriate methods of data collection. The NRC project team has two years of experience interviewing Elders. In the process, we have had many opportunities to gain valuable knowledge and to reflect on the experience. The recommendations for research protocols with Elders are based upon a combination of pertinent literature and direct experience interviewing Elders.

#### **1. Need research topics on the strengths of Alaska Natives**

The research team is recommending that researchers consider the option of exploring the positive aspects of Alaska Native people, cultural strengths, and protective factors. Alaska Native people have been saturated with research projects that have focused on the problems they are facing. A plethora of studies have clearly defined the substance abuse, physical health, mental health, and family and social problems facing Alaska Native people. On the other hand, there have been very few studies that highlight the resilience, protective factors, strengths, and positive adaptation of Alaska Native people.<sup>12</sup>

#### **2. Maintain a positive attitude with Elders**

When spending time with Elders, it is important to have a positive attitude. Elders are especially sensitive to our energy, whether it is positive or negative. As researchers who go into their homes, we need to take time to relax, focus, and balance ourselves prior to interviewing Elders, as a form of respect.

#### **3. Listen more than talk**

While research benefits from sticking to the interview questions as a guideline, at the same time, when interviewing Elders, we need to avoid interjecting and interrupting their train of thought. Researchers need to support what Elders are saying. Elders have a culturally specific cadence in their speech which may require the researcher to adjust and slow down. Hamilton-

<sup>12</sup> UAF (2004) *The People Awakening Project: Discovering Alaska Native Pathways to Sobriety* is an example of a study which focused upon the strengths of the Alaska Native community.





Canelos (1986) recommended that the interviewer listen more than talk, giving the Elder total attention and liberal time.

#### **4. Take time with the Elder**

Rushing the interview will only lead to the Elder withdrawing instead of opening up. The conflicting energy shuts down the interview before it begins. We need to slow down and become a calming presence, which will prompt the Elders to open up to the interview questions. It is vital to allow Elders ample time to express themselves without interruptions. The Elder will appreciate and value the development of the relational connection.

Feldman (1980) reported that when interviewing Alaska Native Elders:

*“There can be an unconscious reluctance on the part of researchers to simply spend time with those they wish to study outside of ‘data gathering’ sessions. This reluctance is easily noticed by the study group and can create unwillingness when an interview session is requested.”*

Hamilton-Canelos (1986) traveled to communities in rural Alaska to conduct research with Elders and recommended taking three days to establish trust when interviewing Elders. The first visit is introductory, to explain the purpose of the project; the second visit is used to gather data; and the third visit is used to follow up and answer questions.

#### **5. Present the Elder with a gift**

The project team found that when interviewing Elders it is respectful to bring a small gift, such as a jar of jam or salmon. If the interviewer feels comfortable, offering the small gift will communicate respect to the Elder.

#### **6. Respect Native protocols**

When interviewing Elders, it is vital to communicate respect for Native protocols, values, and ways of life. If the Elder does not feel respected, he/she will give superficial information. We can offer ourselves to be corrected, and ask the Elders to teach us how to respect them properly. Hamilton-Canelos (1986) explained that when interviewing Elders, it is important to learn the local protocols for body and verbal language. We can ask the Elder what are the appropriate Native protocols in the situation. Or, if the Elder is not comfortable explaining the protocols, he/she might refer the researcher to someone who can teach the protocols.

#### **7. Allow Elders to speak in their Native language**

On every occasion possible, the Elder must be allowed to speak in his/her Native language. The team found that, when English was the second language, the Elders spoke more richly and deeply in their Native tongue than if they spoke in English. These Elders may have found it difficult to detail concepts and give the depth to their answers using English words. Even if the interviewer doesn't understand the language, the Elder should be encouraged to express the information in his/her language. The interview recording can be translated at a later date if a translator is not available at the time of the interview. If possible, hire linguists to translate.





## 8. Take frequent breaks

Craig (1986) reminds us to take frequent breaks when interviewing Elders. Due to physical needs of Elders, researchers need to remember to allow for extra time for interviewing the population.

## 9. Check for accuracy

Based upon the theme of the research, researchers need to paraphrase what they are hearing when interviewing Elders, to check for accuracy. When analyzing the data, check for accuracy with the Elders. When gathering culturally sensitive material from Elders, engaging cultural consultants from each cultural region to provide guidance in understanding the concepts, cultural beliefs, historical events, oral stories, terminology and rituals can be valuable. The cultural consultants can be selected for their advanced knowledge of cultural ways, ability to speak their Native language, and their connection to the Elder wisdom. When the final draft of the report is developed, the consultants can be contacted once again to verify the accuracy of the analysis.

### B. Cultural holocaust

Disrespect of the elderly can be, in part, explained by focusing on the history of Alaska Natives. A holocaust is defined as an act of great destruction and loss of life. The dictionary defines culture as the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought<sup>13</sup>. The research team joined the two concepts and defined “cultural holocaust” as the attempt to eliminate and acculturate the culture of Alaska Natives. A common slogan of this time in American history was “Kill the Indian but save the man” which resonated with the dominant culture’s policy of assimilation. The literature defines this experience as cultural genocide, historical trauma, and multigenerational grief.

During the colonization of Alaska, a loss of cultural transmission as a whole occurred (Richards & Morgan, 1991). Alaska Natives have experienced a history of cultural losses, such as loss of language, extended families, subsistence lands, spiritual beliefs, and parenting of their children. They have experienced a history in which the basic foundation of the social life that bonds their culture and communities together has been damaged. The holocaust that the tribes of Alaska Native peoples experienced resulted in trauma that has been handed down to the next generations. The cultural holocaust has affected the psychology of Alaska Native cultures, communities, families, and individuals across generations (Graves, 2004).

Many believe that the soul and the psyche of generations of Alaska Native peoples have inherited the pain, loss, and frustration of their ancestors. As a result of loss of cultural patterns, identities, relationships, and unresolved massive psychic traumas, many Alaska Native people are experiencing chronic social problems today (Graves, 2004). The culture was severely damaged and Alaska Native people have endured multifaceted cultural and historical distress, which has been associated with many chronic social problems such as substance abuse, suicide, family disruption, community and interpersonal violence, and mental health issues (Graves, 2004). Bigfoot (2000) stated that Native families have a collective history of trauma and abuse. This trauma and abuse can be connected to the abuse of the elderly. The history contributes to a higher proportion of disrespect among Alaska Natives.

<sup>13</sup> Retrieved on October 25, 2005 from: <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=culture>





Peter (1988) studied the loss of context which gave meaning to the lives of the Gwitchin Athabascan people of Alaska. Peter stated that there is a human response to the processes of disruptive social change. There is an initial numbness, confusion, and despair when people are uprooted from the context that gives meaning to their lives. The loss of context impairs the ability to attach meaning to events and the ability to heal from the experience. The loss of context feels threatening and, unless the individual learns to understand the situation and cope with it, he/she will experience a sense of helplessness with regards to the future. A disorientation of purpose will result in anxiety and despair.

### **C. Healing from the Cultural Holocaust**

Healing from the cultural holocaust, rapid acculturation, and present day trauma can be enhanced by focusing upon the cultural strengths of Alaska Natives. The cultural holocaust can begin to heal by relying upon the cultural resilience, ceremonies, and rituals. Historical and present day trauma, Elder abuse, suicide, substance abuse, and violence can be prevented and/or decreased by relying upon the cultural strengths.

Despite the rapid changes and loss of culture, many Alaska Natives are in the process of regaining their strength. With the support and guidance from the Elders, many communities are actively in the process of bringing the ancestral wisdom into the modern world. An Elder described this as:

*“...Carrying on the message of the drum...to carry the strength of the past unto the trail to the future...”*

Alaska Natives are in process of bringing the wisdom of the old along with the knowledge of the new. Many communities are actively strengthening the connection between youth and Elders, returning Elders to their role as leaders and following the rhythm of nature.

Whitehat (1995) discussed the reemergence of Native languages and traditional values in the past 20 years. Elders are the keepers of the languages and traditions vital to the survival of the Native cultures. There is an urgent and critical need to connect the youth with the Elders. Pingayak (1976) stated that if Alaska Natives respect the Elders, they will have a long, prosperous life. A greater part of the youth today is not attached to the wisdom of the Elders and lack respect for the ancestral knowledge. Whitehat reminds us that it is the Indian (Native) people who need to train the children to approach the Elders, because nobody is going to help with this situation. He reminds us that the children are starving for knowledge, discipline, and attention.

Cashin (2000) stated that in order to heal from historical trauma, the first step is to break the silence. Native people have been living with the group who conquered them, and at the same time are attempting to heal from the genocidal trauma. Western healing methods do not address this aspect of healing. Group healing, rather than individual methods, works better for Native people. In Cashin’s study, the healers stated that it was not a time for intercultural healing. Ceremonies at sacred sites such as internment camps, reservation sites, and places where first contact with the Europeans occurred will set the healing process in motion. Ceremonies on the land will help to create harmony and balance between the land and the people.





Peter (1988) provided three principles for assisting people in reconstructing a meaningful system after a severe loss experience:

- 1) The process of reformation will entail conflict. Allow expression of anger, frustration, and hostility.
- 2) Stage of differentiation: groups who have experienced loss will need to organize their own patterns on their own terms without outsider interference.
- 3) Time is needed. De-colonization is a time when structure of meaning is developing within people and connect them to the land.

### 1. Cultural resilience

The culture of Alaska Natives can be recognized and accepted as source of power and protection. The cultural identity which includes the values, spirituality, the tradition of listening, ceremonies and rituals, and respect for the natural world and elders can be utilized as essential protective strategies for Alaska Natives (HeavyRunner & Morris, 1997). Engaging the cultural identity of Alaska Native people is a component of decreasing the effects of the cultural holocaust. HeavyRunner and Morris (1997) explained that Native people who have a cultural identity can serve as a source of strength. Researchers, educators, and service providers need to understand that Alaska Native cultural identity can provide protection and support resilience among Native communities, children, adults, families, and the elderly. Baldrige (1995) reported that there are many gaps in providing culturally sensitive services to Native elderly. The cultural gap in service provision to the elderly hinders full use of the services; therefore, incorporating cultural knowledge and values into the services will positively impact the gaps in services.

Programs and services that are designed for Alaska Native people can build upon the connection to the natural world, the traditional role of Elders, and the role of extended family members. Connections to the natural environment and healing through listening, participation, and silence can be utilized as protective factors that foster resilience for Alaska Natives. When values and beliefs are recognized and accepted, the natural resilience of Alaska Natives will be cultivated and augmented (HeavyRunner & Morris, 1997). The innate, cultural protective factors can be made the central philosophy of programs and services. An Aleut Elder explained it in the following manner:

*“So the healing programs that are needed in our Community Wellness Programs I think has to be modified from the Western approaches to the Native approaches about how to become a real human being and use those teachings, then I think the elders would started being treated well.”*

Graves (2004) studied a group of Alaska Native men and found that a strong reliance upon cultural values served as a protective factor against chronic social problems, reducing the probability of a negative outcome and strengthening adaptation. The men talked about the culturally defined values, which helped them adapt to the rapid societal changes and chronic social problems.

The Alaska Native Knowledge Network listed ten values that are common to all of the cultural groups in Alaska: 1) respect others, 2) share what you have, 3) know who you are, 4) accept what life brings, 5) have patience, 6) live carefully, 7) take care of others, 8) honor your Elders, 9) pray for guidance, and 10) see connections. These values can provide guidance for





developing prevention and treatment programs. Alaska Natives believe that people are born with a natural capacity for well-being and need to recognize when they are out of balance with their physical, mental, or emotional self, or with their connection to the natural world. The cultural resiliency of Alaska Natives is recognized, accepted, engaged, and strengthened by the “tradition of listening,” or the oral tradition.

**2. The tradition of listening: a powerful preventative apparatus**

Cultural strength or resilience of Alaska Natives can be fostered by the tradition of listening, or the oral tradition. The stories can be protective because they convey culturally specific high expectations, caring, support, and opportunities for participation. As the participants listen, they learn patience and respect (HeavyRunner & Morris, 1997). Pingayak (1976) stated that we need to teach Alaska Natives to listen with their hearts and their minds, not just their ears.

The tradition of listening is connected with personal and community stability. Harmony can be sustained through actively incorporating the wisdom of the past into action today. The ancient principles related to the tradition of listening have relevancy today, despite the process of rapid acculturation and loss of culture.

The structure of the tradition of listening is holistic, balanced, and interconnected. It involves a holistic approach, whereby interdependence and interconnectedness among members of the community is highly valued. Elders hold a central role within the Alaska Native listening model. Pingayak (1976) stated that Elders hold the knowledge of the way of life and culture and have the responsibility to maintain and pass the knowledge to the next generation. The Elders are challenged by sources that could destroy the culture, but, when they stand together and others follow and support them, the cultural ways will be protected. Knowing body language and trusting intuition are essential components of the oral tradition and can serve as protective factors. Training begins before birth when the voice has a positive impact on the fetus, and occurs during sleep when stories and songs are whispered into the ear of a sleeping child.

There is a fundamental connection between the tradition of listening and the capacity to accept and express respect for the self and others. When one lacks the ability to listen from the Alaska Native paradigm, disrespect is born. The cycle of respect involves a three step process. First, the person must feel loved and honored by others. Next, the individual recognizes and accepts his/her intrinsic value internally. 3) Finally, others recognize the individual’s capacity to love and honor. Along with accepting his/her value, the individual will come to see the value of all creation, including the natural world.

Most of the cultural consultants and respondents from placed the tradition of listening as the number one value for Alaska Native tribes. Richards & Morgan (1991) included this Elder quote in their manuscript:

*“We need to know our past to know where we’re going. Our people have always done that. They have always told stories of the past to understand where they were today. That the trails they have gone down in the past will help them to know the trails they will go in the future.”*

Lindahll (2002) recommends that silence, presence, and openness are ways of fostering the tradition of listening. If we practice silence we allow ourselves an opportunity to slow down and consider what we are hearing. Hesselbein (2003) stated that we need to remember that





listening involves a connection that is circular. According to the author, we need to also listen to the whispers of our bodies, our heart, and our lives. We can become more aware of our illnesses, relationships with others, and our spirit.

Becker (1998) reported that American Indian traditional ways are learned experientially, through observation, listening, and doing. The traditions are taught through practice, whereby parents teach by example. Storytelling is another way to learn about traditional ways. Childhood is not the only time to learn from the story; rather, learning is a life-long process.

### 3. Ceremonies and rituals

Spirituality is a critical part of healing from the cultural holocaust experienced by Alaska Native people. Ceremonies and rituals, such as the naming tradition, potlatch partners, and rites of passage, can be used to begin the healing process.

In order prevent abuse of elders, as well as suicide, substance, child abuse, and violence within Alaska Native communities, ceremonies, rituals, and rites of passage throughout life serve as protective factors that enhance cultural resilience. Ceremonies and rituals are enacted to build the mindset of respect for others, especially Elders. The ceremonies and rituals can be utilized as a response to the needs defined by Alaska Native leaders and Elders. The following is a list of rituals and ceremonies; it is not an exhaustive list, but serves to highlight just a few<sup>14</sup>.

#### a. Naming custom

The custom of naming can shield an individual from harm and be therapeutic for families and communities. Null (1996) writes that Native American names are earned and can provide for protection and healing. Sometimes the name bestows certain powers and responsibilities, or names are passed down within families and communities. An individual can be renamed as he/she evolves and changes.

Hamilton-Cannelos (1986) stated that, in the Yup'ik tradition, a newborn infant is given the Yup'ik name of the last person to die. It is believed that the baby takes on the essence of the namesake, and the community members will then converse about the namesake in front of the infant. It is not unusual for relatives of the deceased to spend hours relating the events that took place involving the namesake. Some even mimic the speech and mannerisms of the deceased. The connection between the namesake and the child is solidified and the tie between the two is established. The child takes on the essence and role of the namesake. The relationship can involve giving presents and doing favors for the namesake's relatives. This is a reciprocal process by which relatives of the namesake will heal their grief and unresolved wounds, which benefits the family and community. The naming custom provides protection for the child because no one would abuse or neglect their beloved departed (Hamilton-Cannelos, 1986).

#### b. Smudging

Smudging is a common practice for Natives and is used to cleanse energy. The smoke is seen as carrying the thoughts and prayers. Negative energy that is being held inside can be released and replaced with a sense of peace and purification.

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<sup>14</sup> Other ceremonies, rituals, and cultural systems may include: grieving ceremonies, medicine lodges, counsel of elders, family support systems, wailing songs, belief systems about the journey of life, tea partners, etc.





### c. Potlatch partners

The Potlatch Partners ceremony of the Athabascan tribe is one of the several profound celebrations that instilled a mindset of respect for mankind and creation at an early age. A family of a young child picks a partner, typically someone not related to the family. This ceremony was in place long before Christianity and the god-mother and god-father practices. The tenets of the potlatch partners advanced the saying that it takes a whole village to raise a child.

A person had one or more partners for life, usually of the opposite gender. The women in the village would honor the men for three days with native dancing, sharing of food, and gift-giving. The following year or so the men would reciprocate or “pay back” the women.

Potlatch partners not only celebrated relationships within the community, but strict Native protocol was essential when invitations carried by two male runners were extended to outlying villages. Sharing, caring, and humor were important values ingrained by these celebrations throughout one’s life. But, above all, respect was the most important traditional value that strengthened relationships for the individuals, families, and communities.<sup>15</sup>

### d. Rites of passage for both genders

The rites of passage for both genders need to be reinstated. The clearly defined roles and responsibilities will help to protect and guide the youth of today. Elders and Native leaders need to decide if the problems facing Alaska Native youth could be resolved by incorporating some form of these practices. In the past, young men were taught by their Elders, uncles, and fathers. Pingayak (1976) stated that education was held in the *qaygiq* (men’s house) and in the homes of people in the community. The *qaygiq* and the *kashim* were utilized as social and spiritual centers. Ceremonies, storytelling, and festivals were held in these houses. In the past, men lived in the *kashim* or *qaygiq* apart from the women. During the day, the men danced, composed songs, and planned their winter hunts.

*“If you don’t have your values, you are at the mercy of the wind and tides.”<sup>16</sup>*

Richards & Morgan (1991) included this Elder quote:

*“To keep the spirits up – we had a big Kashim when I was young in Napaimute and we did lots of dancing. People from other villages were often invited and gifts were exchanged.”*

## 4. A Yup’ik perspective: positive affirmation

The following section was provided by Kanaqlak (Dr. George P. Charles).<sup>17</sup>

Our survival as a distinct First Nations people lies within the spiritual universe of our esteemed Alaska Native Elders. My Yuk Elders, the wisdom keepers, remind us that the key to our survival lies within the collective memories of our existing elders. The elders have said through the ages past that the essence of who we are dwells within us all and that we only need to listen

<sup>15</sup> Project team member, Pat Frank, provided the section Potlatch Partners.

<sup>16</sup> Aron Booth from Metlakatla

<sup>17</sup> *The Voices of Our Elders: The Key to Our Survival*, by Kanaqlak (George P. Charles), Ph.D., Yuk, Director of the National Resource Center for American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian Elders.





to the inner voice that eventually comes to us all. *Ellam Yua* (Raven), the creator of the Yuk universe, gave us all the capacity to think, learn, remember, and discern the knowledge that comes to us in many ways and in many forms. We were created as being part of the universe created by Raven. All of Raven’s creations are interconnected, interrelated, and therefore dependant on each other.

One such simple example iterated for eons of time by our Yuk elders is the idea of positive affirmation. We all are creators. We all have a sphere of influence. We can do anything that we want, knowing that there are consequences to the choices that we make or the things that we create. Some of what we chose to create is at times positive with positive consequences, and at other times negative with negative consequences. What we create or think of affects our collective universe and our collective spiritual essence both good or bad. Since all of Raven’s creations are interconnected and interrelated, our individual actions or thoughts affect the whole.

It is therefore imperative that we create or think in positive terms. In some of my readings that deal with the human condition or human behavior, the word “dysfunction” is used, meaning that certain people are dysfunctional. I would much rather use the term “distraction.” The Yuk have been distracted from their true nature by outside elements foreign to what we were before contact. We were distracted to think that the Euro-American culture was superior to our own. In that distraction from our original essence, we bought into the idea that we were dysfunctional. Dysfunction to me has negative connotations. Distraction on the other hand has an element that leads to the positive. When we are not distracted we once again regain a clearer healthier vision of who we are.

In the Yuk paradigm, the elders refer to *Ellam linga*, the Eye of Awareness, that we have a clear vision, a healthy vision of who we are. We had a healthy image of ourselves. Through our distraction by having made negative choices, our Eye of Awareness can begin to close, sometimes partially, sometimes completely. A kind of cultural distraction emerged from the cultural clash we experienced from contact with the Euro-Americans. As everyone knows, the acculturation and assimilation process instigated by the Euro-Americans was an attempt to re-create the First Nations people in their own image. A negative imagery developed within us and we were lead to believe the Euro-American culture was superior to our original essence. Our healthier elders tell us that we can regain our Eye of Awareness, to once again become a healthy human being in our own terms defined by ourselves. With an open Eye of Awareness we can begin to live healthy and happier lives as our ancestors did before contact. The Yuk elders also remind us not to judge others. We can learn to judge ourselves in ways that lead to opening the original *Ellam linga* that we had when we were created by *Ellam Yua*. Our elders also state that there is “healing through remembrance.” We are stronger and healthier together when we help each other to regain our Eye of Awareness.

*Ciulanka Quyavikanka* (My first ones, I am thankful to them), the true and only authors of this short paper. I am but a transmitter of what they have remembered. The real credit goes to them. *TUA'INGRITUQ...* (THIS IS NOT THE END)...

**D. Elder abuse**

According to the American Indian Policy Center (1995) there is very little literature related to the struggles and needs of Elders, with elder abuse being one of those areas. This project begins to shed light upon the origin of abuse or disrespect of the elderly from a cultural perspective.





Traditionally, Alaska Native people had systems in place to restore justice, which were mechanisms for handling the absence of respect. These mechanisms need to be recognized, accepted, and reinstated by Native leaders and Elders. The system of justice involves traditional teachings, in particular maintenance of balance and harmony, and respect for others and the natural world (Gray & Lauderdale, 2005).





## V. Data Limitations

The respondents in this study were highly educated, bi-cultural, and leaders in their communities. There are other Elders who are not widely recognized, yet who maintain cultural knowledge. However, it is very expensive to travel to rural areas of the state and many traditional people are not comfortable speaking on the telephone.

The findings are reflective of those interviewed and cannot be generalized to all Alaska Native Elders.

While the team members were invested in the accuracy and integrity of the report, their background, ethnicity, and worldview hold the potential to bias the results.



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“...Sometimes it’s (Alaska Native Ways of Knowing) a gentler approach that leads to a solution faster than the Western way.”

-Tlingit Elder, 2005

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