

# ROOTS OF RESILIENCE:

## TRANSFORMATIONS OF IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY IN INDIGENOUS MENTAL HEALTH

### Overview

Roots of Resilience is a collaboration between researchers in Canada and New Zealand which examines the factors that promote resilience in mental health among Indigenous people across the lifespan. We view resilience as a dynamic process of social and psychological adaptation to life challenges. As such, resilience is a characteristic both of individuals and communities, revealed as a positive outcome in the face of stresses and challenges. Resilience at individual, family, and community levels interacts with larger social, historical and cultural factors to enable some individuals and communities to do well despite adversity.

The Roots of Resilience study is funded by the Institute of Aboriginal Peoples' Health (IAPH) of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) and the Health Research Council of New Zealand under the International Collaborative Indigenous Health Research Partnership on Resilience (ICIHRP) program.

### Objectives

The main objectives of this project are to:

- Rethink resilience from Indigenous and interdisciplinary perspectives.
- Share existing models and methods for research on resilience and assist in their refinement.
- Integrate Indigenous methods and ways of knowing into the research design and the translation of research findings into policy and practice.
- Collect individual life narratives and community level data to identify what is distinctive about resilience among Indigenous peoples.
- Design and carry out cross-national comparative studies to identify the role of specific social and cultural factors in resilience.

### Researchers

**Program Lead Investigator:** Laurence J. Kirmayer MD, FRCPC, James McGill Professor and Director of the Division of Social and Transcultural Psychiatry, Department of Psychiatry, McGill University.

**Canada Lead Investigator:** Dr. Roderick McCormick, a Mohawk Psychologist and Associate Professor in the Counseling Psychology program at the University of British Columbia.

**New Zealand Lead Investigator:** Dr. Pamela Bennett, Senior Lecturer in the Division of Maori and Pacific Island Health, Faculty of Medicine, University of Auckland.

#### Canada Investigators:

Dr. Jacob Burack, McGill University  
Dr. Michael Chandler, University of British Columbia  
Dr. Christopher Lalonde, University of Victoria  
Dr. Caroline Tait, University of Saskatchewan  
Dr. Cornelia Wieman, University of Toronto  
Dr. Phyllis Zelkowitz, Institute of Community & Family Psychiatry, Jewish General Hospital

#### New Zealand Investigators:

Colin Mantell, University of Auckland  
Jane McKendrick, University of Auckland

#### Fellows and Students

The project team also include students, postdoctoral research fellows, and research assistants from Canada and New Zealand.



### Roots of Resilience Projects

#### Project 1: Stories of resilience, healing and transformation

**Investigator:** Dr. Laurence Kirmayer, McGill University

The aim of the Stories of Resilience project is to collect stories that define resilience from Aboriginal perspectives and to use these narratives to identify factors that promote resilience among individuals and communities. The project is participatory and we work closely with community research councils, advisory boards and community researchers. The stories collected will be studied to identify themes of resilience, healing, recovery, and transformation from Aboriginal perspectives, and through discussions with community members, identify potential interventions and initiatives that can facilitate resilience and healing. We will prepare a community-specific report for each community that we work with and hold community forums to present the results of the research to participating communities. We will also compare different communities to identify common aspects of resilience and aspects that are unique to specific cultural traditions or social contexts. Nations currently involved include Mi'kmaq of Eskasoni (Nova Scotia), Kanien'kehá:ka/Mohawks of Kahnawá:ke (Quebec), Crees of Iiyiyuuschi (James Bay, Quebec), Gwa'Sala-Nakwaxda'xw of Fort Rupert (British Columbia).

#### Project 2: Resilience, citizenship, and identity

**Investigator:** Dr. Caroline Tait, University of Saskatchewan

This project examines the concept of resilience as it applies to questions of citizenship and identity in an urban Indigenous community. The idea for this study emerged out of a research partnership between the Saskatoon Indian and Métis Friendship Centre and Dr. Caroline Tait. The study uses in-depth interviews, life histories, participant observation, photographic and video recording to examine the ways in which the urban Indigenous population of Saskatoon claim citizenship in the broader urban milieu despite historical and contemporary adversity that stigmatizes, marginalizes, and marks them as "Other." The central research question is to understand the ways in which the urban Indigenous community of Saskatoon has responded to and resisted identities imposed upon them by the dominant society, as well as the ways they reclaim, create, and sustain positive Indigenous identities and citizenship.

#### Project 3: Determinants of school performance and outcome

**Investigator:** Dr. Jake Burack, McGill University

This project by the McGill Youth Study Team (MYST), headed by Dr. Jake Burack of the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology at McGill University, began 10 years ago when the school administrators of the Jimmy Sandy Memorial School in Kawawachikamach (Quebec) expressed concerns about low rates of school completion, high rates of behaviour problems and increasing rates of drug use among their students. To address the questions posed by the community, a group of researchers consulting to the schools collect data on a variety of aspects of the students' lives, including relationships with their parents, teachers and friends; identification with cultural heritage; academic performance; emotional and behavioral adjustment; participation in high-risk behaviors; and self-identity. In addition, the teachers provide insight about the students' performance and behaviors in the school setting. The MYST team present their research results to the administrators at the school, as well as to members of the Band Council to ensure that the project continues to meet the community's specific research needs.

#### Project 4: Community level factors in youth resilience

**Investigators:**

Dr. Michael Chandler, University of British Columbia  
Dr. Chris Lalonde, University of Victoria

This project grows out of an ongoing program of research focused on the ways in which children, adolescents and whole communities achieve a sense of personal or cultural persistence in the face of inevitable change. This earlier work has shown links between low rates of suicidal and other self-destructive behaviors among adolescents and young adults, and the maintenance of "cultural continuity" (i.e., connections to a traditional past and local control of future community prospects). This project involves three distinct steps: 1) Work with partners in New Zealand to identify community-level variability in several health-related outcome variables including Indigenous youth suicide, accidents and school performance, and the range of culturally relevant and practically available community level variables that may serve as proxy measures of cultural continuity and other potential resilience factors; 2) Using the data to map cross-community variability in cultural continuity that distinguish communities with high versus low or absent rates of youth suicide, school dropout rates, and other markers of community wellbeing. These factors will then be interpreted in consultation with scholars and partners knowledgeable about the history and dynamics of the communities; and 3) In collaboration with clinicians, public health experts, and indigenous policy makers, the results of the analyses will be used to develop models of resilience at community levels, and to identify potential interventions to foster resilience in communities.

#### Project 5: Alternative models for psychiatric assessment - relational models and resilience

**Investigators:**

Dr. Pamela Bennett, University of Auckland  
Dr. Laurence J. Kirmayer, McGill University

The goal of this project is to examine critically the diagnostic and assessment frameworks of psychiatry as applied to Indigenous health, in order to identify and develop ways of framing individual responses that better capture the nature of resilience, positive mental health, and both individual and collective resources. To do this, we will collect and analyze a series of case studies of psychiatric assessment and diagnosis where the conventional diagnosis is considered inadequate or misleading by Indigenous practitioners. We will examine alternative frameworks for interpreting responses to adversity that employ Indigenous concepts of relatedness, family and community function, and spirituality. Based on this work, we will develop training materials for mental health professionals to improve their cultural competence in Indigenous mental health.

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