

## Article

# “Then Who Are You?”: Young American Indian and Alaska Native Women Navigating Cultural Connectedness in Dating and Relationships

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**Abstract:** Despite disproportionately high rates of intimate partner violence among American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) women and associations between adolescent dating violence and partner violence in adulthood, little to no research has focused on dating and relationships among AI/AN adolescents. Using exploratory thematic analysis with focus group data ( $N = 16$ ), we explore this topic among a sample of young AI/AN women (ages 15–17). Results suggest that dating may enhance or inhibit connections to culture or tribal identity. Moreover, responsibility for sustaining cultural knowledge, practices, and lineage may influence choices of reproductive partners for Native women living within colonial structures of governance. The greatest threat in relationships were similar to those from settler colonialism—loss of culture and consequently, self. Promoting healthy relationships among this population should include cultural safety, identity, and involvement, as well as a focus on broader systems, including enrollment policies, that may influence these relationships. Supportive networks and mentorship related to identity and cultural involvement should be available for young AI/AN women. In response to this Special Issue’s call for work that offers creative approaches to conveying knowledge and disruptions to what are considered acceptable narrative approaches we offer illustrations as well as text.

**Keywords:** dating violence; Indigenous; prevention; cultural continuity; enrollment; identity; adolescents; youth

## 1. Introduction

Women’s roles in the health and wellbeing of tribal communities are well documented ([Anderson 2000](#); [Baskin 2020](#); [Mihehuah 2003](#); [Pesantubbee 1999](#)). Since pre-colonial times, American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN or Native<sup>1</sup>) women have sustained cultural knowledge and practices through their roles as givers of life, teachers of children, healers, political leaders and warriors. The health of tribal communities and the survivance of Native cultures depends upon the health of our women ([Walters et al. 2011](#); [Walters and Simoni 2002](#)). However, social, political, and historical forces—including settler colonialism, systemic racism, and patriarchal systems of governance—shape inequitable conditions that contribute to persistent burdens on the health and wellbeing of AI/AN women and girls.

<sup>1</sup> When referring more broadly to the population we use AI/AN, but we also use the term Native because unless referring to a specific tribe, that is a more common term. Native is also how we phrased the focus group questions and the term used by participants.

One such area of inequity is exposure to violence. Disproportionately high rates of intimate partner violence (IPV) have been well documented among AI/AN women (Rosay 2016; Figure 1). Notably, there has been little focus on prevention of teen dating violence (TDV) in this population, despite established relationships between TDV and IPV in the general population (Exner-Cortens et al. 2013; Gómez 2011; Figure 2). While limited, evidence suggests that AI/AN youth may be at higher risk for TDV (Hautala et al. 2017; Montana Office of Public Instruction 2015) than the general population (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2009; Coker et al. 2015; Howard et al. 2007). However, the existing evidence-base largely excludes data on the lived experiences of AI/AN youth.

Furthermore, research has largely overlooked how AI/AN youth approach dating and relationships. Few studies have focused on understanding adolescent conceptualizations of romantic relationships in their myriad forms. Even fewer explore these within the unique historical and contemporary context of AI/AN populations living within systems of settler colonialism. Consequently, there is a gap in our knowledge of what may be unique factors related to dating among AI/AN youth and how community connectedness and tribal identity influence perceptions and decisions about relationships among this population (Figure 3).

For example, most research has focused on identifying individual-level risk and protective factors for TDV perpetration and victimization, while overlooking the profound socializing role that families, schools and tribal or home communities and institutions play in influencing decisions around dating and relationships. This article aims to contribute to our knowledge of how AI/AN young women think about dating and relationships in the context of cultural connectedness and identity. We hope this exploratory work will further our knowledge in developing effective programs to promote healthy relationships and consequently prevent TDV among this population.



**Figure 1.** This image states that 4 out of 5 Native women experience violence in their lifetime and emphasizes the strengths of Native women. See Image Descriptions (I.D.) 1 in Appendix A.



**Figure 2.** A teenager is texting and the conversation indicates emotional and verbal abuse. Then there is an image of the woman as an adult in another abusive relationship. See I.D. 2 in Appendix A.



**Figure 3.** Hands from two different women hold a braid of sweetgrass representing where one may find unique protective factors among Native young women. See I.D. 3 in Appendix A.

### 1.1. Cultural Connectedness and Identity among AI/AN Adolescents

Cultural continuity and connectedness have been explored and expressed as a protective factor among Indigenous youth through identity, belonging, and connections to land, language and spiritual and cultural practices (see for example, [Chandler and Lalonde 2008](#); [Mohatt et al. 2011](#)). Cultural

engagement or identity has been demonstrated integral to youth resilience among Indigenous youth in Canada (Njeze et al. 2020). The Indigenous Connectedness Framework suggests that cultural connectedness is a key mechanism of Indigenous wellbeing that includes environmental, community, family, intergenerational and spiritual connectedness (Ullrich 2019). However, we have much to learn about how these concepts influence young AI/AN people's decisions about romantic relationships.

There is a wide variability among AI/AN populations with respect to citizenship, distinctions between reservation and urban populations, individual and collective identities, and knowledge and engagement of cultural practices and beliefs. What makes someone "Native"? There have been numerous attempts to measure cultural identities and degrees of connectedness to tribal identities or communities. In quantitative data, researchers have focused on measuring degrees of ethnic identity, individual attitudes about cultural groups, and cultural practices and activities (Galliher et al. 2011; Jones and Galliher 2007; Markstrom 2011; Whitbeck et al. 2002). Despite the difficulty in quantifying AI/AN identity and connectedness, the integration of culturally relevant content is a recommendation often made in the literature and among AI/AN communities (Schultz et al. 2016).

### *1.2. Citizenship within Settler Colonial Systems*

Legacies of settler colonialism and resulting contemporary and historical trauma can be seen in relationships, belonging, and identity. These legacies also impact formal systems of governance and terms of citizenship. Federally recognized tribes operate as sovereign nations within the United States. As such, tribes set terms for citizenship within their nations and these vary across tribes. Common requirements include lineal descent or a blood quantum minimum. In simple terms, lineal descent means that if one's relatives were or are enrolled in a tribe then they are eligible to enroll as well. A brief definition of blood quantum is that it is an individual's degree of "Indian blood". It is typically calculated by looking at an individual's relationship to original enrollees of a tribe and their documented blood quantum, often assuming those original enrollees had a full blood quantum (that they were "full blood" or had 100% Indian blood). Blood quantum remains a much discussed and sometimes controversial topic (Doerfler 2015; Jacobsen and Bowman 2019; Ratteree and Hill 2017; TallBear 2013). The fact remains that requirements for enrollment can affect an individual's identity and relationships. They ultimately decide whether or not a person (and their children) may become a citizen of a tribe and are directly influenced by biological relatives and lineage.

### *1.3. Present Study*

This exploratory work examines dating and relationships among a sample of young AI/AN women. The overall purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to explore how dating and relationships were defined and described by these young women with a goal of strengthening our ability to promote healthy relationships and prevent TDV among this population. Implications for TDV are noted in the discussion, but we focus our findings more broadly on the role of cultural connectedness and identity and feelings of responsibility for sustaining cultural knowledge, practices, and lineage related to decisions around dating and choosing partners.

### *1.4. Legibility, Credibility, and Reclamation*

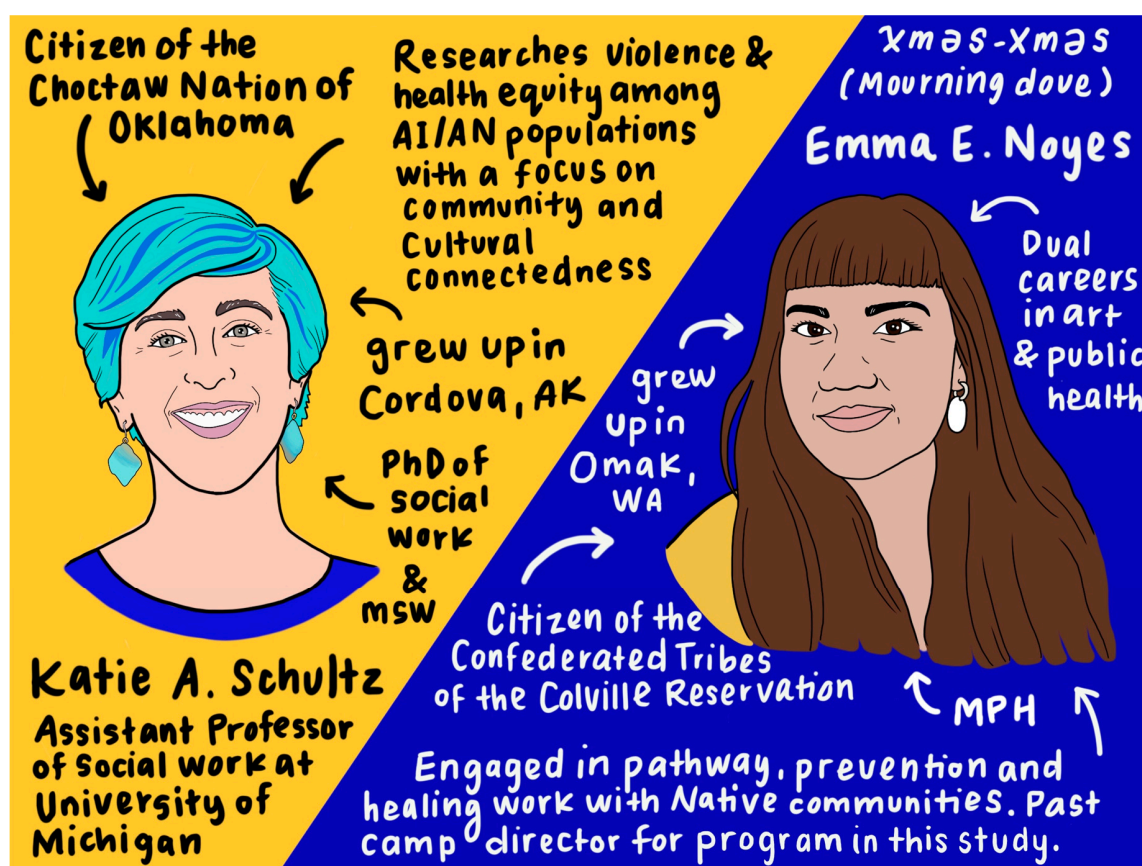
In response to this Special Issue's call for work that offers creative approaches to conveying knowledge, we employ two disruptions to what are typically considered acceptable narrative approaches in academic publishing. First, while we follow the outline of a peer reviewed manuscript, we embed illustrations within the text to create a visually engaging narrative. We do so to incorporate the arts into knowledge production and dissemination and with the hope that it makes the article more legible outside of the academic canon. Second, we make a move to reclaim the discussion section. By definition, discussion is the action or process of talking about something in order to reach a decision or to exchange ideas, also described as a conversation. In the full spirit of discussion and to bring in the voices of those with the most in-depth, experiential knowledge about these topics, we asked a

group of Indigenous women to review and interpret the findings. We use that conversation to guide the discussion section. This approach to knowledge building purposefully centers Indigenous voices and lived experiences sorely underrepresented in academic literature.

This work is also a push for us to unlearn a process of knowledge dissemination that has by and large excluded the very audiences living and affected by these topics. We have tried to be mindful and creative in how we make this information legible and useful to the people those women represent—AI/AN women who influence younger women in their work and their roles as mothers, sisters, and aunties. It is also our intention to challenge how research publications are evaluated as legible and credible. Our Indigenous communities have resisted, survived, and thrived in spite of ongoing assaults on our bodies, lands, and systems of knowledge and governance (these are not all separate). In what we hope is a time of national reckoning and imagining and creating futures of equity and healing, this work is intended to spark dialogue.

## 2. Methods

The authors, both citizens of tribal nations (Figure 4), designed the study and collected and analyzed the data. We intentionally place ourselves in relationship to this research not only because reflexivity is an integral part of qualitative research, but also as an Indigenist approach. How and why we relate to the focus of this work and the data collection, analysis, and interpretation is informed by our positions as Native women. All research was reviewed and approved by a university institutional review board.



**Figure 4.** The authors' portraits are surrounded by information about who they are and where they are from. See I.D. 4 in Appendix A.

### 2.1. Sampling and Recruitment

This convenience sample was drawn from high school students attending a culturally-centered college preparation and career exposure summer program for AI/AN high school students interested in pursuing health careers. All youth accepted into the program were eligible, but not required, to participate in the study. Youth in this study self-identified as women and AI/AN and were entering 10th, 11th, or 12th grade (ages 15–17). While we did not ask about gender or sexual orientation, participants spoke to their experiences in a way that centered cisgender and heterosexual identities. Participants came from urban, rural, and reservation communities and were citizens or descendants of tribes from throughout the western United States, creating a diverse intertribal sample. Packets with information on attending the program included a recruitment letter with information about the study and a consent form. A reminder email with information about the study was sent one week later. Written parental permission and youth assent were obtained.

### 2.2. Data Collection

During the summer program, two focus groups took place onsite over the course of one week. Participants were invited to attend both focus groups; one participant attended only the first focus group. At the start of each group we informed the participants that we were trying to understand dating and relationships for AI/AN youth in general and asked that they not share personal experiences that may make them uncomfortable or embarrassed. Using semi-structured interview guides, the first focus group ( $N = 17$ ) focused on how youth define dating relationships, how they differentiate “normal” conflicts from abusive dating relationships, and questions about what causes abuse in relationships. The second focus group ( $N = 16$ ) asked about TDV knowledge, information-seeking behavior, and how to effectively share TDV information with AI/AN youth. In this group we also asked about protective factors unique to Native youth including strengths and protective aspects of Native identities and tribal and family influences. The groups were audio-recorded and transcribed. Participants were given \$15 for their participation.

### 2.3. Qualitative Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed using an exploratory thematic approach. Thematic analysis is common in exploratory qualitative studies and is notable for its flexible nature (Braun and Clarke 2006; Clarke and Braun 2017). Audio recordings of the focus groups were transcribed by a professional service. Before beginning analysis, we reviewed the transcripts for accuracy by comparing them to the audio recordings. Subsequently we read through the transcripts multiple times and began coding, the application of words or phrases to excerpts of the data to capture attributes and content of the data (Saldaña 2009). We created a codebook that was continually revised throughout the coding process. Codes capture notable features of the data relevant to the focus of the study and are the foundation for creating themes. Themes represent important ideas related to the research question and larger patterns or meaning within the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Through discussion-based co-coding (Padgett 2017) we independently coded the data and then collaboratively organized the codes under a number of broad categories related to the overall goals of the study (dating and relationships with a focus on TDV prevention).

The aim of a thematic analysis is to identify and interpret key, not all, of the data and the research question can evolve during the analytic process (Clarke and Braun 2017). Given our shared interest in cultural identity and connectedness, we found ourselves repeatedly drawn to the data resulting from two questions in the second focus group. Consequently, the focus of this analysis narrowed to the data resulting from an interviewer prompt asking about different expectations in a relationship, “based on whether you have found yourself a Native honey, or a non-Native honey?” The conversation rapidly veered from casual dating to how partner selection might impact ability to ensure cultural continuity or the continuation of traditions and cultural practice across generations within family

and community. A follow up question asked participants to specify why it was important to them to raise children with a strong Native identity and cultural beliefs and practices. These questions elicited unanticipated conversations on ideal future partners, reproductive choices, cultural identity, and community connections. We focused on these findings based on the lack of attention to it in existing literature. Moreover, these issues are the most unique findings in considering dating and relationships within a context specific to Native populations.

Upon agreeing on the focus of this analysis, we returned to the data with a revised coding framework that focused on those codes and data related to what would become our themes and the key findings of the study. The first author took the lead on coding the data in subsequent rounds with weekly meetings to discuss findings with the second author and to co-create a thematic map of the findings. This mapping involved arranging coded excerpts into themes to make sense of patterns and elicit meaning from the data. During this stage we also began discussing ideas for the illustrations, starting with the ways in which our emerging themes related to each other. The second author began sketching potential thematic schemas until we eventually arrived at a coherent narrative for the findings. Illustrating the chosen quotes added another layer of interpretation and deepened our analysis. In drafting the illustrations, the second author spent extended periods of time reflecting on the quote and making connections across themes. Over time, she recognized a shift from merely creating appealing visual aids for quotes to uncovering the essence of quotes and new analytic insights. She brought these to our weekly meetings, and we refined results accordingly. We used consensual validation (Padgett 2017) wherein we met regularly to compare our processes and reach consensus on the findings. See Appendix A for full image descriptions (I.D.) and artist notes about the figures.

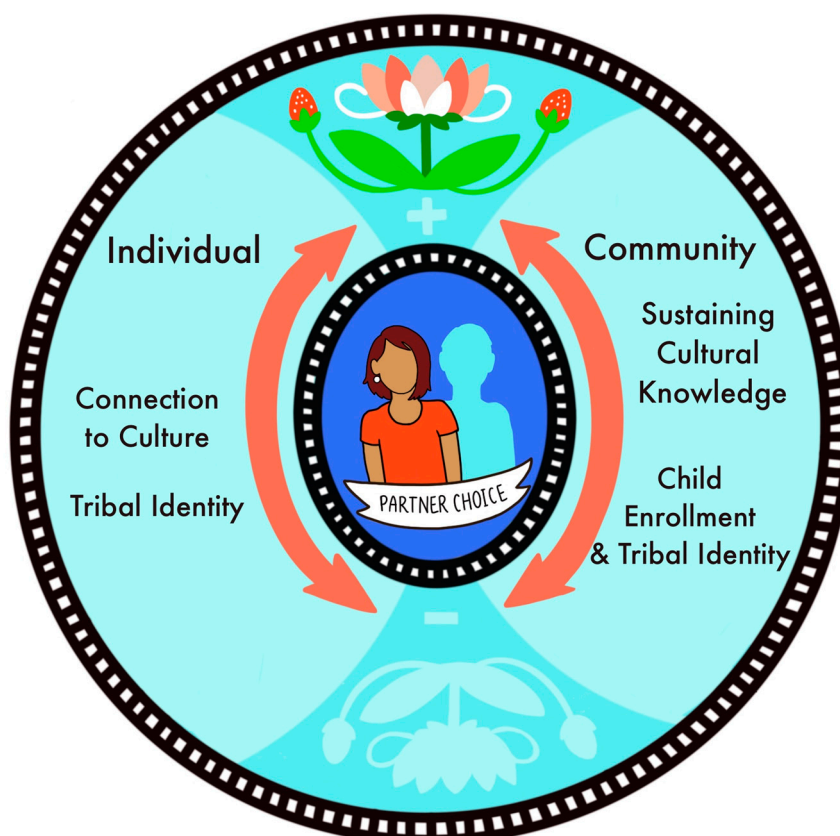
#### 2.4. Reclaiming the Discussion

The discussion section of a journal manuscript is generally where you interpret the key findings and develop implications of the study. We recognize both academic and Indigenous spaces as sites of knowledge production and expertise. For this reason, our discussion section was informed by interpretation of the results by the authors and three American Indian women, of whom we came to affectionately refer to as the Aunties. We consider this a process in line with many conversations that take place in our communities, when we turn to our relatives to make sense of and develop our stories. Each of those women have spent most of their lives and careers in the Pacific Northwest and have lived in both urban and reservation communities. In addition to decades of experience working with and mentoring Native youth, two of the Aunties are mothers of young women. Their experience and expertise spans education, cultural reclamation, the arts, government-government relations, and health.

### 3. Results

Findings suggest that connection to culture and tribal identities as well as feelings of responsibility to maintain tribal practices and lineage were important among the young women in this sample. Consequently, the desire for cultural connection and feelings of responsibility informed qualities they were seeking in romantic and reproductive partners. The influence of these values on choosing a partner were evident at the individual and community level. At the individual level, romantic partners can enhance or inhibit personal connections to culture or tribal identity. For at least one young woman, a Native partner offered the opportunity to become more culturally connected. For others, a non-Native partner or one who did or would not respect Native culture or identities posed a potential threat to their cultural practices and identity. At a communal level, responsibility for sustaining cultural knowledge, practices, and lineage may influence choice of reproductive and parenting partners for young AI/AN women living within colonial structures of governance. While these issues were not explicitly expressed by all participants, our results suggest unique implications for choosing romantic and reproductive partners among young AI/AN women in relation to one's sense of cultural connectedness, tribal identity, and sense of responsibility to the survivance of Native nations.

In this study, culturally-specific considerations in choosing a romantic or reproductive partner among this sample of young AI/AN women fell under three major domains: (1) increasing or upholding individual connections to culture and tribal identities; (2) a responsibility and respect for maintaining and passing cultural teachings and traditions to the next generation; and (3) ensuring that their children would be recognized as a tribal member or descendant, with a focus on eligibility for tribal enrollment. The interrelatedness of these domains is illustrated in Figure 5.



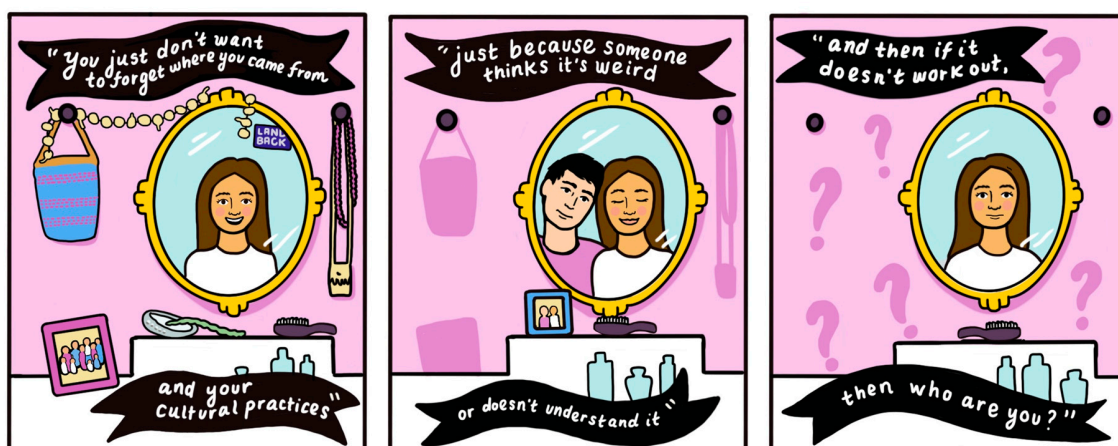
**Figure 5.** A young woman and a silhouette of a potential partner are at the center with surrounding text of thematic domains. See I.D. 5 in Appendix A.

### 3.1. Individual Identity & Connectedness

At the individual level, young women talked about the importance of being or becoming culturally connected to their tribes and tribal identities and practices. Consequently, choosing a partner who would (or did) support or understand their cultural practices and tribal identities was important among the young women in this sample. This was evident among those who expressed themselves as closely connected to their tribal identity and community as well as those actively seeking stronger cultural connection.

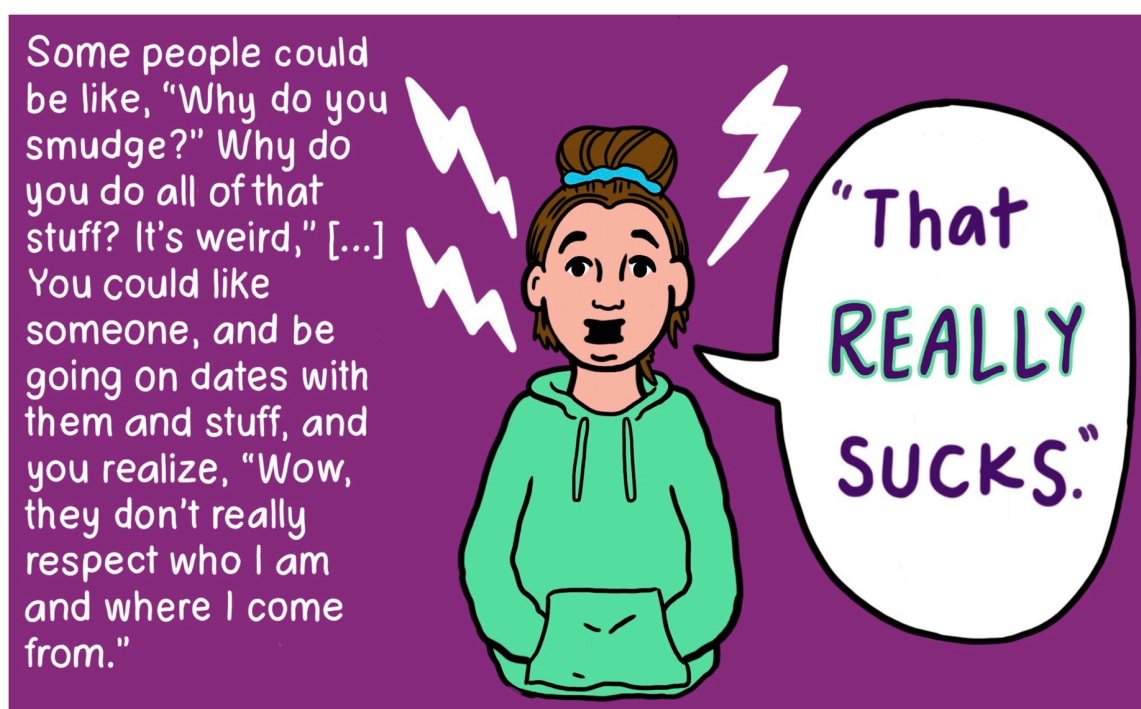
Results indicate that among some of the sample, sense of self was interdependent with cultural identity. For example, a partner who would support involvement in cultural practices and tribal identity were important to this participant, suggesting that one who did not could pose a threat to her own sense of who she is (Figure 6<sup>2</sup>).

<sup>2</sup> Full quote: You just don't want to forget where you come from and your cultural practices, just because someone ... thinks it's weird, or doesn't understand it. I know it can be easy to fall in love with someone and be like, "Oh, I want to conform to whatever they want, so I can be with them." And then you'll stray away from who you are, and then if it doesn't work out, then who are you?



**Figure 6.** In the first panel a young woman is surrounded by items that represent her life as a Native person. In the second, a person she is dating appears and items that previously surrounded her are missing. In the final, the relationship is over and items representing who she was before the relationship have turned into question marks. See I.D. 6 in Appendix A.

When prompted by the interviewer, “Why is being connected important?” another participant responded, “You don’t want to lose sight of your culture, especially if it’s a part of you. Like losing yourself, I guess.” Reflecting once again, a deep interrelationship between individual sense of self and cultural identity. Relatedly for another young woman, being with a partner that did not respect Native culture could present problems in a relationship (Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** A young woman wearing a hoody has both hands tucked into the pockets and is “struck” with a realization and symbolized by three lightning bolts. See I.D. 7 in Appendix A.

On the other hand, one participant lived in a predominantly White community and did not feel a connection to her tribal community. She was very vocal in expressing an explicit desire to be more culturally connected and related that to her desire to date a Native person (Figure 8). For this young

woman, there was an assumption that a Native partner would offer an opportunity to become more culturally connected. She was one of the few participants who expressed this desire. Many of the young women seemed comfortable in their relationship to their own communities and identities; many expressed pride and a strong Native identity.



**Figure 8.** The image represents distance and separation between self and tribal community as the distance between a star gazer and the stars. See I.D. 8 in Appendix A.

### 3.2. "You Gotta Think about How You're Gonna Raise Your Kids": Reproductive Partners

Commitment to participation and connection with culture was also expressed as communal responsibility to upholding and maintaining tribal beliefs and practices for future generations. This was most pronounced within the context of having and raising children. Responding to a probe as to why it is important to raise their children as Native people, one young woman responded, "... to keep our traditions and our culture alive ... It's up to us now, our generation, to keep our culture alive ... Like, the language is dying, and after the language—what's next?" (Figure 9).



**Figure 9.** This panel includes a collage of images representing different aspects of keeping culture alive. See I.D. 9 in Appendix A.

Relatedly, when asked, “Why is being connected important?” another participant indicated that active involvement in cultural activities during her upbringing was a major factor in developing and maintaining her cultural identity and sense of self.

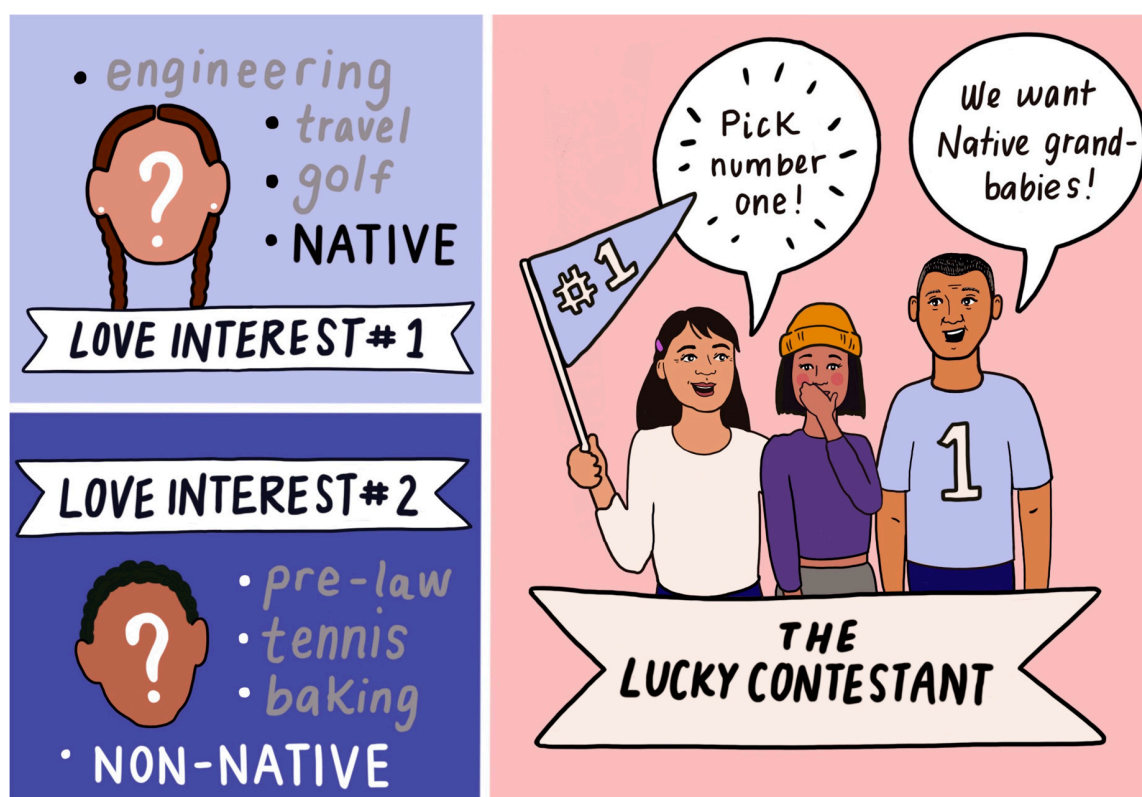
I wouldn’t be who I am today if I was never involved, or who I am, because I’d be so different ... I’d be very different if I didn’t do any of the things I do. I’d look White and then act White too.

Her identity as a Native person was directly related to involvement in cultural activities—how that Native identity was created and is expressed. Consequently, this impacts how she thinks about raising her own children and the importance of raising children to take an active role in connecting to and maintaining cultural traditions.

One participant, who had been raised with a Native and non-Native parent, described her non-Native parent as being “really into” Native traditions and culture. Subsequently she acknowledged the possibility and an openness to parenting with a non-Native partner. In that case, she would want to find someone who was “at least open to seeing what I’ve grown up with and I hope they’d respect the fact that I’d like my kids to also be raised that way.” However, many young women in the sample wanted to have children with Native partners—one going so far as to state, “I feel like I have to have babies with a Native. Not marry, have babies.” This was the same young woman seeking to learn and connect more strongly with her Native culture. In response to her statement, another added, “That’s a lot of stress, because what if you find someone that you’re totally in love with, that’s as White as White can be?” What followed was a conversation during which participants responded: “Just have kids with somebody else.” [meaning a Native partner if you were with someone non-Native] and “We might never find someone Native that is as compatible with you as that person is, so I feel like it’s just a choice you need to make.”

While participants wrestled with what having children with a non-Native partner might mean for cultural exposure and tribal enrollment status of their children, some also received messages from parents and other family members (Native and non-Native) to date and have children with Native partners. One young woman felt pressure from her parents, “I’m not sure if they’d be open to the idea

of me dating someone that's not Native ... They want me to have Native babies and carry on the tradition and culture and everything" (Figure 10).



**Figure 10.** This panel shows two options of individuals to date, as if partner choice was a game show. The parents attempt to persuade her to pick the Native choice. See I.D. 10 in Appendix A.

This young woman acknowledged that if she had children with a White partner that her children would still be Native, but that the message from her parents was, "I want you to find a Native boy" and that she had accepted that message, "My parents only talk about Natives, so I'm like, 'Okay, Natives. It's cool.'" This indicates an assumption that seemed shared among participants, that a Native partner would ensure that their children would be raised within and sustain cultural beliefs and practices and that this may not happen with a non-Native partner.

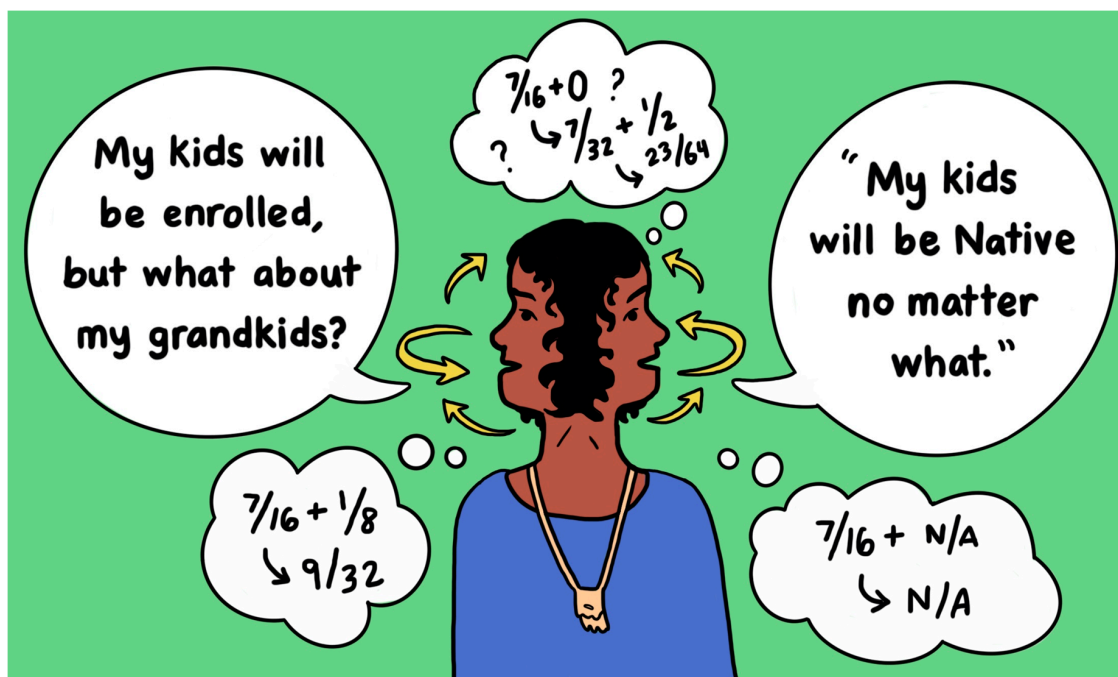
### 3.3. "It's Just a Choice You Need to Make": Citizenship & Recognition

A number of young women described a reluctance to marry and have kids with someone non-Native explicitly because of concerns that their children would not be eligible for tribal enrollment. "It's just more secure, if you [have children with] a Native American"—this security comes from believing that your kids will not only be raised within Native culture, but also in knowing that their children would be enrolled or recognized as Native. The same young woman that had emphasized the importance of having babies with a Native partner (over marrying a Native partner) described herself as "only this much Native and this much this, this and that", expressing her mixed lineage and concern that having children with someone non-Native would make their children less Native or ineligible for enrollment. Another stated that if she has kids with a non-Native person their children would not be eligible for enrollment. She went on to describe how she would be more likely to stay with a Native person, "because I want to continue my family [through enrollment] and I feel like the other person [non-Native] wouldn't value my culture as much." This was based partially on her experience at "almost an all-White school" where "they don't value the same things I value and it's really weird."

The young woman who described pressure from her family to “find a Native boy” in the previous section also shared that she wanted to marry a Native person in order to carry on traditions, but she recognized that “my kids would be Native no matter what” (i.e., even with a non-Native partner). In this case, this was due in part to the fact that her children would be eligible for enrollment. However, the generation after may not be (Figure 11). Consequently, she expressed the expectation that she might exert the same pressure on her children to find a Native partner if they had a non-Native father:

I guess I would be harder on them, because they would be the last legal cutoff line for legally Native, and so . . . if I had kids that didn't have a Native father, I'd probably be harder on them about it. I can imagine myself in the future, just being like, “Now you HAVE to get someone that's Native.”

Among other participants, there was some resignation that “you just have to accept it” that your children may not be enrolled, asking questions like, “Do I want my kids to be Native or do I want to have kids with someone [non-Native]?” This is intimately related to the theme of responsibility for maintaining traditions and cultural practices. These young women were expressing a desire to have children with a Native person because they “want [their] kids to be Native” while also acknowledging that their “kids would be Native no matter what” (i.e., with a non-Native father). This contradiction highlights the complexity of these decisions within settler colonial systems of erasure and tribal citizenship.



**Figure 11.** A woman is calculating the blood quantum of offspring while her head is turning back and forth between perspectives on identity. See I.D. 11 in Appendix A.

#### 4. Discussion

*Stories have the power to make our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits work together.* (Archibald 2008)

All of the complexities of Native identity and our histories and stories are brought into our personal relationships. This was evident in the ways in which young women discussed dating and partnerships in relation to: (a) cultural connection and identity and (b) continuance of culture and lineage, with an emphasis on having and raising children. To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine dating and relationships within this context among this population. Although we are unable

to determine behavior from these data, the desire for cultural connection and feelings of responsibility informed qualities these young women expressed seeking in current and future relationships. We also found that tribal enrollment policies, in particular blood quantum requirements used to determine citizenship, were influencing the ways that some of these young women were thinking about dating and relationships and particularly, their reproductive futures.

While our findings suggest that cultural identity and connectedness should foreground efforts to promote healthy dating and romantic relationships among young AI/AN women, our discussion with the Aunties suggests these should be presented within a context of historical and contemporary trauma and violence. This includes historical and contemporary state violence that leads to disconnection from culture and cultural belonging as well as disproportionate rates of violence against women in our communities. Ultimately the greatest threat in dating and relationships for these young women were the same threats posed by larger systems of settler colonialism—that is loss of self and loss of culture. Without connection to your community and culture, “then who are you?” The measure of success of settler colonialism is the erasure of Native peoples (Wolfe 2006). The decisions of who we let into our lives reflect that on a smaller scale, who we allow to shape and influence our own identity—those choices are directly reflected in our chosen relationships.

As noted in the methodology, this section was guided by a discussion of the results with the Aunties. When posed with the opening question of what stood out about the results, our conversation started with acknowledgment of the weight of responsibility for cultural continuity some of these young women carried. From there, talk focused heavily on identity among Indigenous women. Although indirectly addressed in our findings, trauma was a key part of our discussion with the Aunties. Rooted in both personal and professional experiences, these women related historical and contemporary trauma and violence within a broader conversation of interpersonal relationships. Some framed their remarks as stories that have been and are told to young women; one of the authors co-leading the discussion made this observation, adding that most of these were not new stories. She then asked, “What are the stories that we have been told, what are the stories that we tell ourselves and tell our peers, and what are the new stories that are needed?” What follows is a summary of those stories shared during our time together. Quotations in the following sections are the words of the Aunties.

#### *4.1. Stories We Have Been Told & Those We Tell*

##### *4.1.1. Identity*

The stories we have been told and continue to tell ourselves and others are steeped within complex histories and systems of settler colonialism, racism, and capitalism. While aspects of the conversation around identity moved beyond dating and relationships; the women agreed that identity infuses all aspects of young women’s lives. Consequently, the findings are “all traced back to identity”. These larger systems set the boundaries and definitions of enrollment and inclusion unique to AI/AN communities. As one of the Aunties aptly noted, “the cost for participation in the larger systems is the narrowly defined identity.” This gets translated into what it means to be Native—both technically in terms of descendance and enrollment, but also personal and communal definitions and attitudes about who is a “real Indian”. Place is often entangled or conflated with identity. One of the Aunties described this when she talked about identity “being connected to the rez and the culture . . . Because you think the culture happens on the rez; it doesn’t happen anywhere else, right?” In the focus groups, identity was repeatedly associated with enrollment, connection to tribal communities or reservations, and knowledge and participation in specific cultural activities. This is even further narrowed by gender (Figure 12).



**Figure 12.** A visual cascade of narrowing boundaries and definitions of identity. See I.D. 12 in Appendix A.

In our study, women's roles become conflated with motherhood and responsibility for upholding and transmitting culture. The narrow systems in place for defining identity (e.g., blood quantum requirements, generational reduction of Indian blood through having children with non-tribal members) are not only the context for the stories that we hear from young women, but the systems and cues that carry these stories forward. When belonging to a community is entangled with tribal and federal governance that define tribal enrollment and identification, then the understanding of what it is to belong or be a Native person can become limited to biological lineage. This may limit young women's perceptions about how they can contribute to the continuity of cultural and community connection of future generations to reproductive decisions. Given a lack of control or agency in the larger systems defining enrollment and identity, it makes sense these young women focused on individual identity. One of the Aunties talked about the words used to describe Native women (by Native women and others; Figure 13). In our data, this Auntie adroitly points out that, the role of "bearer of the culture" often becomes interpreted as "bearer of the children".



**Figure 13.** A collage of phrases including vessel of the culture and culture bearer are matched with silhouettes vessels including baskets, bowls, and a cradleboard. See I.D. 13 in Appendix A.

The Aunties also responded to findings related to enrollment. One made the frank observation that “enrollment allows for so many opportunities . . . it’s easy to just pick out [that] enrollment makes things complicated but also enrollment makes things possible [and] it is such a foundational pillar of what the tribe is today.” Noting that in her experience, these different opportunities based on enrollment are recognized from a young age. Another Auntie described issues around enrollment and the rights that come with it as “a double-edged sword”. In her case, it involved access to traditional hunting lands and rights that would be passed to her children, but not theirs if they marry and have children outside of the Tribe. While she recognized these implications for her future grandchildren, she also recognized the need for the Tribe to protect their lands and maintain control over access by non-Tribal members.

#### 4.1.2. Trauma

In our discussion with the Aunties, identity and cultural connectedness were also tied to safety in relationships. How and what stories are told, can be both powerful and protective, but also potentially harmful. We discussed how young women may feel pressured to stay in relationships that are unsafe or unhealthy because of the story told by themselves or their community. Perhaps because she thinks she’s the “last link in an ancient culture that must survive” and is responsible for the continuance of Native peoples, beliefs, and practices. This carries implications for dating violence—one young woman in the focus group stated that they would likely “put up with more” and “stick it out” in order to stay in a relationship with a Native partner than with a non-Native partner. Her statement was not conveyed specifically within a context of safety, but suggests a dynamic that should be considered in TDV prevention efforts among this population.

Intergenerational trauma also emerged in this conversation despite not being explicitly discussed in the findings. In part, the stories we tell and are told are passed down by “mothers, aunties, grandmas, who have not healed from this colonial [violence] that’s been ingrained into us. So then they continue to pass it down.” One Auntie shared that in her work with college students, she could hear the voices of the young women participants, “I can hear them justifying the trauma that has to go along with it, whether it be from a partner, whether it be accepting that behavior because my mom put up with it,

because my grandma put up with it, because all of these different things and so that trauma's really passed down." Despite multiple examples of healthy, loving family and romantic relationships in our communities, which were shared by our participants and the Aunties, trauma is also interwoven in these stories. We saw this in the historical losses of language and connection expressed by participants, and contemporary trauma in the lives or work of some of the Aunties. We can't tell one story without the other. In bringing forward stories of strength and resilience, we must also acknowledge and heal from these traumas.

We need to disrupt intergenerational legacies of trauma to rewrite these stories. One of the Aunties called on us to push back against unhealthy narratives and coping strategies that have resulted from years of historical and intergenerational trauma:

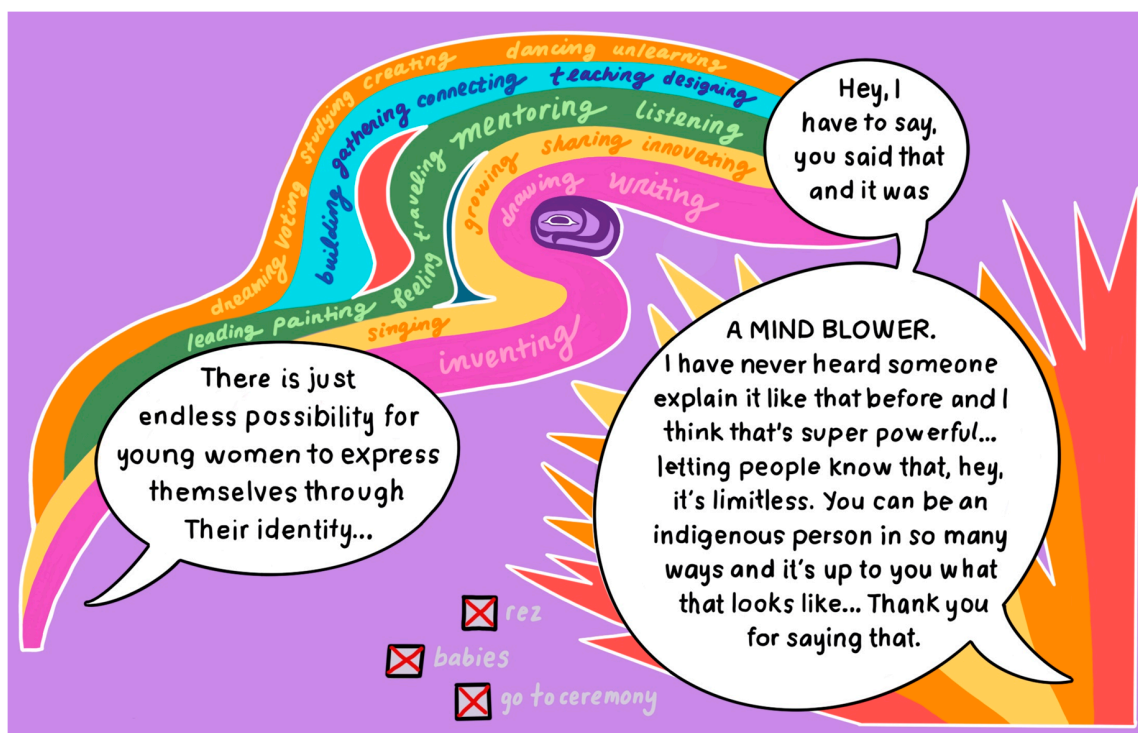
We really have to honor those things, those things that our grandmothers and our aunties [passed on] and we can honor those things and we can hold those things up, while still questioning them. And I think our aunties would be proud of us for questioning.

While young women in the focus group were quick to point out strengths derived from cultural connections, they also experienced unique pressures to partner with individuals and maintain relationships that allow them to carry on tribal practices and responsibilities. Promotion of healthy relationships and prevention of TDV were the overarching research questions guiding this work. Our findings suggest complex implications for young women who may be in unsafe relationships that provide tribal and cultural connectedness.

#### 4.2. *Stories We Need to Tell: Implications*

Our findings underscore the need to integrate culturally specific factors in promoting healthy relationships among this population. This includes addressing a comprehensive definition of healthy dating and relationships that incorporates cultural safety, identity, and involvement. We should not approach conversations or health promotion related to dating with AI/AN adolescents without including broader systems that may influence how they are approaching these relationships. Cultural identity and connection should be salient features of these conversations.

For the Aunties, the stories we need to be telling were really about examples, opportunities, and expansion of what it means to be a Native woman. This includes women in leadership roles that exemplify opportunities for younger women, but also opportunities to have important conversations about identity and connection among and between women across generations. One of the recommendations from the Aunties was to provide more opportunities for these conversations, "... when women get together and have these conversations, things happen ... We have to stop having these conversations so far in between we need to have them more regularly ... " There was a particularly powerful moment during our conversation when one Auntie was struck by the teaching shared by another. She talked about how as Indigenous women, "... we're always being pressured ... you must go to ceremonies, or you must have lived on the reservation, or you must have done this or done that and it's like, all of this, like okay, what boxes do I check?" She expressed her gratitude for being pushed to rethink how Indigeneity can be expressed (Figure 14).



**Figure 14.** In this panel a rainbow of ways of expressing indigeneity flow from one unseen speaker to another. See I.D. 14 in Appendix A.

This was particularly powerful because the Auntie that expressed her gratitude works directly with young women. This exchange provides evidence of the power of these conversations, even when done on this small scale. The Aunties recommended having conversations early and often and that they should acknowledge that lineage and culture are important, but also emphasize “becoming who you are and being unapologetically okay with that”.

Indigenous communities have maintained and in some cases revitalized coming-of-age ceremonies as a way of centering women’s empowerment and demonstrating how women are foundational to Native nations, cultures, and futures (Risling Baldy 2018). One of the Aunties discussed the importance of coming of age ceremonies, but pointed out that these have to be built into a larger network of support that extends beyond that ceremony, emphasizing the need for ongoing networks of aunties and mentors. We need to create, maintain and tell healthy stories for young women to follow. They need to “be connected to, mentored by, and have conversations with Native women that are doing remarkable things in their lives and that have all kinds of stories.” A camp to facilitate these conversations and networks was suggested in addition to the need to create “authentically safe spaces” for these conversations. In doing so, we also need to create spaces for healing from historical and contemporary trauma.

All of this is not to diminish the vital roles and responsibilities of Native women related to motherhood and other ways of sustaining and transmitting culture in our communities. Rather, it is to say that the story should not be reduced only to reproductive decisions at the risk of losing all the stories of the larger relations, connections, and reciprocity that are a part of Native women’s being in this world. We have difficulty talking about gendered roles and responsibilities precisely because heteropatriarchy and settler colonialism have in many ways limited our framing of Indigenous women. Dr. Cutcha Risling Baldy, a member of the Hoopa Valley Tribe, describes the work to revitalize coming-of-age ceremonies in her Nation and how, “these revitalizations are not just about the young women, or only for women in general; they are also focused on developing a decolonized communal spirituality and society” (2018, p. 9). She describes her work as, “exploring how ceremony combats

the ever present systemic gendered violence of settler colonialism and (re)rites systems of gender in Indigenous communities” (Risling Baldy 2018, p. 9). Similarly, this work is a starting point for telling our stories that move beyond narrow definitions of Indigeneity and womanhood.

#### 4.3. Limitations

As with any study, there are limitations to consider. Given the cross-sectional nature of our data, we are unable to determine if the ideas and expressed desires and concerns of these young women actually influence their dating and relationship behavior. This sample may be unique given that participants had independently applied to attend a culturally-centered college preparation and career exposure summer program. They may have been particularly interested and committed to cultural identity and connectedness, having selected to attend a summer program designed for Native youth, voluntarily choosing social experiences and environments with Native peers. As noted earlier, the discussion reflected heteronormative relationships. Trans and non-binary gender identities and LGBTQIA-2S dating and relationships were not discussed. And finally, the focus group format tends to limit deeper discussion on sensitive topics (compared to individual interviews; Morgan 1997) like dating violence and the group format may have influenced what participants were willing to share.

#### 4.4. Future Research

We urge researchers to move beyond individual levels of analysis to include community-level factors associated with dating and relationships and explore community connectedness in these studies, including those focused on TDV. Future research in this area should include questions on cultural connection and identity and feelings of responsibility for cultural continuity. Cultural connectedness and identity have been examined among AI/AN populations in other areas such as substance use (see for example, Baldwin et al. 2011; Walters and Simoni 2002), but not adequately in terms of interpersonal relationships among Native youth.

A related area of inquiry would be the examination of family and community influences on decision-making of adolescents related to dating and relationships. It would be beneficial to better understand what may be driving these decisions among a sample of young men. It is uncertain whether young Native women are more highly socialized to partner with Native men given the focus on reproductive decisions and motherhood. Tribally-specific notions of kinship and belonging deserve more attention in the literature and how those are: (a) being communicated to and interpreted by our young people; or (b) integrated into any efforts to promote healthy dating and relationships.

While participants expressed high expectations for the benefits of dating other Natives, there are some considerations that warrant further examination. Young women may stay in unsafe or otherwise unfavorable relationships because they provide tribal and cultural connection—an area worthy of future inquiry. Moreover, notions of family and reproductive decisions deserve more attention. Participant remarks distinguishing between reproductive and marital partners (“not marry, have babies”) suggest resistance to settler-colonial definitions that claim families are formed by nuclear units in which relationships and caretaking are bounded within heteronormative dyads. This could be in line with examinations of settler-colonial forms of kin and relating that critique family forms dependent on state-sanctioned marriage and centering biological reproduction (TallBear 2018; TallBear and Willey 2019).

### 5. Conclusions

Aligned with the goals of this Special Issue, we hope these are some of the stories that will save us, heal us, and extend our lifelines. We hope the modified storytelling we took within this academic manuscript inspires new ways to tell our stories and approaches for including the voices of community members and those often left out of this publishing process. This exercise was in part about unlearning the standard process of academic publishing. We have tried to think about how this article was written so it best tells stories for and is useful to the people most impacted by these issues. While a small start,

it is a call for us to think about how we present this information to an audience of our friends and relatives, not just an ambiguous or amorphous academic audience. We express immense gratitude to both the participants and the Aunties that shared stories with us. We hope that findings from this study lay the foundation for further efforts to promote healthy, loving relationships and cultural safety, continuity and connectedness among our young people.

**Author Contributions:** Both authors designed the study and collected and analyzed the data. We collaboratively developed and wrote the paper. K.S. led the thematic analysis and E.N. did all illustrations in the paper. We have both read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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## Appendix A

### Image descriptions (I.D.) are provided below.

I.D 1: Four women in the foreground hold a banner at a demonstration and one woman is standing in from of the banner holding a hand drum and drumstick. This image is intended to both subtly convey that 4 out of 5 Native women experience violence in their lifetime and to emphasize the strengths of Native women organizing and resisting the status quo. The text reads, “We hold vital roles in our communities and it is unacceptable that 4 in 5 of us experience violence.”

I.D. 2: A teenager is texting with someone she is dating and the conversation indicates emotional and verbal abuse. Later in time, signified by a zigzag cutting through the middle of the panel, the same young woman is older. A male figure is yelling and the verbal and emotional abuse is similar to the abuse that the woman experienced as a teen. The heading reads, “We know teen dating violence is a contributor to intimate partner violence as an adult.”

I.D. 3: Hands from two different women hold a braid of sweetgrass medicine that has been formed into a circle. This image represents where one may find unique protective factors among Native young women. The image reads, “The unknown: our unique risk and protective factors. Identity? Cultural Connectedness?”

I.D. 4: One half of the image shows a woman with short blue hair wearing turquoise earrings and says: Katie A. Schultz, citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma; researches violence and health equity among AI/AN populations with a focus on community and cultural connectedness; grew up in Cordova, AK; PhD of Social Work and MSW; Assistant Professor of Social Work at the University of Michigan. The other half of the image shows a woman with long brown hair with shell earrings and gives her English name Emma E. Noyes and Mourning Dove, her name in Colville-Okanagan Salish; dual careers in art and public health; grew up in Omak, WA; citizen of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation; MPH; engaged in pathway, prevention and healing work with Native communities. Past camp director for program in this study.

I.D. 5: At the center of this image there is a young woman and a silhouette of a potential partner or love interest. Two bi-directional arrows frame both sides of the center cameo and point to a plus sign above and a minus sign below. The plus sign is crowned with a vibrant floral and berry design whereas below the minus sign the floral and berry design is lacking. The surrounding text indicates the domains and those aspects that were perceived to be enhanced or detracted from based on partner choice. One side reads, “Individual: connection to culture and tribal identity”. The other side reads, “Community: sustaining cultural knowledge and child enrollment and tribal identity.”

I.D 6: This image is composed of three panels. In the first a young woman is joyfully looking at her reflection in a mirror surrounded by items that represent her social, cultural, and spiritual life as a Native person. These include a framed picture of family; a woven yarn bag hangs from the same wall hook that dried roots are draped across; a Land Back sticker is tucked into the mirror frame; a medicine bag hangs with another necklace on a wall hook; sweetgrass rests on top of a shell. In the second panel there are two figures in the mirror, the young woman with her eyes closed and the person she is dating. The items that previously surrounded the mirror are missing and a new item, a photo of a couple, has appeared where the sweetgrass and shell once were. The absence of the items and all that they represent is indicated with silhouettes or impressions of the items. In the final panel the young woman is looking at herself in the mirror again. The text indicates that the dating relationship is over and the impressions of the items representing who she was before the relationship have turned into question marks. The text reads, “You just don’t want to forget where you came from and your cultural practices just because someone thinks it’s weird or doesn’t understand it and then if it doesn’t work out, then who are you?”

I.D. 7: A young woman wearing a hoody has both hands tucked into the pockets and is “struck” with a realization described in the text and symbolized by three lightning bolts. There is a quote from a participant that reads, “Some people could be like, Why do you smudge? Why do you do all of that stuff? It’s weird . . . You could like someone and be going on dates with them and stuff, and you realize, wow—they don’t really respect who I am and where I come from. And that really sucks.”

I.D. 8: A young woman sits outside at night. Next to her she has a lantern and she wears a sweatshirt with a star symbol as she looks up at the sky. It includes a quote from a participant: “I haven’t grown up with my tribe. I haven’t lived on a reservation, my parents know nothing about our tribe, I know nothing about my tribe. And I really want to, I want to reach out and learn about my culture and learn about where I come from. And I feel like if I’m with a Native that will be easier . . . If I’m with someone that’s in a different race and doesn’t have that, then I might lose what I’m trying to go for when I’m going and figuring out what my culture is about and who I am . . . it’s a struggle.” As the quote describes the sense of distance and separation between self and tribal community, this image represents how expansive that distance might feel in the form of the distance between a star gazer and the stars. The young woman sees herself, her own symbol of a star on her sweatshirt, projected into the night sky in two versions. In the first, found on the left, she is with a star that looks most similar to her own and this connects her to a section of sky very rich with stars, representing connection to tribal community. In the second, she is paired with a star very different than her own and although there is a dotted line path toward the area of sky rich with stars, it is still more distant, and her paired star lacks a dotted line path to that place.

I.D. 9: This panel includes a collage of images representing different aspects of keeping culture alive. A paddle and canoe represent the relationship with water and canoe journeys. This particular canoe is a sturgeon nosed river canoe. A beaded stethoscope represents Native health and medical professionals. Moccasins and leggings represent dancing. Hands holding roots represent traditional food gathering. A woman texts someone in her tribal language instead of English. A set of stick game sticks and bones. These all represent culture as living and continuing on in perpetuity. The quote from the participant reads, “It’s up to us now, our generation, to keep our culture alive.”

I.D. 10: In this whimsical panel there are two options of individuals to date, as if partner choice was a game show. The contestant, a young woman, is joined by her parents who attempt to persuade her to pick the individual that is identified as being Native. The image has a banner titled “The Lucky Contestant” in front of a young woman with her father saying, “We want Native grandbabies!” and her Mom saying, “Pick number one!” There are two love interests to the left. Love interest #1 is Native

and enjoys engineering, travel and golf. Love interest #2 is non-Native, pre-law, and likes tennis and baking.

I.D. 11: The central figure in this panel is a young woman holding a head-turning number of thoughts and statements regarding tribal enrollment status and Native identity of multiple future generations in her family. As she does the math of pairing blood quantum fractions and calculating the blood quantum of offspring her head is turning back and forth between two distinct perspectives on identity. One where your children are Native because they are your children and the way you raise them is the determining factor in their identity. Another where pressure increases to have children meet tribal enrollment criteria with each generation. One thought bubble reads, “My kids will be enrolled, but what about my grandkids?” and the other reads, “My kids will be Native no matter what.”

I.D. 12: A visual cascade of narrowing boundaries and definitions of identity. It is an inverted triangle with flowers coming out of either side. In the top tier there is settler colonialism, capitalism, tribal sovereignty, enrollment and descendency. The middle tier includes Native identity and the phrases “culture happens on the rez” and “what and who is traditional”. The lower tier reads, “Native women’s identity = culture bearers, moms”.

I.D. 13: A collage of phrases including vessel of the culture and culture bearer are matched with silhouettes vessels including baskets, bowls, and a cradleboard. Also included are a feather fan, a pregnant woman, and an individual with a child. These phrases are intentionally paired with imagery of cultural vessels often made by women that one might find in a museum or on a shelf in a home and images associated with motherhood.

I.D. 14: In this panel a rainbow of ways of expressing indigeneity flow from one unseen speaker. Another speaker, whose comments are embedded in the fire colors of an explosion, calls attention to the mind-blowing impact of the first speaker’s words. The first speaker says, “There is just endless possibility for young women to express themselves through their identity.” The second speaker responds, “Hey, I have to say—you said that and it was a mind blower. I have never heard someone explain it like that before and I think that’s super powerful ... letting people know that hey, it’s limitless. You can be an indigenous person in so many ways and it’s up to you what that looks like ... Thank you for saying that.” Below her comment are the gray check boxes (rez, babies, go to ceremony) that she offers in contrast to the rainbow.

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