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ORIGINAL PAPER

"My Culture, My Family, My School, Me": Identifying Strengths and Challenges in the Lives and Communities of American Indian Youth

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Abstract Historically, the majority of research with American Indian (AI) youth and communities has focused on vulnerabilities, problems, and needs rather than resilience, strengths, and assets. Adding to the limited research which has examined AI youth and communities using the strengths perspective, we examined community assets, personal strengths, community challenges, and personal hardships as perceived by reservation-based, Northern Plains AI youth via open-ended survey questions. The present study was conducted during the spring and fall of 2009 at a tribal school in the Northern Plains (N = 95; n = 37 males; n = 58 females; aged 14.4–20.95 years; M = 17.3, SD = 1.47 years). The majority of youth self-identified their ethnic background as solely AI (85.3 %), with small percentages reporting additional ethnic backgrounds. Analyses revealed that the people in their lives, especially their families, are significant sources of strength for AI youth. Findings also indicated that AI youth have a positive orientation toward themselves and their communities, which was evidenced by the fact that the youth identified more strengths than challenges in their lives. Somewhat unexpectedly, when asked what aspects of their lives and communities they would most like to change, a significant number of the youth identified they wanted to change "nothing" about their personal lives or their communities. Reasons for these responses are explored.

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Introduction

Recognizing and understanding community assets and mechanisms of resilience is arguably as important, if not *more* important, than identifying its shortcomings and defining its deficiencies. However, the research literature on American Indian (AI) communities often focuses on vulnerabilities, problems, and needs rather than resilience, strengths, and assets (e.g., Kaufman et al. 2007; Novins et al. 2004; Smith et al. 2000). Yet, it is through recognizing the factors that strengthen communities which empowers such communities to mobilize themselves to address problems. Furthermore, previous research has indicated that focusing on strengths can be used as a mechanism to avoid community development policies often imposed upon impoverished and politically disempowered communities based on the assumption that poor communities have little to offer outside of cheap land, cheap labor, and a host of social problems (Perkins et al. 2004).

Research on AI youth typically focuses on problem behaviors rather than positive behaviors (Bearinger et al. 2005; Beauvais 1996; Hellerstedt et al. 2006; Potthoff et al. 1998). Researchers have often expressed that it would be more beneficial to focus on resilience, effective adaptation, coping, and stories of survival among AI youth (LaFromboise and Dizon 2003). In the limited research highlighting the strengths of AI youth, personal attributes, positive/supportive relationships, and AI culture were found to be significant mechanisms of strength and resilience (Filbert and Flynn 2010; Montgomery et al. 2000; Stiffman et al. 2007). For

instance, Filbert and Flynn (2010) found that the greater the level of a young person's cultural assets, the lower his/her behavioral problems measured within the domains of emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, and peer relationship problems.

Several important sources of strengths and mechanisms of resilience have been found for AI youth such as culture, familial support, spirituality/religion, and community connectedness (Cheshire 2001; HeavyRunner and Morris 1997; Johnson et al. 2010; Lalonde 2006; Stiffman et al. 2007). For example, in interviews with urban and rural AI youth, Stiffman et al. (2007) found that cultural activities, community programs, tribal support and care, traditional spiritual activities, security, and tribal financial disbursements to be the things that the AI youth liked best about their tribal community. In other related research, Lalonde's (2006) findings suggested that when tribal communities were successful in the promotion of their cultural heritage and in securing tribal control over their collective future, these communities also indicated an elevated AI youth health status and greater level of well-being, including lower AI youth suicide rates.

Research must look beyond pathology to adaptive developmental assets from the standpoints of both prevention and promotion (Mitchell and Beals 1997). Therefore, a goal of this descriptive study is to raise the discussion of community assets and individual strengths to a level comparable to that of community deficits and individual pathologies. The present study provides documentation of data from open-ended, semi-structured questions regarding community assets and personal strengths as well as community challenges and personal hardships as perceived by rural, Northern Plains American Indian youth.

Strengths Perspective

Since the late 1960s, there has been a growing interest among researchers in investigating the competencies, resilience, resources, and protective factors that lead to positive developmental outcomes that emerge despite adverse circumstances (Cowger 1994; Leadbeater et al. 2004). Much of the literature on the *strengths perspective* is found in positive psychology and social work practices and interventions (Cross 1998). The common element across content areas is the transformation from deficit-based approaches to an approach based on strengths (Maton et al. 2004). According to Kisthardt (2002), the purpose of the strengths perspective is to assist individuals, families, and communities to identify, secure, and sustain the range of both internal and external resources needed to help the individual to achieve their goals and achieve a mutually enriching relationship with the community. This goal is achieved through reinforcing existing assets and/or facilitating the development of new resources as a means to accomplish pre-established goals.

Saleebey (2001) argues that the role of a social worker practicing from a strengths orientation is to assist clients in discovering and expanding the range of adaptive development strategies and resources in their possession "in the service of assisting them to achieve their goals, realize their dreams, and shed the irons of their own inhibitions and misgivings, and society's domination" (p. 1). For example, a social worker using a person-centered strengths assessment would first have the client complete a self-assessment in order to allow the client to self-identify his or her own personal assets, as opposed to the social worker identifying the client's assets and filling out the assessment. The information would then be used to create an individualized wellness/recovery plan emphasizing the use of those resources as a means to attain the specific goals expressed by the client.

In a similar vein, research, policies, and programs working from a strengths perspective require a "prevention, wellness, competency, and future-oriented approach to building strengths" (Leadbeater et al. 2004, p. 28). For instance, within the field of education, there have been specific attempts to apply the strengths perspective in the classroom as well as university settings in attempt to promote long-term academic achievement (Austin 2006; Clifton and Anderson 2002; Maton and Hrabowski 2004). Such practices focus on transforming the academic environment to build upon existing effective learning strategies and highlighting those factors which lead to academic success.

The increased focus on positive attributes among psychology and social work researchers in recent years represents a paradigm shift from the problem-based approach characteristic of much of the previous research in the psychology and social work fields (Maton et al. 2004; Rankin 2006). The differences between these approaches have been outlined by Leadbeater et al. (2004) and are displayed in Table 1. Notably, although the strengths perspective focuses the researcher's attention on successes, problems are not ignored. While there is debate among researchers in regard to the role problems should serve in their analysis, there is also a general agreement that the strengths approach is about restoring balance to our efforts, which requires an appreciation of both the accomplishments and the struggles of human existence (Saleebey 2001).

Contextual Factors and the Strengths Perspective

An overwhelming emphasis on *individual* levels of resilience has led to a neglect of more detailed investigations of

Table 1 Emphasis of problem-focused versus strengths-based research and policy approaches

Problem-focused approaches	Strengths-based approaches
Correct deficits or maladaptive behaviors	Build strengths and resources
Have a short-term impact	Have a long-term impact
Provide crisis intervention	Provide primary prevention
Involve reactive planning	Involve proactive planning
Create good endpoints	Build and sustain strengths
Target risks in populations	Target variations in risks and strengths of populations

Adapted from "research and policy for building strengths: processes and contexts of individual, family, and community development," by Leadbeater et al. (2004). Copyright 2008 by the American Psychological Association

the family, cultural, and societal contexts that support resilience. Such a focus on the individual has caused some researchers, policy analysts, and service providers to critique such an approach as perpetuating a focus on the individual as the "the most potent force of social change", therefore, circumventing further critical analysis of the social structures in which individuals are embedded (Oko 2006, p. 606). Furthermore, a singular focus on the individual can detract research attention, intervention efforts, and funding from organizational and community level programs, which could potentially ameliorate adverse circumstances impeding upon individuals.

In recent years, however, researchers have begun to explore the contextual factors explicit to positive development outcomes and extend concepts of resilience and asset building to family, institutional, and community levels of analysis, which is being increasingly understood by researchers interested in using a context based, multidimensional, dynamic, and process oriented approach (Masten and Coatsworth 1998). Consequently, research attention and intervention efforts focusing on positive development outcomes also take into account the contextual factors supporting positive outcomes.

Application of the Strengths Perspective to Research Relevant to American Indians

A limited number of research studies have been conducted with American Indians/Indigenous populations utilizing the strengths perspective (e.g., Brownlee et al. 2009; Ronnau and Shannon 1990; Stiffman et al. 2007). However, there is an emerging body of AI literature concerned with the related constructs of positive youth development (Brokenleg and Van Bockern 2003), resilience (Fleming and Ledogar 2008; Filbert and Flynn 2010; HeavyRunner and Morris 1997; HeavyRunner and Marshall 2003; LaFromboise et al. 2006; Montgomery et al. 2000; Mainor 2001), and empowerment (Good Voice 2010; Justice 2004; Lafrance 2003) all of which contribute to a strengths perspective on AI youth.

In the few examples of AI research utilizing a strengths perspective, the approach was used as a model for both social worker and client relations, as well as interventions with individuals, families, and communities. Results of these studies demonstrate the success of such an approach in yielding positive behavioral outcomes (Brownlee et al. 2009; Ronnau and Shannon 1990; Stiffman et al. 2007). In their research, Brownlee et al. (2009) utilized a community-based strengths intervention approach to assess, promote, and facilitate a full spectrum of individual strengths at an inner city elementary school in which a number of AI children in welfare services attend. Their findings suggest that the strengths-based intervention approach had positive influences on the behavioral outcomes of the students overall, but especially remarkable results were observed with the AI students (Brownlee et al. 2009). Their findings suggest that the mere act of assessing one's internal and external assets can lead to a heightened awareness of those assets, as well as an increased motivation to fulfill one's personal potential.

As mentioned previously, Stiffman et al. (2007) examined the relationship between the positive factors within individuals, families, and environments and grade point average, youth functioning, and ethnic identity outcomes. Their findings "point to a complex relationship in which strengths and problems are not opposite ends of a continuum, and appear to be largely independent of one another" (p. 343). In their discussion, it is inferred that specific types of strengths, such as neighborhood safety, are more important than the quantity of strengths in any given category. If indeed the *types* of strengths are more important than the *quantity* of strengths in their relationship with youth outcomes, then a more qualitative exploration of youth strengths is warranted.

Present Study

The present study builds upon the literature in several ways. Given the benefits of using the strengths perspective, this study aims to identify sources of strength in the lives and communities of AI youth, while simultaneously identifying those aspects of their lives and communities in need of change. Second, there has been little research of the strengths perspective outside of the therapist-client relationship, particularly with Northern Plains AI youth. This study expands the knowledge on this perspective to include Northern Plains AI youth, and applies the strengths perspective to their identifiers drawn from reflecting upon their lived experiences. The goal of this study is to provide a descriptive account of the positive aspects of the lives and communities identified by AI youth.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Data collection for the present study was conducted in the spring and fall of 2009 at one tribal school in the Northern Plains. High school students (grades 9–12) in the main and alternative high school classrooms were recruited through school announcements where research staff explained study procedures and distributed consent/assent forms. Written consent or assent was obtained from all participants, and parental consent was obtained for participants younger than 18 years of age. In the fall, parental consent was obtained concordant with parent-teacher conferences. Students were offered a $20 gift card to a retail store for their participation in the survey. All study procedures were approved by Sanford Research/USD Institutional Review Board, Aberdeen Area Institutional Review Board, and by the local tribe through tribal resolution.

The sample included 95 participants (n = 58 females, n = 37 males). The majority of participants were recruited in the fall (71.6 %) and were in the main high school classrooms (76.8 %) as opposed to the alternative high school classrooms (23.2 %). The mean age of the students was 17.3 years old (SD = 1.47 years, range: 14.4–20.95 years). It should be noted that this sample may not be representative of all tribal youth of this age group since a number of youth may have dropped out of high school prior to the age at which this sample was drawn. All of the students identified as American Indian/Native American, with small percentages of students also reporting additional ethnic backgrounds since participants were allowed to check several ethnicities. A majority of the sample (n = 82) checked being exclusively of American Indian (AI) ethnicity (85.3 %), 9 students identified as AI and European American (White) ethnicity (9.5 %), 3 students identified as AI and Hispanic American or Latino ethnicity (3.2 %), one student identified as AI and African-American (Black) ethnicity (2.1 %), and one student identified as being of AI, African American, and European American ethnicity (1.1 %). The students also had a range of living situations, such that 27.7 % lived with both parents, 35.4 % lived with their mother, 10.4 % lived with their father, 9.5 % lived with grandparent(s), 11.5 % lived with an "other" adult (e.g., auntie, romantic partner's parent), and 5.3 % lived without any other adults in the household.

Measures

Youth responded to the following open-ended questions in writing on the survey:

1. Personal strengths: "What are some things you love about your life?"
2. Personal challenges: "What are some things you would change about your life?"
3. Community strengths: "What are some things you love about your community?"
4. Community challenges: "What are some things you would change about your community?"

Analysis

Responses to the open-ended survey questions were typed verbatim and entered into an Excel file for analysis. No qualitative software was used in the analysis. Rather, responses were coded through the method of inductive content analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994; Morgan 1993). Through content analysis, themes and codes emerged after the third author carefully reviewed the data multiple times. While reviewing the data, the third author developed an initial list of codes that were related to the themes that were created. In accordance with recommendations from Miles and Huberman (1994), codes were developed in the following fashion: (a) codes were assigned from the start list to the responses; (b) the start list of codes was revised as needed; (c) the coding scheme was applied to all responses; (d) accurate records of coding were maintained throughout the process.

Reliability

Inter-rater reliability was used to assess the consistency in which the authors were in agreement about the categories in which the qualitative data was coded. In order to assess and report inter-rater reliability, the recommendations of Lombard et al. (2005) were followed. The present study used Cohen's Kappa (Cohen 1960) to determine reliability based on the characteristics of the variables. Cohen's Kappa was selected as the appropriate index because of its ability to account for agreement that is simply due to chance, this index has been described as the measure of choice (Dewey 1983) and is frequently used in research that involves coding behavior (Bakeman 2000).

Reliability was assessed through a series of steps. A small sample of responses were selected by the third author and the second author was trained by learning what categories the data samples would be coded, and the reasoning for coding the data in that manner was explained. A pilot test was then used to further assess reliability after the second author was trained on the coding methods. In accordance with the general standard (Lacy and Riffe 1996), a random sample of 30 units was used during the pilot reliability test. During the pilot, the second author performed coding without consultation with or guidance from the third author. Pilot reliability results were calculated via Predictive Analytics SoftWare (PASW) and kappa values were found to be acceptable (range 0.78–1.00).

In cases where there was a disagreement between the primary and secondary coder, discussion yielded a consensus about how the response should be coded and whether revisions or clarifications of the coding scheme were needed. Authors were in agreement that reliability levels were adequate and another randomly selected sample of the data was used to assess full sample reliability. In accordance with the guidelines offered by Lombard et al. (2005), 25 % of all responses were coded by the second author. Full sample kappa ranges (0.82 –0.90) determined that inter-rater reliability was found to be adequate especially in light of the number of possible categories (Perreault and Leigh 1989).

Validity

Scholars have written about three types of validity which pertain to qualitative research: (1) descriptive validity, (2) interpretive validity, (3) and theoretical validity. *Descriptive validity* refers to the accuracy in which the researchers reported descriptive information (Johnson 1997; Maxwell 1992). For the present study, descriptive validity was strengthened through the use of participants' own written responses and through investigator triangulation. Investigator triangulation was obtained by means of cross-checking coding schemes to ensure that the investigators agreed upon the categorization of the data, which was discussed previously in the section on inter-rater reliability. Descriptive validity was further enhanced by means of recording participant responses verbatim and through the frequent reporting of participants' exact words in the "Results" section of this paper. *Interpretive validity*, which refers to the accuracy in which the researchers portrayed the meaning attached to the data as perceived by the participants (Johnson 1997; Maxwell 1992), was also strengthened through the use of verbatim responses in that little was left up to interpretation outside of the creation of categories in which the verbatim responses were coded. *Theoretical validity*, which refers to the degree to which the theoretical explanation(s) developed from the study fits the data (Johnson 1997; Maxwell 1992), was evident in the present study by means of interpreting raw data through the lens of the strengths perspective. Therefore, the results and discussion relate closely to the actual written responses of the participants and would be deemed as having strong theoretical validity.

Results

Description of Open-Ended Responses

Because questions were open-ended, the youth varied in their responses, ranging from multiple comments to no comments at all. In general, youth were more willing to identify a multitude strengths as opposed to challenges. This pattern will be explored in further detail in the "Discussion" section of this paper.

Individual Life

Personal Strengths

All 95 participants responded to the question regarding what they love about their lives. AI youth averaged 2.08 responses for positive aspects in their lives, with a range from one to five. Categories of their responses along with the frequencies of categories mentioned are displayed in Table 2. Similar to the strengths reported by youths in the study conducted by Stiffman et al. (2007), common themes reported related to the youths' families, peers, themselves, and their community environment. The most frequently referenced theme mentioned by the youth was family (58.9 % of total responses). For example, when asked what she loves about her life, one 19-year-old female wrote,

> I love that I have a beautiful daughter. I'm glad I have her. I love that I'm athletic and that I like school. I love my family that I have in my life. I love that I have a good family that always supports me.

Friends and significant others were the next most recurrent theme and, in many cases, responses included both family and friends. For instance, one 16-year-old male wrote, "I pretty much love everything. My family especially, my friends, and the blessings and I [*sic*] opportunities I receive mean a lot to me too." The frequency in which youth cited loving "everything" about their lives (10.5 % of total responses) is also noteworthy. Overall, the positive aspects referenced by the youth are consistent with traditional AI values of collectivism and community.

Personal Challenges

All 95 participants responded to the question regarding what they would change about their lives. When identifying sources of struggle in their personal lives, AI youth did not provide as many extended responses in comparison to their identification of sources of strength, with an average of 1.19 responses and a range from one to four. Categories of their responses along with their frequencies are displayed in Table 3. Youth indicated they would not change anything about their lives more frequently than any other theme (32.6 % of total responses). However, few of the respondents expanded on this response. Those that did expand on this response indicated a reasoning reflecting general satisfaction with their lives. For example, a 14-year-old female wrote, "Nothing really cuz I like my life how it is." Other examples included an 18-year-old

Table 2 Positive aspects of personal life identified by AI youth (N = 95)

Response	n	%[a]	Example responses
Family	56	58.9	"My daughter and my family"
			"I love that my family is always there for one another"
			"I love that I have a mom and dad"
Friends/significant other	35	36.8	"I love it when I get to spend time with my friends outside of school"
			"Friends that are there [*sic*] for me"
			"My girlfriend"
Myself	23	24.2	"I love the things I'm doing now"
			"Spiritual, lovable, caring, intelligent"
			"I love that I'm proud to myself"
Extracurricular activities/job	22	23.2	"my job"
			"I can play the guitar real good"
			"I love my bullriding career and mainly sports"
School	22	23.2	"…the way my life is going, education wise"
			"I love that I am still in school"
			"I love that I have a school to go to"
Culture	15	15.8	"Being Native"
			"I love my culture very much"
			"It's [*sic*] going to pow-wows"
Everything	10	10.5	"I love everything"
			"I pretty much love everything"
			"I love everything about my life. Life is too short to hate things"
Environment	7	7.4	"where I live"
			"I love the fact that I grew up on the reservation"
			"home"
Miscellaneous	4	4.2	"getting high all the time"
			"I love to do anything but stay home with my dad"
Don't know	3	3.2	"I wouldn't say I love muy [*sic*] life, but I guess you can say I think muh [*sic*] life iz [*sic*] ok"
			"don't really know"

Percentages do not add to 100 as a result of multiple responses

[a] Percent of responses that fall into this category

male who wrote, "I wouldn't change anything at all. My life was and is a learning experience. I LOVE MY LIFE ☺," and an 18-year-old female who wrote, "Actaully [*sic*] I wouldn't change anything about my life. Because I wouldn't be where I am today. No regrets."

The next most recurrent theme was the choices youth made (23.2 % of total responses). Similar to AI youth risk behaviors reported in previous studies, youths reported dropping out of high school, teen pregnancy, and substance abuse as common sources of struggle in their personal lives (Faircloth and Tippeconnic 2010; Hamilton et al. 2009; Potthoff et al. 1998). These responses often reflected feelings of regret in terms of truancy, drugs and alcohol abuse, and sexual activity. For instance, a 19-year-old female wrote, "If I could change something about my life I would of [*sic*] never drop [*sic*] out of school in the first place. Cause I could be so far ahead if I never made the wrong choices." In addition, a 19-year-old male wrote, "All the trouble I got into. To learn the first time I made an [*sic*] mistake," And a 16-year old female who wrote, "My drug/alcohol abuse, my attitude towards authority."

On the other hand, some youth indicated their desire to change the choices other people in their lives had made. A 17-year old female wrote, "The rez [*sic*]. I would like to shape it so there was more help to stay in school, away from drugs/alcohol. I d/k [*sic*] stuff like that, plus more help with young familys [*sic*]." A 14-year old female wrote, "Bringing my Auntie back, to help my mom with her bills at home, to have my dad to [*sic*] quit drinking." Other examples included a comment written by a 16-year-old female, "I would like to have all my family drug free & liven [*sic*] nice & happy lifes [*sic*],"and another comment written by a 17-year-old female, "I would change muh [*sic*] family and how they treat me."

Table 3 Aspects of personal life in need of change identified by AI youth (N = 95)

Response	n	%[a]	Example responses
Nothing	31	32.6	"nothing really"
			"Nothing"
			"Nothing to change"
The choices I've made	22	23.2	"Most of the wrong decisions I have made"
			"stop getting into trouble"
			"Not to be as wild"
School related	14	14.7	"finish school"
			"be in my right grade"
			"to be more devoted to school"
Substance abuse	12	12.6	"stop getting high"
			"My drinking"
			"…my dad to quit drinking"
Living situation/environment	12	12.6	"I would change living on the reservation"
			"Where I live"
			"my living conditions"
Family related	11	11.6	"I would change how I treat my parents"
			"My family's bad habits"
			"My family issues"
Miscellaneous	5	5.3	"Morning optimism"
			"? Stayin [*sic*] home"
Appearance	3	3.2	"My appearance"
			"My weight. My health"
Don't know	3	3.2	"Idk"
			"I don't know"

Percentages do not add to 100 as a result of multiple responses

[a] Percent of responses that fall into this category

Overall, AI youths' responses reflect a positive orientation toward their personal lives. A positive orientation which, compared to their responses regarding their community lives, would indicate either greater satisfaction in their personal lives or less influence and control over their community lives. This topic will be touched on briefly in the following "Results " section and explored in greater depth in the "Discussion" section of this paper.

Community Life

Community Strengths

On the question regarding what they love about their communities, 86 participants responded to this question (six youth did not respond). As previously noted, the youth were less likely to produce a response in regard to community strengths compared to strengths in their personal lives, with an average of 1.21 responses, and a range from none to three. Response categories and their frequencies are illustrated in Table 4. The youth's responses to community strengths were similar to their responses to positive aspects in their lives. The youth consistently emphasized the people in their lives including their family, friends, and the population in general as things they love about their community (43.8 % of total responses). A 17-year-old female wrote, "You never can feel poor or rich someone out there has been in your shoes and can help or tell you were [*sic*] to go." An 18-year-old male commented, "I love my family and friends!!! The schools, resturants [*sic*], and the people that are positive." This is consistent with previous research conducted by Blyth (1993) in which the most commonly reported sources of community strengths for the youth surveyed in their study were family care and support.

Consistent with other sources of community strengths reported in the Blyth (1993) study, other community benefits frequently cited by youth were the various activities, resources, and facilities available to them. Things mentioned by the youth included powwows, schools, fitness centers, parks, casinos, etc. It was also of interest the frequency in which youth mentioned "nothing" in reference to community strengths (9 % of total responses). In comparison to their comments regarding the sources of strength in their personal lives, the youth identified fewer sources of strength in their communities, and their responses were less detailed. Reasons for fewer identifiers of community

Table 4 Community strengths identified by AI youth (N = 89)

Response	n	%[a]	Example responses
People/atmosphere	39	43.8	"The people here are friendly"
			"The closeness of the people. All the friendly people who wave"
			"the population"
Facilities/resources/ activities	20	22.5	"How we have opportunities to get an educations [*sic*]"
			"community events and activities"
			"The things we have"
Culture/traditions	17	19.1	"culture"
			"That we are all Native American"
			"They represent our own culture! Oh yeah"
Location/environment	13	14.6	"I love the wildlife in our community"
			"The place feels good"
			"The land I live on"
Nothing	8	9.0	"nothing…(boring)"
			"nothing really"
Miscellaneous	5	5.6	"Joe"
			"It's alright"
Everything	4	4.5	"pretty much everything"
			"Everything"
Don't know	3	3.4	"I don't know"
			"Idk"

Percentages do not add to 100 as a result of multiple responses

Six participants did not respond to the question

[a] Percent of responses that fall into this category

strengths will be explored in the following "Discussion" section of this paper.

Community Challenges

Ninety youth responded to the question regarding things they would change about their communities (five youth did not respond).Youth averaged 1.19 responses to community challenges with a range from none to three (see Table 5). Given the high rates of substance abuse among Northern Plains AI youth reported in previous research (e.g., Beals et al. 1997; Spear et al. 2005), it was not surprising to find that substance abuse was the most frequently noted theme in the youth's indicators of the community's challenges (20 % of total responses). For example, one 16-year-old female wrote, "the alcohol and drugs are killing my people and our culture." Those youth indicating alcohol and substance abuse as an element of their community they would like to see change indicated that such abuse is a problem among both the youth and adults alike. In reference to aspects of her community she would like to change, an 18-year-old female wrote, "Fix the roads. Clean it up. Make it safe for kids. Not as much teen & overall drug & alcohol abuse." Their comments indicate that alcohol and substance abuse is a community-wide struggle, which has been well documented by previous researchers.

Other aspects of their community youth indicated they would like to change largely included the appearance and quality of their environment. Items mentioned for this question largely referenced littering and poor road quality. Similar to their identifiers of the aspects of their personal lives they would like to change, a number of youth also expressed a desire to change "nothing" about their community (16.7 % of total responses). Possible explanations for this response will be explored in the following discussion.

Discussion

Overall, AI youths' responses reflect a positive orientation toward both their personal lives and their communities. This was evident in the fact that youth identified more strengths as opposed to challenges in both their personal lives and their communities. This was further highlighted by the fact that when asked to identify sources of struggle in their personal lives, the most commonly referenced theme was "nothing." Furthermore, a significant number of youth indicated they would not change anything about their communities as well. At first glance, this finding was somewhat surprising given that poverty, substance abuse, homicide, and suicide among residents have been continuous and serious problems on the reservations in the Northern Plains. However, strengths based practitioners "do not accept the notion of treatment-resistant children and families and hopeless communities" (Laursen 2000, p. 73). Rather, this approach challenges us to counter

Table 5 Aspects of community in need of change identified by AI youth (N = 90)

Response	n	%[a]	Example responses
Substance abuse	18	20.0	"being able to stop young teens from alcohol"
			"Drugs, alcohol, teenage smoking"
			"stop the pill drug abuse"
Appearance/ environment	16	17.8	"all the trash"
			"The way it looks"
			"I would change all the messed up roads we have"
Nothing	15	16.7	"nothing really"
			"I wouldn't change anything"
			"nothing"
People	14	14.7	"I would like to change the people who aren't positive"
			"That most people need to grow-up and like there [*sic*] life better"
			"the cops"
Lack of support	10	15.6	"More help"
			"bad influences on kids"
			"I would get rid of racism"
More facilities/activities	9	10.0	"more recreational buildings"
			"what we have to do to kill time"
			"more family activities"
Violence/safety	7	7.8	"Violence"
			"I want to make it a safe and better place w/the bad stuff"
			"gang & violence"
Don't know	7	7.8	"I'm not absolutely sure"
			"Don't care"
Money problems	6	6.7	"I would change the way we manage our income"
			"the big money problems we have"
			"The minimum wage for jobs"
Everything	6	6.7	"everything"
			"Everything that need to be changed"
			"a lot because I think this town is horrible"

Percentages do not add to 100 as a result of multiple responses

Five participants did not respond to the question

[a] Percent of responses that fall into this category

beliefs about pathology and risks and assist youth in identifying, securing, and sustaining both formal and informal resources within their communities. The results reported in this study indicate that these youth possess a variety of adaptive developmental assets amidst an environment characterized by a range of adverse circumstances, thus reflecting high levels of resiliency amongst the Northern Plains AI youth in our sample.

In recognizing that youth may face risks within their environments, it is advised to design interventions which address the broader systemic sources of these risks. To build upon youth resilience, programs should be directed not only towards the individual, but also the families and communities in which the youth is embedded. The people in their lives, especially their families, were repeatedly cited as sources of strength by AI youth. Therefore, families may be an important, yet previously neglected source of strength as an integral component of community-based interventions with AI youth. The need for intervention efforts involving AI youth to be directed toward families has been documented by other researchers (Boyd-Ball 2003; Gittelsohn et al. 2003; Strickland et al. 2006). Previous research indicates that such efforts may be especially fruitful in the areas of substance abuse and suicide prevention (Family Resource Coalition 1991; O'Nell 1993). Therefore, expanding intervention efforts to include their broader social environment would be a critical way in which to help promote the strengths and resilience of American Indian youth.

Signs of resiliency were also evident in youths' positive orientation toward the future, which was demonstrated by the reoccurring idea of investment in education as a source of strength. For example, when asked what she loves about her life, one 20-year-old female wrote, "I love going to school so I can get a good education." In response to the same question, a 16-year-old female wrote, "I love how it is all somewhat coming togeather [*sic*]. The home I'm liven [*sic*] in people I'm staying with, & all my schooling." Identification of educational opportunities was also evident in their indicators of community strengths. When asked

what she loves about her community, one 19-year-old female wrote, "How we have opportunities to get an educations [*sic*]." In response to the same question, an 18-year-old female wrote, "The schools & the very or many opportunities it gives you like help." Youths' positive orientation toward the future was further confirmed by the desire of youth to make better choices in regard to their schooling. For instance, when asked what things she would change about her life, one 19-year-old female wrote, "My schooling. I would come to school more often, be on time and keep my grades up."

As previously noted, in comparison to participants' comments regarding the sources of strength in their personal lives, the youth identified fewer sources of strength in their communities. Although reasons for why youth gave fewer identifiers of community strengths can only be inferred, one possible explanation can be drawn from the similarity between the categories of identified strengths in both their lives and communities. The youth may not have expanded on their descriptions of strengths in their communities to avoid repeating previous responses or as a result of growing weary of elaborating on their responses. Of course, another possibility is that youth struggled to identify community strengths due to a lack of strengths to identify. Furthermore, the role of power and influence on AI youth's perceptions of their capacity to both identify those things in need of change and participate in the change process may also be playing a role. This ambiguity is reflected by the suggestion of AI youths to change "nothing" in their lives and communities. However, without youth detailing further explanation, the reason for such responses is unclear. It may be inferred that such comments are indicating either a general satisfaction with their lives and communities *or* feelings of powerlessness to change their lives and communities. Utilization of the strengths perspective would lean towards interpreting the data in the former way, envisioning that these youth are resilient and hold an optimistic viewpoint towards life in general.

Limitations, Future Directions, and Conclusions

Due to the preliminary state of strengths research and measurement, the purpose of this study was to identify the sources of strengths and struggles for AI youth. This approach is an extension of the majority of strengths based research. A strengths approach is most often used as a collaborative method between social worker and client to assist individuals, families, schools, and/or communities in identifying risk factors, protective factors, internal and external strengths, goals, strategies, and definition of success in order to promote empowerment and/or to formulate intervention objectives (Early and GlenMaye 2000, 2001). The findings presented here are merely the first step in this process. Future research could actively pursue the latter part of this process in which researchers work collaboratively with this community using the strengths approach to guide goal setting, transformation, and improving the quality of day-to-day living.

There are many examples of how effective program practices can promote positive aspects of youth while simultaneously eliminating or reducing negative aspects. However, it is not a simple process, and requires an entire transformation of practices (Brendtro et al. 2005). In addition to those items listed in Table 1, some suggestions include: (1) providing training to program staff to enhance understanding and utilization of the strengths based approach (Espiner and Guild 2010); (2) include self-defined goal setting and service to others as integral components of the program curriculum (Feinstein et al. 2009; Laursen 2000), (3) encourage program participants to be involved in extra-curricular/community activities and mentorship through those activities (Blyth 1993; Feinstein et al. 2009), and (4) involve youth at risk as collaborative partners in program development and implementation (Seita 2004). These strategies can be used to build, promote, and sustain strengths and resources as integral components of prevention and intervention efforts.

Because this study is confined to AI youth from one tribe, the generalizability of the findings presented in this study are limited in scope and do not represent the nationwide population of AI youth. This sample was not randomly chosen since youth who dropped out of school were not surveyed for this study. Therefore, the findings reported here may underrepresent the breadth of strengths and challenges experienced by youth on this reservation. It should also be noted that a possible drawback to our approach to measuring strengths by means of open-ended questions, is that youth referenced only a few sources of strengths and challenges in their brief responses. Perhaps a more diverse range of responses could have been obtained by providing respondents with a list of strengths and challenges to select from, or by using a different qualitative approach such as in-depth focus groups or interviews. Case studies of individual American Indian youth or even entire tribal communities may also be useful to expand the literature by including AI youth narratives. Future research could also compare responses between American Indian youth to responses from non-American Indian youth or compare responses of youth living on the reservation to those living off of the reservation.

Regardless of this study's limitations, the identified strengths discussed in this paper can be used to inform the development of programs intended to circumvent struggles relevant to the lives of AI youth. As demonstrated by the previous successes of program interventions utilizing a

strengths perspective, this approach has a promising potential to help youth employ their strengths to combat their struggles. American Indian communities have a long history of rearing children with a value system that is consistent with the process of positive youth development (Brokenleg and Van Bockern 2003). As such, program intervention serving AI youth may benefit through the utilization of a strengths-based approach. Implementation of the Circle of Courage model (Brendtro et al. 1990), which focuses on building strengths in youths' lives, has been shown to be effective when working with AI youth and other underserved populations (e.g., Espiner and Guild 2010; Feinstein et al. 2009; Lee and Perales 2005). This strengths-based approach works because it defines the problems of youth in terms of strengths and developmental needs which can be further developed through culturally-based programs for AI youth (Kenyon and Hanson 2012).

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