"I Want to Leave—Go Far Away—I Don't Want to Get Stuck on the Res[ervation]": Developmental Outcomes of Adolescent-Aged Children of Navajo Native American Teen Mothers

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Abstract

In 1992 and 1995, data were collected from 29 Navajo Reservation teenage mothers. In 2007, 71% (*n* = 21) of the original sample participated in a follow-up investigation. Then in 2008, data were collected from their children. Here, we present results of the 2008 investigation by describing the developmental outcomes of 14 "at risk" youth—those born to Navajo Native American adolescent mothers. Grounded in Ecological Systems Theory, our primary goal was to identify risk and protective factors across social and physical contexts (e.g., family, peer, school, and reservation community). A supplemental goal was to examine associations among indices of psycho-social well-being (e.g., depression, parental conflict, social support). Results revealed a consistent pattern of youth functioning, which allowed classification of participants into three distinct groups: well-adapted,

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overcoming, and struggling. Verbal reports and survey indices supported the classifications. Implications and suggestions for continued research are discussed.

Keywords

Introduction

The children of adolescent mothers are considered "at risk" for a host of negative and detrimental developmental outcomes when compared with peers born to adult mothers. These threats to optimal development are well-established and range from cognitive impairments and emotional problems (Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, Belsky, & Silva, 2001) to delinquency and academic adjustment difficulties (Brooks-Gunn & Furstenberg, 1986), substance abuse, early sexual activity and off-time parenting, and continued cognitive and behavior problems (Klein, 2005). On the other hand, resilience—or the ability to achieve positive outcomes in the face of adversity—is also well-established among children exposed to difficult life circumstances (Bottrell, 2009; Dumont & Provost, 1998), including being born to teenage mothers and the chronic stressors often associated with such (SmithBattle, 2006). It was within this context of developmental challenge—tempered by hopeful potential—that the present investigation was conceived. Despite voluminous literature on adolescent mothers and their children, significant gaps remain. First, studies including older children and particularly those targeting the adolescent-aged children of young mothers, are rare. Second, although the adolescent parenting literature is replete with investigations of Black, White, and (to some extent) Latina youth, studies involving Native American participants are exceptionally uncommon, despite rates of teenage parenting on some reservations that far exceed national statistics. Finally, the majority of investigations of adolescent mothers and their children focus on urban populations, with rural samples regularly overlooked. This investigation was intended to help fill gaps in the literature by exploring the developmental outcomes of adolescent-aged children of Navajo Native American teenage mothers.

Grounded in Ecological Systems Theory (EST), the goals of this study were, first and foremost, to identify risk and protective factors within and across the key social contexts (e.g., family, peer, school) navigated by a particularly unique sample of youth. A secondary goal was to examine

associations among indices of psycho-social well-being assumed critical for optimal developmental outcomes. A brief review of the literature frames the investigation.

Children of Adolescent Mothers: An "At Risk" Group

Despite marked variability in the developmental outcomes of teenage mothers (Oxford et al., 2005; Rich & Kim, 1999), the precariousness of youthful parenting often creates vulnerability in their offspring, thereby putting them "at risk" for a host of negative outcomes (Apfel & Seitz, 1997). Carothers, Borkowski, and Whitman (2006) explain, "Children born to adolescent mothers have heightened vulnerability for exposure to multiple stressful life events owing to factors associated with teenaged parenthood such as poverty and low levels of maternal education" (p. 827). Stresses stemming from young mothers' poverty and educational deficits may create cumulative, even life-long problems for their children (Lipman, Georgiades, & Boyle, 2011; Shaw, Gilliom, Ingoldsby, & Nagin, 2003).

Still, the heterogeneity and resilience of children born to adolescent mothers has also been documented. In a recent study, Smithbattle and Leonard (2012) contrast two cases of (now adult) first-born children of adolescent mothers. Their work sharply illustrates the diverse outcomes and cumulative impact of social advantage/disadvantage, illuminating ". . . how an early birth for one mother and her first-born child tells us *very little and may inadvertently blunt important distinctions* that precede and organize the transition into parenting and adulthood" (p. 412). Rhule, McMahon, Spieker, and Munson (2006) find similarly compelling evidence of resilience among older children of adolescent mothers. In a 10-year follow-up focusing on positive adjustment and associated protective factors, most (89%) participants were positively adjusted in at least one domain of functioning, and 20% were positively adjusted across all domains examined.

Risk and Protective Factors

The ability to overcome adversity—to thrive in the face of hardship and disadvantage—is most often referred to as "resilience" (Garmezy, 1985). Protective factors promote resilience in the face of cumulative risk (Garmezy, 1985) and can be found within individuals (e.g., positive coping strategies, humor, intelligence) as well as their social and physical environments (e.g., nurturing families, academically minded schools, and supportive communities). In contrast, risk factors increase the probability for unhealthy outcomes. Identification and understanding of both risk and protective factors, across

multiple contexts within which "at risk" youth are embedded, is essential for developing effective intervention and promoting optimal well-being (Goebert et al., 2012).

EST

Beginning at birth, individuals are embedded within multifaceted and multi-layered hierarchically organized social systems (i.e., micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-).. It is the interaction between the person (including all her or his personal characteristics) and her or his sociocultural environment, which dictate developmental process and outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1989, 2005). In this study, family of origin, school, and peer group comprised the micro-systems of greatest interest. Meso-system influences were examined via connections across these micro-systems. Finally, because of the unique sample, we focused on Navajo culture and the reservation community as elements representing the macro-system.

Micro-systems: Family, peers, school. The influence of family relationships and familial patterns of behavior cannot be overstated in the developmental outcomes of youth. Certain variables, including parental attachment and nurturance (Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000) and monitoring behaviors (Racz & McMahon, 2011) are particularly noteworthy protective factors, whereas exposure to family violence (Houltberg, Henry, & Morris, 2012) and substance abuse (Natti & Levy-Cahana, 2011) comprise distinct and significant risk factors. Similarly, the school context offers additional opportunities for youth exposure to risk (e.g., bullying; Lösel & Bender, 2014) as well as protective processes and factors (e.g., caring teachers, rigorous academic standards; Ludwig & Warren, 2009). Peers too, may serve important roles in youths' exposure to risk/protective factors and processes—by encouraging substance use, violence, and/or deviant behaviors, on one hand (Low, Polanin, & Espelage, 2013), or by promoting academic achievement and prosocial activities (Carson, 2013) on the other. Furthermore, interplay across micro-systems (i.e., meso-system influences) is expected. To illustrate, warm, nurturing parents who value educational success (family micro-system) often promote patterns of academic achievement (school micro-system) via encouragement, support, and monitoring.

Macro-system: Navajo Reservation community and culture. Communities characterized by violence, poverty, educational underachievement, and substance abuse incur significant challenges to optimal well-being (Szlemko, Wood, & Thurman, 2006). Such conditions are common to many Native American

reservation communities, including the Navajo. The Navajo Reservation encompasses 26,000 square miles of high desert in Arizona, New Mexico, and Southern Utah (Bureau of Indian Affairs [BIA], 2003). Reservation unemployment ranges from 6% to 57% and over 30% of reservation families are classified as impoverished (First Things First, 2010). Educationally, nearly half (47%) of Navajo Reservation students fall below standards for math, and fewer than 60% of reservation ninth graders graduate high school (Willeto, 1999). And, although alcohol sales are illegal on the Navajo Reservation, alcoholism rates are six times that of national statistics (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2002). On the other hand, the reservation is physically beautiful—characterized by rock cliffs, expansive mesas, and red siltstone; 85% of tribal members live on the reservation (BIA, 2003)—suggesting a community rich in heritage and extended kin. For those interested in learning, traditional lifestyles (i.e., pastoralism) and skills (i.e., craft and jewelry making) as well as cultural ceremonies (e.g., Kinaalda) are still practiced on the Navajo Reservation. Knowledge of and pride in one's tribal heritage and culture may buffer reservation youth from dire developmental outcomes. Recent studies provide compelling evidence of such (LaFromboise, Hoyt, Oliver, & Whitbeck, 2006; Pu et al., 2013).

Building on the work of others, the primary goal of this investigation was to identify risk and protective factors, faced by a unique "at risk" sample of youth, across key social and environmental contexts. A secondary goal was to examine associations among indices of psycho-social well-being assumed critical for optimal developmental outcomes.

Method

Procedures

In 1992, the primary investigator (PI) collected survey and interview data from 21 Navajo adolescent mothers living in a small community in the heart of the Navajo Reservation. In 1995, she returned to the Navajo Reservation and collected survey and interview data from eight additional adolescent mothers residing in an adjacent community. These data formed the basis of the PI's master's thesis (1992) and doctoral dissertation (1996) and are collectively referred to as *Time 1*. In 2007 (*Time 2*), the PI returned to the Navajo Reservation and collected follow-up data from 74% (*n* = 21) of the original sample. One year later, the PI again returned to the Navajo Reservation to collect data from the oldest child of each of the 21 *Time 2* mothers. With the help of a Navajo assistant, youth participants were located through their mothers or extended family members and by word-of-mouth. Parents

completed a parental consent form and participants completed a youth assent form. Participants were assigned an ID number and then completed a series of self-report survey questionnaires followed by an open-ended, semistructured and audio-recorded interview. All data were collected in a convenient, private location (e.g., room in participant's home). Data collection lasted an average of 60 minutes with each participant (range = 40-90 minutes), and youth were compensated US$20 for their time.

Trustworthiness. An audit trail, in addition to triangulation and member checks, helped ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation of method was achieved through the mixed-method approach; when interview and survey data conflicted (e.g., differences between survey and interview responses), discrepancies were addressed at the time of data collection and clarification obtained. In the member check, issues discussed in one interview (e.g., youth access to drugs or alcohol) were broached anonymously in subsequent interviews to obtain multiple perspectives. Finally, during the interviews, the PI interpreted participants' statements and requested further clarification or confirmation of understanding as needed.

Participants

Sixteen youth were located. One refused to participate and another was severely cognitively impaired and thus unable to participate. Our total sample was 14. Participants ranged in age from 14 to 21 years (*M* = 16.2 years). Eleven were enrolled in high school, 1 had graduated and 2 had dropped out. Most (*n* = 8) lived in two-parent homes. Four participants (28%) were mothers themselves (3 had one child, 1 had two children); their children ranged in age from 12 to 24 months (*M* = 20.2 months) and were born when the participants were, on average, 16.2 years old (range = 14-19 years; see Table 1).

Interview Protocol

Interviews were semistructured and divided into five sections based on contexts of interest (i.e., family, school, peers, community/Navajo Reservation, and culture). Open-ended and follow-up questions were posed to help identify potential risk and protective factors within and across each context (e.g., emotional support, exposure to violence). For instance, in the "school" section, sample questions included the following: Can you tell me a little bit about school, for instance, what do you like about it? What don't you like about it? Do you feel like you are "successful" in school (why/why not)? What are some of your biggest school/academic accomplishments? What are

Table 1. Demographic Data.

Variables	Total sample (*n* = 14)
Age	
M	16.2
Range	14–21
Female gender (*n*)	8
Education	
Attending school with no disruptions	11
Dropped out/returned and graduated	1
Dropped out/returned and enrolled	1
Dropped out/never returned	2
Current grade (range)	8th-12th
Current GPA (*M*/range)	3.3 (3.0-3.9)
Residence (*n*)	
Parents	8
Mother	5
Partner	1
Total household members (*M*/range)	6.2 (3-11)
Have own children (*n*)	4
Number of children (total)	5
Children's ages (*M*/range)	20.2 months (12-24 months)
Age when first child born (*M*/range)	16.2 years (14-19 years)
Currently dating (*n*)	6
Length of current relationship (*M*/range)	30.8 months (10 months to 48 months)
Sexually active (*n*)	5
Using birth control (*n*)	3
Employment (*n*)	
Working full-time	1
Working and attending school	4
Not working and not attending school	2
Navajo language proficient (*n*)	6

Note. GPA = grade point average.

your biggest school/academic challenges? Are you involved in any sports or extracurricular activities? and so on. Although relationships and experiences within and across the five contexts formed the foci of each interview, specific questions were tailored to the *unique* developmental experiences of each youth (i.e., follow-up questions eliciting greater detail and depth were necessarily based on responses provided in prior questions). To illustrate, some

participants were involved in numerous extracurricular activities (e.g., sports), which played a significant protective role by motivating them to avoid alcohol and drugs, whereas other youth were not involved in any extracurricular activities. Clearly, interview questions related to extracurricular involvement differed between those youth. To examine meso-system influences, questions about significant people from one context (e.g., family, peers) were posed in relation to other contexts (e.g., "Would you describe your friends as academically successful or not? Why/why not?" or "How does your mom help you be successful at school?").

Survey Indices (Listed Alphabetically)

Self-report survey indices to assess personal attributes (i.e., depression) and relational dynamics (i.e., relational conflict/distress, social support) supplemented verbal reports.

Children's Attitude Toward Mother (CAM) and Father (CAF). The CAM and CAF measure the severity of problems experienced with parents and include identical 25-items except for the appropriate exchange of "father" and "mother." Higher scores indicate greater distress and the presence of more severe problems; scores above 70 indicate severe relationship stress. The scales demonstrate excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .91$ and $\alpha = .93$) and validity (Hudson, 1997).

Depression Self-Rating Scale (DSRS). This is an 18-item instrument measuring depression in children and youth (Birleson, 1981). Items are scored on a 3-point scale (ranging from 0 to 2), with total scale score ranging from 0 to 36. Higher scores indicate more depressive symptomology. It has a cutting score of 13, which discriminates between depressed and nondepressed individuals and demonstrates good test-retest reliability (.80) and concurrent validity, correlating .81 with other instruments measuring depression in children.

Index of Peer Relations (IPR). This is a 25-item instrument to measure the severity or magnitude of problems with peers and is intended for individuals aged 12 or older. Sample questions include, "My peers treat me badly" and "My peers don't even seem to notice me"; responses choices range from 1 to 7 (1 = *none of the time* to 7 = *all of the time*). After reverse coding 12 items and completing all additional computations, total scores may range from 0 to 100; higher scores indicate greater distress. The IPR has two cutting scores: Scores above 30 suggest the presence of a clinically significant problem, and

those above 70 indicate severe stress. The IPR demonstrates good internal consistency ($\alpha = .67$) and excellent validity (.90; see Hudson, 1997).

Norbeck Social Support Questionnaire (NSSQ). The NSSQ (Norbeck, Lindsey, & Carrieri, 1982) asks participants to identity up to six network members and to then answer a series of questions about each (e.g., "How much does this person make you feel liked or loved?"). Response choices range from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*). Total support is obtained by summing all items for each network member. Participants also report frequency of contact and relationship length for each network member. Items have high test-retest reliability (.85-.92).

Data Analysis

Interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis (Aronson, 1994). Analysis begins by thoroughly reading all interview data (i.e., protocols) and adding initial codes. In this study, part of this analysis entailed identifying and summarizing critical elements within each of the five social contexts and cataloging those as potential risk or protective factors. Next, a summary for each youth was created with shared patterns of experience, or themes, documented (e.g., risk associated with substance abuse in the family context). Finally, related patterns were combined and cataloged into subthemes. Each transcript was individually coded by the PI and at least two research assistants (RAs). Data analysis, including coding and identifying emergent themes and subthemes, was discussed in semi-weekly meetings between the PI and RAs. When coding discrepancies arose, transcripts were reexamined until coding agreement was reached. Survey data were coded and entered into an SPSS file (SPSS 21) by the PI, checked for errors (by a doctoral student), and analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlational analyses.

The mixed-method approach allowed for in-depth examination of and comparison between survey and interview data. Our analyses focused on youth outcomes in relation to the presence/absence of risk and protective factors (e.g., social support, parental monitoring, academic performance, extracurricular involvement, risk taking behaviors such as unprotected sex and use of drugs and alcohol) within and across each of the five social contexts examined. These analyses revealed three distinct patterns of psycho-social functioning, including (a) "well-adapted" youth whose social systems were characterized by significantly more protective than risk factors and who demonstrated optimal functioning across multiple ecological and social contexts; (b) youth exposed to numerous developmental risks, but who nonetheless

demonstrated the ability to "overcome" challenges by capitalizing on the few protective factors to which they were also exposed; and (c) youth ill-equipped to prevail against the overwhelming risks to which they were exposed. These youth were "struggling" in nearly every aspect of psycho-social functioning examined. The three patterns, supplemented with case examples, are described below (all names are pseudonyms).

Results

Goal 1: Identify Risk and Protective Factors Across Key Contexts

Well adapted. Of the 14 participants, 6 (4 male, 2 female) demonstrated exemplary functioning across multiple social contexts. These youth described a great respect for their parent(s)' provision of material support, but even more importantly, described nurturing family environments and the presence of emotional support. Shellie, for instance, described her parents as "supporting and caring and loving." A common theme among the well-adapted youth was "talking" with parents; these discussions were frequent and often centered on parental teaching/advising, motivating, and demonstrating interest in other micro-systems (e.g., school, peer). Xavier explained,

> Well, my mom always helped me to get on the right path. She is always telling me to stay in school and do my best and if I want something to get it and not just give up on it.

Similarly, John noted that his entire family was ". . . really close" and that they ". . . talk about stuff that goes on at school . . .." Close relationships with siblings were also noted by these youth, as demonstrated by Trevor who described his relationship with his sister as "Real good, we do a lot of things together." Furthermore, all described frequent contact with extended kin and all included at least one extended family member (e.g., cousin, grandmother) in their support networks (on the NSSQ).

These youth appeared equally engaged in and positive about their school experiences. All six reported above average grades (i.e., As and Bs), described the importance of education for achieving life goals, dedicated time and effort to studying, and enjoyed school and their teachers. Furthermore, all verbalized plans to attend college with two noting specific professional aspirations (i.e., pediatrician, architect). Beyond academics, all six participated in extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, science club) and three spontaneously commented on how sport participation was a deterrent against substance use. At the peer level, well-adapted youth surrounded themselves with friends

who embodied similar values and aspirations, and all reported receiving guidance, encouragement, and emotional support from peers. Shellie, for instance, described her two best friends as ". . . dependable and reliable." Simply stated, for the well-adapted youth, peers provided an additional context from which to receive affirmation and positive regard.

Patterns *across* these micro-systems (i.e., meso-system influences) were also evident. For instance, all six described effective parental monitoring—particularly with regard to opposite-sex relationships. Parental communication about the dangers and risks associated with dating and sexual activity were common and none of the well-adapted youth had been sexually active. Trevor explained,

> No I don't [date] because my mom talks to me about it. She says that it is hard to have a girlfriend and go to school and she said that once you become a father, that's it. Period. You're not going to have a youth life again.

Furthermore, several noted that they had been influenced by parental expectations to avoid other risky behaviors (e.g., substance use) in order to achieve academic goals (e.g., attend college). Jason explained his avoidance of substances: "My family [says] all this stuff about how it [alcohol/drugs] will mess your future up and stuff."

With respect to the macro-system, five youth felt well informed about Navajo culture—cultural knowledge brokered by family and extended kin—and described active involvement in Navajo traditions (e.g., dances, ceremonies). One regularly participated in traditional "Fancy Dance" competitions nationally, and another spoke Navajo with peers. Finally, these youth radiated a positive image, and several self-identified as role models for younger siblings.

Fifteen-year-old Aria exemplifies the well-adapted group. When interviewed, she lived with her mother, stepfather, and four younger siblings. Her mother and stepfather had been together for 9 years. Aria described her mother as ". . . like my best friend" and admired her stepfather because, "Even though he isn't our real dad he treats us like we were his own." She and her mother "talk a lot," and her mother's high educational expectations were frequently conveyed. Aria was also close to her siblings and grandparents. In school, she maintained a 3.2 grade point average (GPA) and appeared academically focused, stating that homework "is the first thing we have to do when we get home." She planned to attend college following graduation and, in the meantime, participated in volleyball, basketball, and the science club at school. Aria had been best friends with the same two girls for the past 4 years—all hoped to become pediatricians. She had never dated nor been sexually active, explaining, "It's [sex] just scary. My mom tells me all this stuff

Table 2. Individual and Group Mean Scores for Navajo Adolescent Self-Report Measures.

Youth groups	CAM	CAF	IPR	DSRS	NSSQ members	NSSQ support
Well adapted						
Aria[a]	30	32	33	7	6	200
Jason	28	33	26	5	6	199
Josiah	48	48	33	3	3	89
Shellie	25	30	25	7	4	127
Trevor	38	—	36	5	3	100
Xavier	39	—	31	6	4	131
Group *M*(SD)	34.7 (8.6)	35.8 (8.3)	30.7 (4.3)	5.5 (1.5)	4.3 (1.4)	141 (48)
Overcoming						
Jordan	64	107[b]	47	6	6	182
Kevin[a]	90	38	60	9	4	121
Sarina	161[b]	29	54	10	2	54
Tabitha[c]	42	62	32	3	3	96
Group *M*(SD)	65.3 (24)	43 (17.1)	48.3 (12.1)	7 (3.2)	3.75 (1.7)	113.3 (53.5)
Struggling						
Cheria[ac]	48	—	44	8	3	98
Kammie[c]	27	—	34	9	5	167
Mariah[c]	42	—	46	8	4	119
Nakota	59	50	45	14	2	53
Group *M* (SD)	44 (13.3)		42.3 (5.6)	9.8 (2.9)	3.5 (1.3)	109.3 (47.3)
Total *M* (SD)	44.6 (18.3)	40.3 (11.9)	39 (10.5)	7.1 (2.9)	3.9 (1.4)	124 (48)

Note. CAM = Children's Attitude Toward Mother; CAF = Children's Attitude Toward Father; IPR = Index of Peer Relations; DSRS = Depression Self-Rating Scale; NSSQ Members = Norbeck Social Support Questionnaire network size; NSSQ Support = Norbeck Social Support Questionnaire perceived support from network members; "—" = data not obtained.
[a]Case-study youth.
[b]Score excluded from group and total sample mean scores due to extreme value.
[c]Teenage mother.

and she starts talking about it and it sounds gross and scary . . . she makes [sex] seem as gross as possible so we don't want to do it." She also avoided substances because her parents would "be really angry with me" and noted that her mother ". . . lectures me about drugs . . . and [how] you aren't going to achieve what you want on drugs."

Scores on survey indices supplemented verbal reports and confirmed the categorization of Aria as well adapted. Specifically, she scored a 32, 30, and 33, respectively, on the CAF, CAM, and IPR—all below sample means (i.e., 40.3, 44.6, and 39), and all scores indicated little relationship distress (refer to Table 2). In addition, she identified the maximum (i.e., 6) number of support network members on the NSSQ (including two best friends, mother,

stepfather, grandmother, and aunt), perceived the greatest *amount* of support (i.e., 200) of all participants in the study, and evidenced minimal depressive symptomology (i.e., score of 7 on the Depression Self-Rating Scale [DSDR]).

Overcoming. Four of the 14 demonstrated a pattern unique from their well-adapted peers. These youth (i.e., 2 males/2 females) faced significant adversity, yet they also identified multiple protective factors that appeared to buffer the potentially devastating consequences of cumulative risk. Labeled as "overcoming," all 4 had been reared in two-parent households, and all reported emotionally close and supportive relationships with at least one immediate family member. All reported experiencing significant family adversity, including physical violence. Sarina, for instance, had been formally removed from her mother's care due to allegations of child abuse, and another, Jordan, had intervened in physical altercations between his parents on multiple occasions. Parental substance abuse and chronic unemployment was noted by 3 of the 4, and all 4 described, to some extent, feelings of maternal abandonment. One of the overcoming youth was also an adolescent mother.

However, in addition to familial risk, these youth also described appreciation for parental caretaking, close relations with siblings, and emotional support from at least one parent. Jordan, for instance, admired his father because "He . . . pays the bills and helps my mom and takes care of my mom and takes care of us and just works." And Sarina described receiving emotional support from her father, noting, "My dad is the coolest. He is very understanding. I can tell him what I am going through and if it weren't for him I probably would have gone crazy."

Their school experiences were diverse. Two earned average grades (e.g., Cs), were often distracted in school, felt school was boring, and described themselves as ". . . too lazy to learn." And, although neither participated in extracurricular activities, both verbalized vocational/technical career plans (i.e., welding, military) and identified the school counselor as a significant source of support. Another overcoming youth earned above average grades, participated in football and wrestling and planned to attend college. Tabitha, the adolescent mother, had dropped out of high school as a senior due to familial obligations and never returned. Still, she and her long-term partner maintained full-time employment and supported an independent home for their son.

Generally speaking, these youth invested little time with like-aged peers. Two of the four, including Sarina, admitted that lack of trust impeded their ability to establish genuine friendships. She said, "I am not close to my friends. I don't like to get too close with people . . . I guess I have trust

issues." Like their well-adapted peers, these youth described parental concern about dating and early sexual intimacy; unlike their well-adapted peers, most (*n* = 3) failed to heed parental advice. Tabitha, as noted earlier, was already a mother and two others maintained romantic, sexually active partnerships but kept these relationships secret from their parents. On the other hand, most (*n* = 3) avoided substance use; one of the four admitted to using both alcohol and marijuana and was part of a substance-using, sometimes violent, peer network. Finally, within the larger cultural context, two youth considered themselves knowledgeable about Navajo culture and participated in some traditional ceremonies; none spoke the Navajo language.

Kevin illustrates the overcoming group. At the time of data collection, he was 16 years old and lived with his mother, father, and four younger siblings. His mother and father had been married for 17 years, although their relationship was characterized by instability and conflict. In describing his relationship with his mother, Kevin said, "It's not that good. I hardly want to hang out with her. To this day, now, I can't really trust my mom or anything." Kevin described how, as a child, his mother left the family for a few months. Although she returned and had not left since, residual anger and insecurity remained. Kevin had also experienced the temporary absence of his father, due to military deployment, and his father suffered from emotional disturbances and alcohol abuse.. Family violence, too, was not uncommon. About his father, Kevin said, ". . . when he gets mad, he gets mad, like scary mad, like he'll do something crazy." At times, Kevin had tried to intervene when his father became violent, explaining,

> My mom, my mom is too scared to do anything because a couple of times my dad held her down and stuff like that but I had to stop him . . . I had to grab him off, try and calm him down.

Yet, Kevin was close to his father. He explained,

> I can tell him anything and he listens to me. He has always been there for me when I needed him. When I'm in trouble he will come and get me—when I need advice on something or just like helping me get in shape.

However, he also wanted "Just for him [father] to stop drinking" and characterized his parents' relationship as having much conflict and distrust, with little enjoyment. About his family as a whole, Kevin commented, "We hardly hang out with each other . . . We are always busy, I'm off working, my dad is working, my sister is out at volleyball camp . . .." Kevin also felt enormous responsibility for his siblings and remarked, "I had to mature fast. I didn't

have time to play." He was close to and protective of them and identified himself as a role model. Although conflict was evident in his immediate family, Kevin was extremely close to his grandparents and a cousin; his grandparents ". . . teach me wise things about life. How life is better outside the reservation, about how to be a good person." And, in reference to his cousin, Kevin noted, "My cousin—he is like a brother to me."

Kevin maintained a 3.5 GPA, noting, "Most of the time I'm usually studying." He hoped to attend University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) to become a radiologist. He was also a member of his high school basketball team and described a good relationship with his school counselor. On the other hand, he did not appreciate the school environment and described it as ". . . like jail, living in a juvie [juvenile] center, rails everywhere . . . Security cameras everywhere, metal detectors . . . Sometimes we have like dogs there too, canine searches . . . And the gang unit usually comes in." With respect to peers Kevin associated with a diverse group (e.g., "skaters," "basketball players," "nerds") but denied having close friendships:

> I don't trust none of my friends . . . Ever since I was little my dad told me never trust your friends. I always have that in my mind because your friends can mislead you, pretty much do stuff to hurt you, be jealous of you.

He appeared emotionally close to his girlfriend, saying, "She has a big heart. She really cares for me. She keeps me out of trouble and keeps me from fights and hanging out with the wrong crowd." Dating was a source of conflict between Kevin and his parents, especially his mother, because "she [mother] doesn't want me to make the same mistakes she did [early pregnancy]." Although sexually active, Kevin reported regular contraceptive use. He avoided alcohol and drug use by spending time with his grandparents, staying busy with his father, and avoiding negative people and risky situations. Rather than partying, for instance, "I just go out to my grandma's . . . I don't bother to run around at night. I'm always around my grandparents or my dad." Kevin described himself as "respectful" and used active coping (i.e., running) to deal with stressors.

Results of the survey instruments demonstrated support for Kevin's placement in the overcoming group. Maternal relationship distress was evident in his CAM score of 90—the second highest score of the entire sample and 20 points above the cutoff indicating severe relationship distress—coupled with an IPR score of 60 (highest of the entire sample) also indicating significant distress with peers. Kevin also scored higher than the sample mean on the depression inventory (i.e., 9 vs. 7.1). However, there was little distress in his relationship with his father (i.e., 38 on the CAF) and his

support network was comprised of four people (i.e., grandfather, two aunts, and father) who provided emotional and instrumental assistance.

Struggling.   The four remaining youth demonstrated psycho-social functioning best characterized as struggling. All were female and three were teenage mothers. All four described family conflict and varying degrees of emotional distance—problems with parents were cited most often, but several discussed conflict with siblings as well. Three of the four reported having absent fathers (i.e., one father was in prison and the other two had never been involved with their children) and two of the three had been removed from their mother's care, during the formative years, because of neglect and substance abuse. In addition, economic hardship was pronounced in all four families—due most often to chronic parental unemployment. Generally speaking, these youth were raised in homes lacking parental monitoring and devoid of expectations for academic or vocational success.

Academically, they also struggled. All three mothers had dropped out of school—either temporarily ($n = 2$) or permanently ($n = 1$)—and academic records indicated average to below average grades and no extracurricular participation. Furthermore, few like-aged peers were reported by any in this group; parenting, generally speaking, precluded socializing. Mariah explained, "They [friends] hardly invite me anywhere anymore . . . because I have to stay home with the baby." The three mothers were single parents, and nonresident fathers provided little financial or child-rearing support. None of the adolescent mothers were employed nor were they engaged in activities (e.g., technical training) to develop employable skills. They lived with families of origin and relied on public assistance. As a group, their understanding of their Native American roots was minimal, they rarely participated in cultural traditions or events, and they reported little interest in learning more about their rich Navajo heritage. Despite the challenges to optimal development, assets were noted. For instance, all four received instrumental support (i.e., shelter, food) from families of origin, and all reported having at least one emotionally supportive family member (especially maternal grandmothers).

Cheria provides a point of reference. At 16, she lived with her mother, younger siblings, and her own children. Cheria's upbringing was difficult. Prior to his incarceration for sexually abusing a cousin, Cheria's father was frequently violent—toward Cheria, her siblings, and her mother. Still, he was the sole earner and his absence left the family "[without] a father to depend on." Cheria's mother suffered from chronic and severe depression and, for several years, substance abuse as well. Cheria had been removed from her mother's care "because my mom had drinking problems and she kept taking

off." During that time, she lived with a maternal grandmother—the bright spot in Cheria's life—and a person with whom Cheria was "very close." And, although she admired her mother's sobriety, her former substance abuse left a lasting impression on Cheria, who avoided substance use herself because, "I don't want my kids to go away." Finally, she described her relationship with her mother by saying, "We sometimes get along."

Cheria's first child was born when she was 14 and her second child a year later. The children's father provided no emotional, financial, or instrumental support and demonstrated tendencies toward alcohol abuse and violence. Cheria feared her children might grow up like him ". . . getting girls pregnant and not taking care of them and not going to school." Although she had returned to school after only a brief absence, Cheria was having a difficult time. She explained, "Sometimes at school I feel like I am behind. Sometimes my kids get sick and they can't stay in [on-site child care center]." However, the school counselor was a source of support and someone Cheria relied on "every time I want to talk to someone." In fact, the school counselor was one of only three people on Cheria's support network. Cheria noted having a few friends, but rarely saw them—several were also teenage mothers. Cheria was unemployed and depended on government programs for financial assistance.

Cheria's scores on the self-report measures also reflected a "struggling" youth; her CAM, IPR, and DSRS scores were all above the total sample means (i.e., 48, 44, and 8 vs. 44, 39, and 7, respectively). Her score on the CAM indicated significant distress with her mother and was the fifth highest of the entire sample. Cheria also listed fewer support network members (n = 3) than most of her peers and perceived receiving, on average, less support from them (i.e., mean scores of 98 vs. 124).

Macro-level risks: The reservation community. Despite distinctions in psychosocial functioning, none of the youth were immune to environmental stressors. In general, participants described a community marred by substance abuse, violence, limited police protection, and pervasive adolescent parenting. Substance abuse, and alcoholism specifically, was prominent on the reservation. Xavier (i.e., well adapted) stated, "It's a concern for me—seeing people on the reservation that do drugs and just basically are always drunk." Mariah (i.e., struggling) agreed and described her neighborhood as ". . . just a bunch of drunks that walk around." She was particularly disturbed by youth substance abuse, noting, "I mostly see younger kids than me huffing and drinking and . . . like when I used to go to school when I used to go off campus we would see a lot of kids drunk like at the store." Interestingly, efforts to diminish alcohol abuse by criminalizing alcohol sales on the reservation had

failed because bootlegging (i.e., purchasing alcohol off the reservation and then reselling it privately on the reservation) was rampant. Simply stated, access to alcohol, even for youth, was not problematic: "Around here people can go up to anybody [to purchase alcohol/drugs]."

Violence also characterized life on the Navajo reservation. Jordan (i.e., overcoming) explained,

> Like gangs around here just walking around the hills and stuff like that. They might jump you. One of my friends it happened to her, she was walking home. So it is scary for girls and little kids around here.

Yet, an alarming theme that also emerged was lack of police protection. Kevin (i.e., overcoming) stated, "They [police] are no help . . . I've called them before and it took them an hour to come up to where I live and it's just right there [the police station]. . . Everything was all settled down and they finally come." Similarly, Kammie (i.e., struggling) indicated that police "never" helped and ". . . they take forever just to come." Finally, several described teenage pregnancy as a significant, community-wide problem. Tabitha (i.e., overcoming), for instance, knew six people, all aged 15 or younger, who had children. She commented, "I would say everywhere I look [I see pregnant/parenting youth] 'cause there is a lot out there."

Given reservation images portrayed by the youth, we were not surprised to find that most ($n = 12$ or 86%) wanted to leave. Their reasons varied. Kammie (i.e., struggling) wanted to move because:

> I don't like it here . . . I just don't like living here. I mean, like when I was away for the summer, I felt so relieved that I was away at a different place. There is something about this place I don't like.

Other responses, like that from Aria (i.e., well adapted), provided more insight:

> Yeah, I want to leave, go far . . . I don't want to be stuck on the res [reservation] . . . I don't want to live here. Some of us don't have running water. We have to haul water and stuff like that and like we don't have electricity sometimes.

For others, leaving was motivated less by physical hardship than a desire for greater opportunities as illustrated by Kevin (i.e., overcoming) who hoped to move to a city "like Flagstaff or Phoenix" for "jobs, more money and [opportunities for] getting nicer things." Xavier (i.e., well adapted) concurred noting a desire:

Table 3. Correlation Matrix.

Measures	CAM	CAF	IPR	NSSQ	DSRS
CAM	1.0	−.08	.76**	−.51	.39
CAF	−.08	1.0	.18	.16	−.21
IPR	.76**	.18	1.0	−.38	.54*
NSSQ	−.51	.16	−.38	1.0	−.32
DSRS	.39	−.21	.54*	−.32	1.0

Note. CAM = Children's Attitude Toward Mother; CAF = Children's Attitude Toward Father; IPR = Index of Peer Relations; NSSQ = Norbeck Social Support Questionnaire; DSRS = Depression Self-Rating Scale.
*p< .05. **p< .01.

> . . . to make something of my life and be better . . . Like it would be harder to just improve on myself [on the reservation] . . . like have a good job and good education. Well, in the city there are more opportunities for jobs and careers and higher education than there is on the reservation.

And Jordan (i.e., overcoming) wanted to move away for fear of getting "stuck." Once he left, he would never return because, he stated, "Like my friend's dad—when he came back there was hardly anything for him to do so he got lazy."

Goal 2: Examine Associations Among Indices of Psycho-Social Well-Being

Analyses of quantitative data supplement qualitative analyses and affirm organization of participants into three unique groups. As evident in Table 2, the well-adapted youth demonstrated the lowest levels of conflict with family and peers (i.e., CAF, CAM, and IPR scores), the lowest level of depression (i.e., group $\bar{x}$ = 5.5 on DSDR), and greatest number of support network members (group $\bar{x}$ = 4.3) and perceived support (i.e., 141) on the NSSQ. The struggling group reported having the highest depressive scores (group $\bar{x}$ = 9.8) and the fewest average number of support network members (group $\bar{x}$ = 3.5) and perceived support from them.

In addition to examination of individual scores, correlational analyses allowed exploration of variable associations. As evident in Table 3, two significant relationships emerged. Specifically, CAM scores were significantly and positively correlated with IPR scores (r = .76**) indicating that conflict with mother corresponded to conflict with peers. In addition, conflict with peers (i.e., IPR) was significantly and positively correlated with depression

(i.e., DSRS; r = .54*). And, although not statistically significant, several other associations deserve attention. First, CAM scores (representing conflict with mother) were negatively associated with social support (NSSQ; r = −.51) and positively associated with depression (r = .39). Second, IPR scores were negatively associated with social support (r = −.38), and social support was negatively correlated with depression (r = −.32). All associations are in the expected directions; lack of statistical significance is quite likely due to small sample size.

Discussion

This investigation sought, first and foremost, to identify risk and protective factors characterizing the key contexts within which a unique sample of reservation-residing Native American youth are embedded. A supplemental goal was to examine associations among indices of psycho-social well-being assumed critical for optimal developmental outcomes. The examination of risk and protective factors among reservation youth, across social and environmental contexts, is not unique to this study. In a mixed-method investigation, Feinstein, Driving-Hawk, and Baartman (2009) focused attention on factors that promoted academic success among reservation students. Their findings revealed protective factors at the individual, family, peer, and school levels (e.g., personal goals, future plans, positive role models, involvement in extracurricular activities)—themes consistent with results presented here. Likewise, risk factors within and across micro-, meso-, and macro-systems have also been previously identified among reservation youth (see, for instance, Nalls, Mullis, & Mullis, 2009; Oetting, Beauvais, & Edwards, 1988). What is altogether unique about the present investigation is the clear *pattern* of youth functioning, which allowed classification of participants into three distinct groups. Furthermore, verbal reports and survey indices offered consistent and compelling support for each youth's classification as well adapted, overcoming, or struggling.

In a sample of 14 youth, 6 (43%) evidenced strong adaptation to key social contexts demonstrated via supportive relationships, academic achievement, interest and participation in their Navajo heritage, and future planning and goal setting. Overall, protective factors (e.g., nurturing adults, positive and goal oriented peers, participation in extracurricular activities) were easily identified across the micro-systems of these youth. Significant too was the clear and consistent theme of purposeful avoidance of risky behaviors (e.g., drug and alcohol use, casual sex) that could jeopardize their bright futures. Rather than "well-adapted," these youth might easily be described instead as "thriving" as they demonstrated many of the thriving indicators described by Scales et al. (2000;

for example, school success, maintenance of physical health, overcoming adversity, leadership, helping others, delay of gratification, valuing diversity). Furthermore, in an expansion of this earlier work, Scales, Benson, and Roehlkepartain (2011) describe the role of sparks (i.e., deep passions and interests), relationships (i.e., people who support and nurture sparks), and empowerment (i.e., voice and civic engagement) in promoting adolescent thriving. Although not a focus of this investigation, these three elements were evident among many of the well-adapted youth. Continued investigation of these specific "buffering" elements among at-risk youth, as well as strategies for promoting them, may prove beneficial when ecological resources are scarce.

Comparatively speaking, four others were not doing *as* well but nonetheless adapting to (and overcoming) the contextual challenges they faced. The overcoming youth described exposure to more direct and prevalent risk (e.g., family violence, parental substance abuse, parental abandonment, negative peer influences) coupled with arguably fewer protective factors (e.g., involvement in extracurricular activities, little school enjoyment) than their well-adapted peers. Nonetheless, they demonstrated a remarkable ability to persist and persevere despite contextual challenges. These youth most closely resemble the "resilient" and "stress resistant" youth described by Rutter (1985) and Garmezy (1985).

Finally, representing another distinct pattern, four additional youth appeared to be succumbing to the myriad of risks prevalent in their familial (e.g., conflict, substance abuse, poor role models, abandonment), peer (conflict, isolation), and school-based (disengagement, academic failure) microsystems. Simply stated, they were struggling. Few protective factors were evident in their lives—regardless of context examined—to buffer the pervasive risks to which they were exposed daily. Furthermore, it is unclear what resources or services might help them be more successful and engaged, either academically, socially, or emotionally. Some suggest that interventions with Native American youth are most successful when traditional cultural practices are incorporated (Kenyon & Hanson, 2012; Whitbeck, Walls, & Welch, 2012). Although we applaud culturally appropriate and targeted programs, we question the extent to which participants must feel a connection to or interest in their Native American heritage in order for such programs to be effective or beneficial. In other words, to what extent can the exemplary "culturally focused" Positive Youth Development (PYD) programs noted by Kenyon and Hanson (2012), for instance, prove successful for program participants who are completely disengaged from (and disinterested in) their cultural roots (such as the struggling youth in this sample)? Continued research aimed at addressing this question would be particularly beneficial for severely "at risk" populations of ethnic and cultural minority youth.

Furthermore, it has not gone unnoticed that the majority (75%) of the struggling participants were also adolescent mothers. Early, off-time parenting is both a risk factor for future developmental challenges (e.g., academic failure, economic hardship, depression, single parenting; Richards, Papworth, Corbett, & Good, 2007; Savio Beers & Hollo, 2009) as well as an outcome of risk (e.g., poverty, low educational attainment, intergenerational adolescent parenting, substance use, depression; see Corcoran, Franklin, & Bennett, 2000; East, Khoo, & Reyes, 2006). However, it is important to note that, in this investigation, not all of the adolescent mothers were classified as struggling. Tabitha was an exception. She demonstrated the ability to overcome the same familial and environmental challenges faced by her peers (family conflict and substance abuse, academic disengagement, poverty) *in addition to* teenage maternity. As an emerging adult, she worked full-time, avoided substances, maintained a long-term intimate relationship with the father of her son (a man who was also employed, substance free, and nonviolent), and described the importance of "communication" in her family of procreation. The work of Furstenberg and colleagues is noteworthy here. The landmark *Baltimore Study*, as often referred, traces the life histories of approximately 300 teenage mothers and their children over three decades using interview, survey, and case studies. By the 20-year follow-up (see Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Morgan, 1987), the majority were doing quite well, and child outcomes tended to mirror those of their mothers (Brooks-Gunn & Furstenberg, 1986). The latest findings (see Furstenberg, 2007) contribute to a growing consensus among scholars that women are only slightly disadvantaged, if at all, by having a child as a teen compared with older mothers from similar backgrounds. In other words, teenage parenting, per se, is insufficient to determine developmental outcomes for young women or their children.

Finally, in attempting to distinguish buffering forces as well as responses to "risk" among the youth studied here, four points are worthy of consideration. First, *all of the participants* in this investigation, including those classified as well adapted, are the children of adolescent mothers. Continued longitudinal research with *older* children of adolescent mothers is needed—and particularly important are investigations that allow for in-depth study of unique developmental factors and processes that promote functioning across multiple sociocultural contexts. Second, regardless of youth classification, macro-level "risk" factors did *not* discriminate. All participants were exposed to community-level ecological challenges posed by reservation residence (e.g., unemployment, chronic substance abuse and alcoholism, easy access to drugs and alcohol, violence and threats of violence, poor police protection/civic services, etc.). Thus, it appears that these two factors—being a child of an adolescent mother and living in an environment characterized by risk—are not, in and of

themselves, factors that distinguished the well-adapted, overcoming, and struggling youth. However, although the youth were not able to comment on family income, per se, it is noteworthy that *well-adapted* youth appeared to come from homes with more stable family incomes (i.e., regularly employed vs. under-/unemployed parent/s) than their peers—and particularly those classified as *struggling*. The potential protective mechanisms afforded stable (comparatively speaking) financial resources for these youth must be acknowledged.

Third, despite reservation challenges, the Navajo culture is rich with tradition. One might suspect, as we did, that residing within the Navajo Reservation would provide a myriad of opportunities for strong cultural connections—connections that could serve important protective functions for the youth. Unfortunately, our speculations were largely unfounded. Concern for generational transmission of culture among Native American youth is well-established (Cheshire, 2001; House, Stiffman, & Brown, 2006; Nicholas, 2010); this investigation confirms that cultural education and programming might be valuable regardless of context (i.e., urban vs. reservation).

Finally, we feel it particularly noteworthy that, despite a small sample, the majority (*n* = 10 or 71%) of "at risk" youth in this study were *not* struggling—but instead well adapted and overcoming (even thriving and resilient). In a fascinating study, Gestsdottir, Urban, Bowers, Lerner, and Lerner (2011) describe developmental processes in which individual strengths (e.g., self-regulation) and contextual resources "align" in such a way as to optimize ecological opportunities. This alignment, they argue, "enhances the probability of PYD" (Gestsdottir et al., 2011, p. 61). Although beyond the scope of the present investigation, evidence of such interplay exists among many of the youth sampled here. Continued work examining the alignment between personal assets and ecological resources is particularly important in environments characterized by severe deprivation and risk.

Limitations

Sample size limited both the amount and type of analyses that could be run. Furthermore, small sample size and geographical scope (all youth from a small area of the expansive Navajo reservation) also limit transferability of results. Although every effort was made to ensure the robustness of the data, findings must be examined with these limitations in mind.

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