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# A Discourse Analysis of Cultural Influences on Alaska Native Successful Aging

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## ABSTRACT

Geographical remoteness, limited resources, and socioeconomic disparities contribute to the migration of rural Alaska Native Elders to urban areas to access medical services and resources, improve economic situations, or reunite with family. We compared the discourse of 12 Elders in Anchorage who previously lived in four remote traditional villages in the Norton Sound region (ages 60–84) and 13 Elders in those villages (ages 48–80). Using Gee’s discourse analysis framework, two patterns emerged detailing cultural effects on identity and Eldership, illuminating differences in the self-evaluation of successful aging based on cultural influences and the role of contextual factors.

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## KEYWORDS

Indigenous aging; urban indigenous aging; rural indigenous aging; aging well; eldership

## Introduction

The aging process in Alaska Native (AN) communities is understood as a cycle in which life continues after death and through one’s descendants, both over the lifespan and beyond. This worldview emphasizes respect for Elders as cultural knowledge bearers, keepers, teachers, and mentors (Lewis, 2011). Recognizing this tradition, the term “elder” in this article is capitalized to distinguish between Indigenous elders who have reached “Eldership” and those who are elderly (Grandbois & Sanders, 2009; Indigenous Directions Leadership Group Concordia University, 2019; Lewis, 2011, 2016; Stiegelbauer, 1996). Being considered an Elder encompasses reverence and a prominent role within the community and, at times, nationally or internationally (Baskin & Davey, 2015). Investigations of successful aging from an AN point of view identified “Eldership” as a distinct descriptor for individuals in the community that are “aging well” and are recognized by AN communities and other Indigenous groups

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to describe an older adult who ages successfully (Brooks-Cleator et al., 2019; Danyluck et al., 2021; Lewis, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2019; Quigley et al., 2022). “Aging well” and “successful aging” will be used interchangeably within this article due to its established use in the literature and acceptance within AN communities (Brooks-Cleator et al., 2019; Lewis, 2013; Quigley et al., 2022).

Most successful aging research within Alaska has focused on rural communities (Lewis, 2011, 2013, 2014). These studies highlight the importance of a traditional rural lifestyle to promote successful aging (Lewis, 2011, 2013) and indicate relocation as unfavorable, impeding the Elder’s access to health-sustaining resources, such as tight-knit community systems, Native foods, and the traditional lifestyle (Kim, 2020; Lewis, 2010, 2011). Based on community member observations, Elders’ relocation is believed to result in poor aging and premature death (Kim, 2020; Lewis, 2011). In addition, concerns are growing about the detrimental impacts of social, economic, and demographic changes on aging among AN older adult due to outmigration, value changes, and increased Westernization (Driscoll et al., 2010; Lewis, 2013). This study explores the discourse of rural- and urban-based AN Elders as they discuss successful aging, specifically the cultural influences on “Eldership” and Elder identity. This study enriches the current understanding of lived experience within the scholarly literature on successful aging to include Indigenous perspectives.

### **Study context**

Alaska has an estimated 26% (about 193,720) persons aged 55 and older; of these, 14% (about 27,370) are of AN heritage (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). The anticipated growth of the AN older adult population between 2021 and 2050 (55 and older) is 49%, from 27,368 to 40,798 (Alaska Department and Labor Workforce, 2022). Of these, approximately 80% of the AN population live in remote rural areas, while 23% live in rural areas and 10% in urban centers (Goldsmith, 2008). This research occurred in the remote Norton Sound southern sub-region located in the Bering Straits region of Northwest Alaska, which is approximately the size of Ohio. Of the 9,429 residents in the sub-region, approximately 2,120 are over 50, while approximately 100 are over 80 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

The region’s AN health corporation, Norton Sound Health Corporation (NSHC), considers a person an elder once they reach 55 years of age (Norton Sound Health Corporation, 2023). Many Indigenous health governing organizations have adopted reduced age eligibility for services because of lower life expectancies and socioeconomic disadvantages within this population (Collings, 2001; Pulver, 2010). This region has several distinct linguistic and cultural groups, including Inupiat Eskimo and Central and Siberian Yup’ik

Eskimo (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Life in rural villages combines cash-economy and subsistence lifestyle, with many residents relying on or participating in subsistence-related activities such as hunting, gathering, and arts and crafts. Remote villages rely mainly on kinship, family, and community networks to care for older community members. The village population ranges from a handful to several thousand in some hub communities. Hub communities are regional centers that provide services to smaller communities, often containing a hospital and a nursing home.

Limited access to medical care, employment, and housing opportunities, in addition to poverty, high living costs, breakdown of social networks, and the outmigration of families, have contributed to the high rates of AN elders relocating to urban environments (Berman, 2024; Driscoll et al., 2010; Kim, 2020; Lewis, 2013). However, the number of elders who migrate from this rural region to urban communities is unknown. While most older adults prefer aging within their communities (Kim, 2020; Lewis, 2013), many are forced or choose to relocate to urban areas to access urban resources and services. With an overall population of 289,697, Anchorage is the largest city in Alaska, with the largest population of older adults within the state (72,445; age 55 and older). Approximately 7% (4,968) of them identify as American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN), representing the largest population of AI/AN older adults in Alaska. While Anchorage is considered highly diverse, the majority population is White (61%), with 7.5% identifying as AI/AN (Alaska Department and Labor Workforce, 2022). Rural AN Elders describe Anchorage as a Western culture fundamentally different from the traditional village environment (Lewis, 2011). Although there is an uptake in research on aging among AN people, limited information is available about successful urban aging and how the concept of Eldership is affected by relocation and cultural shifts (Boyd, 2018; Howell & Peterson, 2020; Kim, 2020; Lewis, 2010).

### ***Successful aging concepts***

The term “successful aging” has been used for the past half-century (Baker, 1958; Butler, 1974; Pressey & Simcoe, 1950), with the main emphasis on lengthening a person’s healthy and functional state into old age. A theoretical framework was introduced by Rowe and Kahn (1987) to expand research about aging to differentiate between “usual” aging and “successful” aging (Cosco et al., 2014). Usual aging refers to older adults functioning well but having a high risk of disease and disability, whereas successful aging refers to older adults who are physically and mentally healthy and socially engaged. While Rowe and Kahn’s biomedical model postulates successful aging as avoiding illness and disability, psychosocial models underscore life satisfaction, well-being, and social engagement as integral to successful aging (Cosco et al., 2014; Inui, 2003; Pruchno, 2015). The biomedical model received

numerous critiques as being “seriously incomplete” (Matilda Riley, p. 151) based on its emphasis on individual success, diminishing the role of structural and social factors in the aging process. Macroenvironmental elements and social structure such as status and position in society, class, and income disparities, as well as educational attainment, race, financial adequacy, and gender, have been found to impact successful aging outcomes (Stowe & Cooney, 2015) and need to be considered in the study of successful aging. Currently, more focus is directed toward including various demographically and culturally diverse populations in the study of successful aging (Rubinstein & de Medeiros, 2015; Urtamo et al., 2019). These efforts have increased successful aging inquiries within Indigenous communities, illuminating their aging experiences and understanding of the concept.

Summarizing the limited AI/AN successful aging literature, J. E. Pace and Grenier (2016) identified four elements of successful aging: “(a) health and well-being, (b) empowerment and resilience, (c) engagement and behavior, and (d) connectedness” (p. 252). Similarly, Quigley et al. (2022) presented a scoping review of the existing literature on aging well within Indigenous populations. They identified four components of age well: (a) achieving holistic health and well-being, (b) maintaining social relationships, (c) displaying resilience, humor, and optimism, and (d) facing existing challenges. These elements are closely tied to community well-being, traditions, intergenerational interactions, positive community interactions, and place. Indigenous conceptualizations of successful aging highlight the role of contextual influences such as personal, social, economic, political, and historical aspects (Lewis, 2011; Quigley et al., 2022). These reviews drive the use of the established successful aging terminology to inform future research, services, and policies that are inclusive of Indigenous voices and lived experiences (Lewis, 2013).

Scholarly work within rural AN communities (Brooks-Cleator & Lewis, 2020; Howell & Peterson, 2020; Lewis, 2010, 2011, 2014; Wortman & Lewis, 2021) has outlined the importance of community and traditional practices in promoting successful aging (Howell & Peterson, 2020; Lewis, 2011). This is exemplified in the AN Eldership construct, which outlines that someone who is considered an Elder displays emotional well-being and community engagement, has a spiritual presence, is physically active, and adheres to a traditional lifestyle (Lewis, 2011). However, with many older AN adults migrating to urban and Western communities, it is unclear how this significant cultural shift impacts AN Eldership. No study has investigated how urban and rural contexts shape AN Elders’ understanding of successful aging. This article explores the discourse about successfully aging among AN Elders by comparing texts from Elders who relocated from four traditional rural villages of the Norton Sound region to Anchorage (metropolitan area) and rural-based Elders from the same four villages.

## **Discourse**

A study of successful aging discourse offers a closer look into the language in use regarding a specific phenomenon (Gee, 2016). Language in use considers the use of words and how they inform a person's being and actions. This framework emphasizes and recognizes factors such as culture, context, history, identity and role, and beliefs expressed within language and meaning, both spoken and unspoken (Gee, 2016). Language then informs and establishes relationships, actions, connections, and social goods (what is being communicated as to what is "normal," "good," or "right;" Gee, 2016). Gee recognizes discourse as occurring in a social context, forming identities, and communicating information. Gee offers a set of tools that guide qualitative and interpretive investigations to question the significance of shared content and how it informs activities, personal identities, relationships, and social goods. Discourse analysis consists of various qualitative analytical tools from which the researcher chooses the appropriate toolset based on the discourse under scrutiny.

## **Materials and methods**

### **Research design**

This study took place within a three-year (NSF-funded) exploratory, qualitative, community-based participatory research (CBPR) project that investigated the concept of successful aging within AN Elders in Alaska's Norton Sound southern sub-region (Asquith-Heinz et al., 2022; Brooks-Cleator et al., 2019). This systematic comparative analysis examines the use of language in the context of rural and urban successful aging of AN Elders.

CBPR was employed because it is considered a best practice when engaging in research with Indigenous populations (Holkup et al., 2004; LaVeaux & Christopher, 2009; Lewis & Boyd, 2013; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). The CBPR framework uses principles to guide the research, including the definition of community as a unit of identity, emphasizing the strengths and resources of the community, and capacity-building which produces and facilitates co-learning among the researcher and community members.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Alaska Anchorage, the Alaska Area IRB Review Boards, the regional Norton Sound Health Corporation Research Review Board, and tribal village councils. Tribal councils and Elder Care coordinators from the Norton Sound southern sub-region supported relationship building between the villages and the research team. The involvement of an Elder Advisory Committee (consisting of Elders from the participating villages) provided mentorship and guidance to the research team through all stages of the research including community engagement,

cultural awareness, study recruitment, review of preliminary findings, and knowledge dissemination and exchange (Kovach, 2009).

### **Recruitment**

Rural participants were eligible to participate in the study if they identified as AN, lived in the participating rural villages for most of their lives (over half of their lives), were considered an Elder in their community or self-identified as aging well, and spoke English. Tribal councils and Elder Care coordinators supported recruitment by contacting and facilitating outreach to older adults revered as Elders and role models in the community.

Urban participants were eligible to participate in the interview if they self-identified as AN, lived in Anchorage for at least six months, were originally from one of the four rural communities in the Norton Sound southern sub-region, were considered an Elder in their community or self-identified as aging well, and spoke English. Recruitment of urban-based successfully aging Elders occurred with support from the rural Elder Care Coordinators. The Southcentral Foundation Elder Services in Anchorage allowed recruitment at daily lunch gatherings, social media posts (Facebook), and snowball sampling. Flyers shared with the AN Heritage Center were also employed for recruitment. The Elder Advisory Committee suggested these methods as appropriate means for outreach.

### **Participants**

The first author (SMK) interviewed 12 Anchorage-based Elders who initially lived in the four participating villages in the Norton Sound southern sub-region in the summer of 2019. The urban interviews were matched with 13 rural-based Elders (interviewed by SMK, JPL, and KB) residing in those villages completed in year one (2017) of the three-year NSF-supported study of successful aging (Boyd, 2018; Kim & Lewis, 2019).

Within this purposive sample, 44% were male and 56% were female, with the youngest Elder being 48 and the oldest at 84 (urban average age of 71 and rural average age of 67). One participant in the study did not fall into the proposed age range because of community recognition. Their inclusion presented an opportunity to learn about the fluidity of the “Eldership” status and gain increased insight (Stiegelbauer, 1996) into the importance of honoring community recognition of Elders. Table 1 displays the demographic characteristics of the two samples. Most Elders (88%) had at least a high school or an equivalent degree, and almost half of the participants (48%) were married. Approximately 24% of the Elders reported being widowed. Most Anchorage-based Elders identified strongly with their home village, identifying as a person from that community with strong kinship, environmental ties, and connection

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of rural and urban participants.

Demographic Characteristics	Rural		Urban	
	N (13)	%	N (12)	%
Gender				
Male	6	46	5	42
Female	7	54	7	58
Age				
Age range	60 - 84		48 - 80	
Average age (mean)	67		71	
Education				
Less than high school	2	15	1	8
GED/high school	5	39	1	8
Some college	4	32	9	76
College degree	2	15	1	8
Marital status				
Married	6	46	6	50
Widowed	4	31	2	17
Separated	2	15	1	8
Single	1	8	1	8
Divorced			2	17
Primary language				
Inupiat	2	15	5	42
Yupik	6	46	4	33
English	5	39	3	25
Years lived in village				
Less than 20 years	0	0	5	42
20 – 39 years	0	0	1	8
40 and more	13	100	6	50
Self-regarded Elder status				
Not an Elder	4	31	3	25
Young Elder	1	8	1	8
Elder	8	61	8	67

to the region's cultural heritage. The reported range of time lived in the village varied between 5 and 70 years. Most urban-based Elders (75%) self-identified as Elders, whereas 25% of the community-nominated Elders did not. In rural communities, 70% self-identified with the Elder status.

### **Protocol**

Existing literature has established that data saturation often occurs after coding 12 to 17 interviews (Guest et al., 2006). Based on this premise, we conducted purposive sampling of 12 urban interviews and matched 13 rural interviews by age, content, gender distribution, and location. We conducted a comparative discourse analysis of urban and rural discourse on successful aging.

### **Data collection**

Once Elders were determined to meet eligibility criteria and voiced interest in participating, a copy of the informed consent form was shared with the participants. The consent form was reviewed verbally and in writing

(Kripalani et al., 2008). Interviews were mainly conducted individually. However, one couple wished to be interviewed simultaneously, each responding individually to the questions (Lewis & Boyd, 2013). Adhering to the CBPR approach, the research team respected the Elder's wishes for interview location and participation (Brooks-Cleator et al., 2019). Rural Elders met the research team at Elders' houses and community buildings. Interviews in Anchorage were held in places favored by the Elder, generally open public spaces. After consenting, the participants were asked open-ended questions about successful aging (Boyd, 2018; Kim, 2020; Lewis, 2010, 2011).

With the Elder's permission (no one refused), the interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim. Each interview transcript was de-identified to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. Participants received a small gift bag with snacks and a \$50 Amazon gift card as a token of appreciation for their time and knowledge. This type of compensation was recommended and approved by the Elder Advisory Committee and deemed appropriate when working with Elders in this region (Boyd, 2018; Lewis, 2011). Based on previous unsuccessful attempts over the years to mail out interview transcripts for member checking, the team relied on Elder Advisory Board members for reviews (member checking). In the present study, the Elder Advisory Committee reviewed the findings and provided feedback via Zoom after being presented with a summary of the findings. This process functioned as an external review, in addition to the use of multiple coders ( $n = 2$ ), triangulation (observation field notes and conversations with community members), and prolonged engagement through decade-long sustained relations, as well as the implementation of reflexivity throughout the process using weekly reflections addressed potential bias in data analysis by the researchers (Brooks-Cleator et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2020; Kovach, 2009).

### ***Instrument***

Kleinman's Explanatory Model (EM) Interview framework (Kleinman et al., 1978) was employed using a strength-based adaptation of the original EM. This adaptation focused on what supports successful aging within the Elders communities, deemphasizing disease, and pathology. The rural interview guide consisting of 21 questions investigated Elders' understanding and experiences of aging, aging successfully and poor aging, the influence of family and community on aging, and changes over time (see Lewis, 2011). The urban interview guide consisted of an additional subset of questions about relocation and urban aging experiences (see Table 2, Kim, 2020).

The protocol had been piloted within the participating communities (Asquith-Heinz et al., 2022). It was considered appropriate by a respected community partner born and raised in the community and a representative

**Table 2.** Interview guide.

## Explanatory Model Successful Aging Questionnaire

Interview Guide: Successful aging through the eyes of Alaska Natives. The health and wellbeing of Alaska Native Elders in Alaska.

Participant ID #: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

- (1) You were identified as an Elder by your community. How did you become an Elder? (Life course, brief history).
- (2) How does it feel to be seen as an Elder by your community?
- (3) What do you think aging well means (age in a good way)? What does it mean to you?
- (4) How did you learn about aging well? From whom? Example?
- (5) What is your day-to-day life like?
- (6) Has aging changed your relationships? With Family? With Friends? With community? Examples.
- (7) What helps you to aging well? (How are you able to age well?)
- (8) Why do you think some Elders age well and some do not?
- (9) How can you tell that an Elder is aging well? Example?
- (10) How can you tell that an Elder is aging poorly?
- (11) What does a person need to do to age well?
- (12) What does it mean to be an Elder? What is an Elders role?
- (13) How do you know if someone is an Elder or not? Is it age or something else?
- (14) Do you think elders in your community are aging well? Is it different to age here now compared to 20 years ago?
- (15) **Why do you think some Elders move away?**
- (16) **What has helped you with the transition from the rural to the urban community?**
- (17) **What were some of the challenges that you experienced related to moving from the village to the city?**
- (18) **How do you think aging is different in Anchorage compared to your community? What are some of the things you feel are supporting you here in Anchorage, AK?**
- (19) **Are there some things that have supported you here in Anchorage, AK that you were able to bring or still have access to from rural Alaska (your village)?**
- (20) Do you have advice for people in your community who want to age well? OR What would you tell them to do to age well?
- (21) How do you feel sharing your knowledge with the youth? What are the benefits? Challenges?
- (22) Why do you share your experiences with youth? What motivates you?
- (23) What is the most important thing you want to share with the youth? Last question:
- (24) Is there anything about aging or being an Elder that you want to tell me that I haven't asked about yet? Do you have any questions for us?

from each participating community. In-depth, semi-structured open-ended questions allowed for a rich discourse on successful aging.

### **Discourse analysis**

Transcripts were imported into MAXQDA 2019 (VERBI Software, 2019). The authors completed the analysis using a set of tools from Gee's structured and replicable approach to discourse analysis (Gee, 2014). Of the general overarching 28 tools offered for a systematic approach to discourse analysis, a set of appropriate tools was selected most fitting to the demands of this study. The process involved immersion into the data, familiarization with text, pattern exploration, and coding (Gee, 2011).

The authors (SMK and JPL) coded the interviews using two stages – stage one identified text related to the lived experience of successful aging within the two different environments. The first author (SK) read through the interviews and identified text passages referring to rural and urban successful aging (immersion into data set; see Figure 1). The second author (JL) is an Alaska

Native researcher with close ties to the region, providing triangulation based on cultural familiarity and confirming the identified discursive patterns.

Stage 2 involved immersion into the selected text passages, coding, and analyzing the text based on selected tools. This initial coding step involved emergence into the data set to: (a) look for patterns in the data set, including variability (differences in content or narrative, e.g., cultural context and identity) and consistency (e.g., patterns within rural and urban narratives and Elder self-identity); (b) identify the function of the patterns that emerge (e.g., Western or traditional worldview); and (c) explore identity and successful aging in urban and rural contexts. Two major discourses emerged from the text elaborating on cultural differences informing the aging experience and text referring to language used to talk about Elder identity.

Step 2 of the coding process involved choosing a toolset appropriate for the text and application of the set. Guided by the two discourses, the authors discussed the usefulness of 28 tools. The four most suitable tools were selected to explore the Elder’s expressions related to cultural context and Elder identity. Operational definitions of the chosen tools are provided in Table 3.

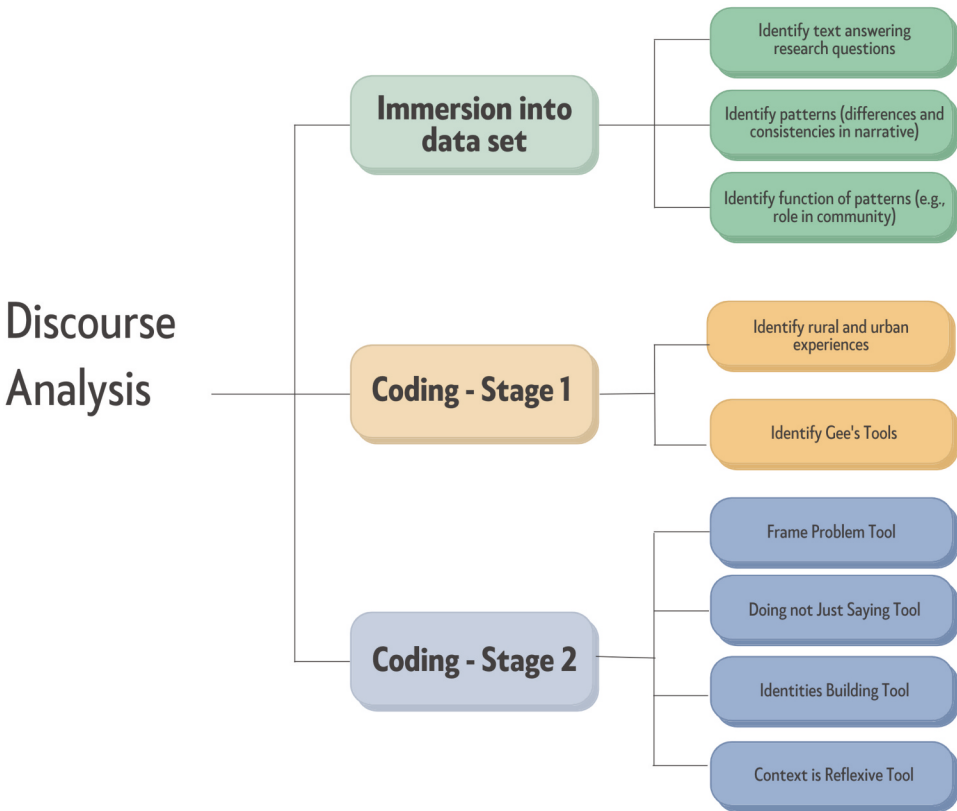


Figure 1. Flowchart of data analysis process.

**Table 3.** Tools for discourse analysis adapted from Gee (2014).

Tools	Operational Definition
(1) The Frame Problem Tool (Tool 6)	Guides the analysis to consider and broaden the context of the language used; in this study, cultural components influencing AN Elders were examined. It requires researchers to expand their social and political context knowledge to analyze the data accurately. This involved the exploration of traditional and Western influences on successful aging and Elder identity.
(2) The Doing and Not Just Saying Tool (Tool 7)	Invites the researcher to consider what the speaker is trying to do and not just what s/he is saying. This refers to understanding the language being used to inform and often to initiate action. In this context, how is the concept of Eldership configured and the specific AN Elder role within the urban and the rural context?
(3) The Context is Reflexive Tool (Tool 13)	Proposes that context is also created by language at the moment it is spoken. "When we speak, we build and design what we have to say to fit the context we are communicating. But, at the same time, how we say it helps create that same context (p. 90)." The question focuses on how the speaker says things to help produce a context. This tool explored how participants expressed their understanding of aging well within the geographical contexts and how it informed their self-appraisal on Eldership.
(4) The Identities Building Tool (Tool 16)	Recognizes that language is used to take on a specific identity or role. Different contexts will produce different identities. The question guiding the text analysis within this tool is how people express their sense of identity through language. Informed by this tool, the explored question asked how rural and urban environments shaped Elder's identity and the "ideal' Elder metaphor.

The first author (SK) analyzed the text by investigating the use of language based on the listed tools. The second author (JP) guided this process through his cultural expertise, tool application confirmation, and information assimilation to form a coherent understanding (Gee, 2011).

## Results

This study explored the impact of traditional and Western cultural nuances on the use of language within the discourse of AN successfully aging. More specifically, this study aimed to: (1) Examine how a successfully aging Elder's identity is configured within these two contexts; and (2) Describe and uncover how culture impacts "Eldership" or aging well within the rural and urban context. To answer these questions, the authors explored the use of language within two discursive patterns: Eldership discourse and Elder identity discourse, guided by the four chosen tools of inquiry (Refer to Table 3).

### *Elder identity discourse*

Elder Identity Discourse examines how Elders discussed being an Elder and where they situated themselves within the continuum of "Eldership." The following quotes exemplify the role of language in sharing information and going beyond acknowledging social practice, giving directions for a person's expectations while identifying sociohistorical contexts (Gee, 2011).

Entering “Eldership” can be achieved in several ways. Some Elders recognize that it is time to become an Elder and start emulating behaviors they have observed growing up within their community. This process often coincides with the birth of grandchildren or stepping into leadership or mentorship roles. For others, community members played a vital role in recognizing the person as an Elder. The initial stages of Eldership are described in the following quote:

[. . .] if you are very wise and you were very respected, and you are in your 50s or 60s, then you’d be called from the community to advise and teach. But I think the deciding period would be being a grandparent because when you are a grandparent, you teach your grandchildren how to do things to pass on the tradition, culture, and morals. And it becomes a stage of life that you teach as an Elder. (urban, female, 71)

Eldership appears to be less dependent on age if it is enforced by community acknowledgment. One Elder further outlined this unique role by sharing, “An Elder is someone who has cultural knowledge and has great pride in who they are, and they portray it and give it in different ways.” This “ideal” concept of an Elder, with its responsibilities, acquired knowledge and wisdom over a lifetime, and inter-and intrapersonal skills, maybe a stage in a person’s life that takes personal and community agency to manifest and be embraced.

Research participants shared various responses to being considered an Elder, including: (a) surprise; (b) expressed being Elders-in-training and not an Elder yet; (c) recommended the researchers talk with more experienced Elders (most often another older Elder or more engaged Elder); or (d) fully embraced Eldership with its responsibilities and functions. The nuances within the self-appraisal of Elders need to be understood within the cultural frame of AN “Eldership.” The role of an Elder is demonstrated in the following quote:

An Elder is someone who leads community. An Elder is who the youth look up to. An Elder is one who takes care of their grandchildren. An Elder is one who listens to people. An Elder is one who observes and listens and also learns, too, learn themselves, too, because we never quit learning. (rural, male, 60)

When considered an Elder, most participants remembered their Elders or others, primarily parents or community members, whom they saw and revered as an Elder. This recognition influenced their reflection on their Elder identity or future Elder status. Furthermore, the cultural humility of being considered a revered and acknowledged Elder may also contribute to the described self-appraisal process. In this case, language was used to identify the Elders’ qualities within their community and compare how closely they fit this “ideal” image. This participant expressed this process:

Because I don’t have all the knowledge, to me, that I should have. I feel kind of humble that I’m an Elder, that they call me an Elder. Yet, I don’t feel like I deserve that title. To

me, an Elder is someone who lived a life that they can give advice on, and I don't feel that I'm really that way yet. I feel like I've got a lot to learn yet. (rural, male, 77)

Within this quote, the Elder reflects on the community's perception and reinforcement of who is considered an Elder. "Eldership" in rural communities incorporates taking on a prescribed role to contribute to the community. Even young children know this convention and will remind the older adult to move into that role. A rural Elder described this process: "Well, you get used to it day-by-day. It starts with little kids and, 'Who are you?' I am a family member. But then they see me, and they start saying, 'Start your Elder work'" (rural, male, 67). Similarly, the whole community promotes the revered Elder status. This Elder describes how communities will engage with older adults:

[...] it's when other people will tell you or they'll say, "This person is an Elder." It's a title or a name that's given to you. Some people will take that, and they'll say, "Oh, yeah. I'm an Elder." And another point of view is that the title is given to you, and you've earned it by reputation. (urban, male, 48)

Embracing the role of "Eldership," this Elder noted, "It's grown. I feel very gifted from my community. It just gets better. You know, the people here treat our Elders really well and I'm really proud to be an Elder" (rural, female, 69).

In the context of successful aging, the "ideal" Eldership model sets guidelines on what and how to become a contributing member of the community. Furthermore, interviewees shared stories of Elders they had observed when they were children. These memories of strong role models provided guidelines for who can be considered an Elder, guided the personal evaluation process, and informed Elder-identity.

In contrast, the influence of a Western context emerged when some Elders, mainly from Anchorage, would identify as an Elder in response to store discounts, discounted bus fares, the entry age for Elder lunches, and recognition by tribal corporations or retirement. These Elders shared, "I found out after the bus office said you are an Elder" (urban, female, 65) and, "I think when I was able to make the choice to retire" (urban, male 69). With AN Elders dispersed across Anchorage and interactions based on lunches offered through tribal organizations, church meetings, and family member availability, Elders relied increasingly on the eligibility to those services to identify as an Elder. Furthermore, one urban Elder explained that he thought Elders in urban settings were not aging as well as the Elders in the rural villages because they "[...] are into the real ethnic background. They wear traditional clothing, kuspuku, they dance, ... and they speak their own language." Holding that "ideal Eldership role," it appears, may lead some Elders to think that they are not aging well in comparison to Elders that they watched growing up and rural Elders.

## ***Eldership discourse***

Eldership discourse refers to passages in the text describing AN Eldership within two distinct cultural environments, traditional AN and Western culture (minority and majority culture, respectively). The following section describes the content of the Eldership discourse, which encompasses community experiences within rural and urban social contexts and migration.

### ***The rural context***

Being recognized as an Elder within rural AN communities or having reached “Eldership” emerges from a set of characteristics, responsibilities, and activities. An Elder describes, “When you become an Elder, it’s a passage. It’s a rite of passage, and there’s a whole system to honor the Elders” (urban, female, 71). Within this system, “Eldership” is intricately interwoven into the traditional community network. In these traditional societal structures, Elders have a designated role within their community, encompassing relationships between younger generations and the most senior community members. These close relationships involve daily interactions on the street, in the store, in educational settings, during sports events, subsisting, and other community activities.

AN rural communities promote social interdependence through societal rules facilitating bidirectional intergenerational relationships. These societal rules encourage lifelong social connections, sharing, and support, benefitting youth, Elders, and the community.

These relationships involve traditional practices highlighted in the following quote:

We have high respect for Elders, and it’s taught very stringently that you respect your Elders. The young hunters, first hunters, if they get their first salmon, first fish, first whatever, you bring that to an Elder. And that Elder will give you a blessing to be a good hunter. If you are a young lady, if you become a good berry picker or a good sewer, anything first of what you have, you take it, and you bring to an Elder, and that Elder will give you blessings to become a great fisherman, hunter, gatherer, sewer, builder, everything. And you have that blessing. And usually, when an Elder receives her first capture, you adopt that child. So you make something for them, you make socks or mittens. (urban, female, 71)

Elders benefit from these supports, and they are vital for aging well within the rural environment. A couple emphasized the importance of subsisting and sharing foods within the community: “If it weren’t for some of our subsistence food that got stored away, we’d be hungry. We’d be hungry if we had to rely totally on that stuff sold at the store because our Social Security income is not that much.” Family and community members provide much of the stored food, continuing the traditional

function of providing for and supporting their Elders within communities.

However, societal changes imposed by colonization and Westernization of communities, devaluing subsistence lifestyles and traditional activities, are leading to a slow denigration of AN community networks, which are vital for survival. Most Elders were acutely aware of the existing limitations within their communities and that they may have no choice but to relocate in later life. At the same time, most Elders wished to grow old within their home community, traditional practices, and lifestyle if they had access to needed resources.

### **Migration**

Rural Elders frequently recalled memories of older family or community members needing more extensive support than what their families and the whole community were able to offer. Nonetheless, more recently, Elders noted these support systems exhausted families to the point they considered relocating to Anchorage or another placement to access advanced care for their Elders.

Elders without close family members in the village were more likely to be cared for outside the community. Descriptions of the forced removal of an Elder into a new environment outlined the loss of cultural involvement and access to traditional foods as detrimental to an Elder's health. A rural-based Elder shared: "To me, sometimes this Elder can't help herself no more, and their family puts them in a home. To me, they really cry inside, don't want to go. That's why they die really fast. I don't want to do that" (rural, female, 84). Even if the Elder was deemed to benefit from the available support, the Elder was remembered by community members as unable to recover from the loss, consequently dying early. One rural Elder shared her observation of another Elder relocating, "She was in a Filipino house [*in Anchorage*], a care house, and their culture is different. She felt really alone, really lonely, and she died early" (urban, female, 73).

The general impressions of rural Elders relocating were most often related to loneliness, loss of connection, and early death. Despite this knowledge, many older adults leave their communities to access Anchorage's medical, financial, and tribal resources.

### **The urban context**

"Eldership" in the urban context encompasses traditional views, including sharing, knowledge transmission, connection with family and community, and respect. Moreover, Elders also emphasized aspects of Western culture such as individuality, staying up to date on community and country developments, and maintaining connections to the home community. Successfully

aging urban Elders vacillate effortlessly between appropriate cultural expectations, including values, beliefs, and behaviors by embracing a robust sense of identity as an AN person with firm community ties. An urban Elder described living in two worlds as follows:

Aging well means that you take care of yourself. You are active. You eat good food. You are involved in activities both in the home and in the community. You make things for people, precious people. You make presentations, you acknowledge and thank people for treating you good. You also make things for them, reciprocate. Aging well means that you have a connection with family, you have tradition, you have beliefs, [...] you have love, you have respect, you have hobbies, you stay current with news and with your village people. You dress good to present yourself positively. (urban, female, 71)

This quote summarizes the blending of the two worlds to age well in Anchorage. The Elder described successful aging by using traditional descriptions such as values, respect, and tradition while also using Western-based concepts and words such as hobbies, making presentations, and attire. Elders who had lived and worked in Anchorage for over twenty years tended to integrate Western and traditional ways of being active and engaging with the community. These Elders, over time, also adopted Western lifestyle concepts, such as hobbies and exercise. In these cases, traditional practices less accessible in the urban setting, such as hunting, fishing, gathering plants, or walking in the community, were substituted by more Western activities such as road biking and working out at the gym.

However, not all urban Elders were able to blend the cultures easily. Most rural Elders and recently relocated Elders associated Anchorage with challenges and a Western lifestyle. One Elder shared their initial struggles: “Because I did grow up in rural Alaska, I did go through culture shock.” Another Elder described urban living as “Yeah, but living in a city is a lot different, I guess. All you do is go exercise in an exercise room or you got to do something. (rural, male, 67). Another rural Elder noted: “I think it’s better to age here [village] than in the city. The city has too much of that on-the-go movement. It’s always move, move, move, move, move. Yeah. Busy, busy, busy, busy” (rural, female, 66).

Several Elders remembered family members experiencing loneliness due to losing access to tight-knit communities and familiar ways of connecting. However, Elders had to adjust to community engagement being mainly initiated, provided, and scheduled (monthly or weekly) by tribal organizations or churches. Most of the social interactions were peer-based and lacked intergenerational opportunities.

The impact of living in an environment that represents Western culture was especially salient when the Elders talked about access to traditional foods and land. For every Elder, access to the land and traditional foods was related to aging well. The limited access to traditional foods within

Anchorage was understood and described as a sign of cultural oppression. Currently, AN people are still fighting to access Native foods in Anchorage. Existing power differentials related to traditional practices were introduced into the conversation by this Elder: “Native food is not allowed. Do you know why? The Department of Agriculture has not approved our Native food to be sold at Fred Meyer. There’s no seal meat, caribou meat, moose meat, seal oil, et cetera, in this store” (urban, female, 73). Another urban Elder adds:

When I first moved to Anchorage a long time ago, there used to be George’s market down Seward highway. He used to sell dried fish, seal oil, subsistence foods. And then here comes the health professionals saying, “Oh, this stuff is so unsanitary. You can’t buy those or sell those here anymore.” So that was the end of George’s. So now, where do we get our Native food from? We really can’t buy them.” (urban, female. 75)

This quote is an example of policies representing the dominant Western culture, its values, and lack of knowledge of Native foods, leaving AN people struggling to rebuild opportunities for traditions and culture within Anchorage. The health benefits of traditional foods have been acknowledged widely, yet, Anchorage-based Elders do not have access to them in local stores. Nevertheless, some progress has been made, and Elders can receive free lunches provided by tribal organizations, which often serve traditional dishes. Even though access to traditional foods may be gradually improving in Anchorage, Elders still have to be creative to gain access by bartering, or exchanging, rural and urban goods.

Most urban Elders noted the access to medical services, financial support, and tribally offered resources as the reason for living in Anchorage. At the same time, two-thirds believed that they would age better and live a longer life if they lived in their original communities with access to the community, church, language, and the traditional lifestyle.

## Discussion

The study’s findings describe the use of language within two distinct cultural environments within the AN context never investigated before. This data set conveys unique cultural impacts on successful aging for AN Elders. While some studies have investigated urban and rural successful aging within other Indigenous communities (Collings, 2001; Hatala et al., 2016), none have explored the language in use and how cultural influences may change that language and, with it, the concept.

### ***Elder identity discourse***

In the context of this study, Eldership arose as a developing and nuanced personal quality shaped by individual, relational, and contextual influences. Elders are remembering, honoring, and emulating how their Elders lived and aged well. With many of their revered Elders having lived at a time when people relied on sled teams, subsistence, traditional clothing, and a common language, the “ideal” Elder image may impact an Elders’ ability to identify with their role models.

Rural communities with tight-knit kinship, reliance on subsistence, and traditional community activities facilitate the progression into Eldership. The self-identification as an Elder is strongly related to other recognized Elders within their community, whom participants vividly recalled as being traditional knowledge bearers, mentors, and leaders. This process is also informed by the Elder comparing themselves to other older adults living in the community that have lived even longer (Stiegelbauer, 1996). The bidirectional acknowledgment of an Elder’s role can lead a child to walk up to an older adult asking them, “When will you start your ‘Elder work’?” Or the older adult may recognize that there are few older adults left, which motivates them to emulate the roles and responsibilities of past Elders. Participants noted that successfully aging Elders would live a traditional lifestyle, including speaking the language fluently, wearing traditional clothing, using a dog sled for transportation, and working to improve their communities. This “ideal” Elder image helped older adults progress into that role, realizing cultural values and practices are shifting to new ways of living, but not forgetting your role models and how they shaped your identity. For some Elders, the discrepancies in lifestyle would make them question whether they are considering themselves an Elder yet, or if they still have more to do.

The identity of an Elder is highly influenced by their involvement with their community, including teaching, sharing, and storytelling (Waugh & Mackenzie, 2011). These roles may be harder to achieve within urban communities due to limited access to traditional activities, practices, and intergenerational gatherings allowing for generativity. These activities need to be sought out individually by the Elder or are offered monthly, weekly, or yearly by tribal organizations. Supports that can improve community belonging, frequent multigenerational gatherings, and an independent AN community center are ways the Elder identity may be reinforced to promote successful aging.

### ***Rural community***

Becoming and being an AN Elder occurs within the community. Among AN communities, “Eldership” is a concept that has been constructed over generations and is firmly nested within traditional community life. Stories of traditional Elders leading an AN lifestyle, wearing traditional clothing, eating traditional foods, using dog sleds for travel, and speaking their tribal language describe Elders from rural communities continuing an AN lifestyle (Kim, 2020). These stories and reflections of Elders provide conduits for encouragement to take on the role and guide the personal identification as Elders. Colonization practices and increased Western influences (educational, socio-economic, political) disrupt Indigenous community networks (Wexler, 2011). Outmigration of families for academic and financial needs leaves some rural Elders without family support. Even in these circumstances, AN Elders prefer aging within their natal communities (Kim, 2020; Lewis, 2013) with access to their communities, the traditional land, Native foods, and subsistence and rural lifestyle (Kim, 2020; Lewis, 2013). Despite this preference, the high incidence of co-morbidities and chronic disease within Indigenous communities (Redwood et al., 2019), along with few available resources in rural communities, lead to forced or voluntary relocation to urban environments. Anchorage provides access to required resources and services spanning medical and financial resources, affordable housing, and mental health treatment (Kim, 2020; J. Pace, 2020) but lacks what Elders desire in the rural communities.

### ***Migration***

Most rural Elders wish to grow old within their communities knowing that this may be impossible for them if their health fails, community and family support are exhausted, or costs exceed their financial resources. Much of these challenges have become more pressing as colonization-induced changes in lifestyle are becoming more prominent in rural communities. Stories in which Elders had no choice than to leave their community in later life to receive services and, as a result, died early fuel the general perception that late-life relocation does not support aging well. The interruption of community, belonging, and identity can negatively impact the health and well-being of Elders (Baron et al., 2020). Accordingly, it is critical to address the importance of place, community, and traditional practices as vital components to aging well (Lewis, 2011; J. Pace, 2020). Creating urban engagement opportunities for AN Elders who migrate in late life may improve aging well. Further research is needed in this area.

### **Urban community**

Negotiating life between two worlds was a central theme in many stories shared by Elders. Traditional gatherings and practices are incorporated into broader Western cultural ways through, for example, programs and cultural activities offered by urban tribal organizations. This study's findings suggest that supporting aging well among AN Elders within an urban environment requires a place for creating a sense of community that allows for intergenerational gatherings, traditional practices, and connection to the land (Kim, 2020; Lewis, 2014; Wortman & Lewis, 2021). Being more welcoming and appreciative of Elders in the urban community, fostering intergenerational belonging of AN people, and providing a space to practice and share traditions may promote successful aging of AN Elders within Anchorage.

### **Strengths and limitations**

This study's findings are limited in two ways. First, the results cannot be applied to all AN Elders, other older populations, or Indigenous groups. Each region within Alaska has a distinct infrastructure, history, and culture that may lead to various migration experiences. The analysis and the proposed model are exploratory and tentative in nature. Moreover, further research is needed to include Indigenous adults from various regions from Alaska and beyond. However, this study offered a unique and insightful view into the experience of AN successful aging to enhance the critical understanding of successful aging and the intersection with culture.

To our knowledge, this is the first study involving discourse analysis of text involving AN Elders' conversations on successful aging within two culturally distinct environments. We examined the interview text asking AN Elders how they understand successful aging. Discourse analysis is used to make claims about a text based on interpretations. Transdisciplinary approaches and conversion of the responses to the discursive analysis tools are suggested to validate findings. The second author (JL) is an AN researcher and by training a community psychologist with ties to the region. Consequently, he provided feedback and consultation in interpreting the text (Gee, 2011, Jaipal-Jamani (2014). The used toolset provided similar conclusions and provided a unique perspective to the study of successful aging (Gee, 2011).

### **Implications**

Successful aging in AN people or "Eldership" is a state that is embedded within a cultural, relational, and intergenerational context (Boyd, 2018; Lewis, 2011; Wexler, 2014). The bidirectional interplay of community respect and the role of an Elder creates an environment that enables older adults to be

contributing, revered members of a community with distinct roles and responsibilities (Lewis, 2011, 2014). Moving from rural Alaska communities to urban Anchorage brings drastic changes to aging well, especially concerning cultural or relational ways of interacting. These changes in positionality and roles within communities may impact Elders' self-evaluation on describing and accepting themselves as someone who has reached Eldership.

Public policies and services need to acknowledge and incorporate the lived experiences of rural and urban AN Elders to promote the establishment of expanded supportive measures founded on culturally appropriate service provision. Specific considerations may include stronger support and increased opportunities for AN Elders to gather in informal intergenerational gatherings. While tribal organizations provide some opportunities throughout the year, they appear to be more formal. Elders suggested the availability of a central gathering place to build community independent of tribal organizations with the opportunity to visit informally to create community and build places to craft together. Migratory patterns of Indigenous older adults need to be considered, studied, and documented to inform theory and policy to create environments that support successful aging outside of home communities. With 70% of American Indian and AN people living in urban areas, this knowledge is vital to create environments that facilitate intergenerational social engagement, the continuation of traditional ways of living, and initiatives to increase well-being by providing access to land, traditional foods, gathering places, sharing opportunities, and community inclusion (Curley, 2021).

Rural Elder-based recommendations included improving or establishing community-based in-home services to support older adults to provide Elders with the ability to stay within their home community, permitting the continuation of a traditional lifestyle, mainly traditional foods, in aging well (Brooks-Cleator & Lewis, 2020). This may involve the development of a workforce that consists of culturally appropriately trained paid community members. Local and federal policy supporting paid family or community caregivers may increase a family's ability to sustain long-term caring (Reyes et al., 2021). Furthermore, increased training of community health aids located in the rural communities may improve resource connectedness, dementia knowledge, and service utilization in villages that are not on the road system (Donlon & Willims, 2018). Opportunities for generativity, intergenerational community gatherings, and the ability to visit their home community may improve Elders' self-identification and promote reconnection to the land and traditional practices. Establishing new resources, such as an independent Elder community center (Waugh & Mackenzie, 2011), could be vital to establishing a community and fostering traditional roles in Anchorage. These Elder-based recommendations are prime examples of the necessity to employ decolonizing practices and policies to improve the experience of AN Elders.

Beyond the AN Elder experience of aging well, the findings may inform existing successful aging models or create an independent, successful aging theory specific to Indigenous populations. This research promotes the extension of knowledge deemed necessary to overcome the currently identified shortcomings in studying successful aging (Martinson & Berridge, 2015), including the illumination of contextual influences such as personal, social, economic, and political aspects. A realignment of the science of aging that can promote the establishment of practices and policies that has implications for every aging person has been proposed by aging researchers (Cole, 1995; Martinson & Berridge, 2015; Stowe & Cooney, 2015). The shared AN Elder voice inform the slowly increasing amount of previously “missing voices” of older adults within various cultural contexts (Martinson & Berridge, 2015; Peterson & Martin, 2015; Poon et al., 2003; Reich et al., 2020).

## Conclusion

Using discourse analysis, this study examined successful aging from the perspective of Alaska Native Elders in urban and rural communities. Rural AN Elders expressed a strong desire to age within their own home communities but often faced urban relocation to access medical services and resources. However, findings from our study revealed urban migration issues impacting successful aging. More specifically, our study identified disparities related to loss of traditional foods, practices, intergenerational support, and ties to the land. Urban migration was often described by Elders in terms of loneliness, loss of connection, and increased risk for premature death, particularly for recently relocated Elders. Moreover, urban migration of Elders was often associated with a loss of Eldership and guidance for the rural communities.

Our study’s findings have significant implications for policy, practice and research addressing successful aging for diverse cultures, especially among AN Elders. In developing policy and practice to support successful aging, it is critical to recognize the importance of place, community, and culture as essential components to aging well. Moreover, it is vital to recognize the importance of lived experience and culture in developing interventions to address urban migration challenges to support successful aging. Only through the development of community-based research and cultural insight can we develop effective interventions to support successful aging.

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## Author contributions

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## Data sharing statement

Due to the tribal ownership of the research data, the supporting data is not publicly shared but may be available from the corresponding author, SK, upon reasonable request.

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