



Generativity as a Traditional Way of Life: Successful aging among Unangan Elders in the Aleutian Pribilof Islands

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Abstract

Predominantly Western-based biomedical models of successful aging have been used to research, understand, and explain successful aging among diverse populations. With an increasingly heterogeneous older adult population nationwide, scholars have been exploring Indigenous understandings of successful aging. To add to the accumulation of knowledge of diverse Alaska Native populations, this study involved semi-structured qualitative interviews with 20 Unangan Elders from the Aleutian and Pribilof Islands. This community-based participatory research study explores the aging experiences and conceptualization of successful aging of these Elders from this remote and culturally distinct region of Alaska. Thematic analysis was employed to identify themes related to successful aging within this specific region, which supported our previous four themes, or characteristics, of Alaska Native successful aging: physical health, social support and emotional well-being, generativity as a traditional way of life, and community engagement and Indigenous cultural generativity. Each of these themes or characteristics of Eldership is intertwined and together support successful aging within two remote communities in the Bering Sea. The findings of this study illuminate how Alaska Native Elders can live in geographically diverse regions of the State, yet the values and teachings they possess on successful aging possess the same cultural values and teachings. This study highlighted two new emerging constructs that influence Alaska Native Elders' successful aging based on geographical location. Findings contribute to the thematic saturation of the four main successful aging domains while outlining the importance of future research to conduct deeper investigations into the role of environment and history on Elders' perceptions and understanding of aging.

Keywords Successful aging · Alaska Native · Generativity · Community-based Participatory Research · Rural remote health

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Introduction

Insights into successful aging have been historically based on Western biomedical approaches (Stowe & Cooney, 2015; Torres, 1999). However, over the past decade, scholars have been moving towards broader and holistic approaches to defining successful aging (Reich et al., 2020). While research has outlined the role of culture in successful aging on an international level (Torres, 1999), we are just learning how cultural and historical contexts (i.e., historical, and intergenerational trauma) influence Alaska Native aging processes (Evans-Campbell, 2008; Mohatt et al., 2014). With increasing knowledge of what it means to “age in a good way” within Alaska Native communities, Jordan P. Lewis, an Alaska Native researcher, has established a set of characteristics of successful aging among several cultural groups of Alaska Native Elders, including Anchorage, as well as the Bristol Bay and Norton Sound Southern sub-regions. The main characteristics of successful aging based on these two regions are emotional well-being, community engagement, spirituality, and physical health (Brooks-Cleator & Lewis, 2020; Lewis, 2010, 2011, 2013a, b, 2014a, b, 2017). Based on his research, the Alaska Native concept of “Eldership” may be understood as synonymous with the Western concepts of successful aging. This paper builds upon previous publications on Alaska Native aging but expands its reach to an additional distinct and unique cultural and geographical region.

Indigenous communities in Alaska respect and revere their Elders, and for this reason, our publications, including this one, capitalize the term Elder given this cultural convention that distinguishes those Alaska Native Elders who practice traditional customs, pass down their knowledge, wisdom, and experiences, and serve as an integral part of their community (Lewis, 2011). The participants in our studies include community-nominated Elders, so the capitalization also recognizes the community distinction of who is an Elder versus those who are just growing older (Lewis, 2011, 2021c, Asquith-Heinz & Lewis, 2022a).

The Aleutian and Pribilof Islands

The Aleutian and Pribilof Islands are a string of 150 remote islands located in the Bering Sea of Alaska, stretching some 1,100 miles with dramatic volcanic landforms, rich oceans, and severe weather. Currently, about 8162 Unangans live in 14 villages representing 14 tribes (First Alaskans Institute, 2023). Unangax people had lived in this region for about 9,000 years before Russian contact in the early 1800s, which brought disease, social change, and a substantial decrease in the population. The Russian period was followed by the American control of the lives of Unangan people. American colonizers continued to exploit Unangan people’s labor for economic benefits, especially the seal harvest and fishing (Torrey & Krukoff, 1978). These events were followed by the World War II Internment of the people of nine communities resulting in further cultural loss and change (Veltre & Smith, 2010).

Within the context of this study, many Elders recalled stories from their parents about the WWII internment experience and the governmental regime under which

they used to live. The memories of people who never returned, the extremely harsh living conditions, being forcibly removed and relocated to a foreign environment, and the loss of whole village sites after internment still impact Elders' lives and the well-being of their families and communities. It is essential to be knowledgeable and sensitive to the historical context to engage respectfully with communities as these impact health outcomes of Alaska Native Elders and how they understand successful aging. To learn more about the history of this region, a comprehensive account of historical events, including the events of first contact, disease, the long-standing history of colonization, oppression, and survivance (combining survival and resistance to harness and emphasize Indigenous people's strength and thriving (Vizenor, 2008), can be found in "Slaves of the Harvest" (1978) written by B.B. Torrey.

Literature

Existing Western conceptualizations of successful aging are often rooted in John Rowe and Robert Kahn's (1987) article in *Science*. This overly biomedically and individually deterministic (Rubinstein & de Medeiros, 2015) framework has been challenged to consider holistic factors such as emotional, spiritual, family, and cognitive health (Stowe & Cooney, 2015) and the importance of social structures (Foster & Walker, 2015). Recently, socio-psychological aging models emphasize life satisfaction, social participation and functioning, and psychological resources, including personal growth (Bowling & Dieppe, 2005). The validity of successful aging has been enhanced by the exploration and integration of older adults' experiences and beliefs into researchers' definitions (Jopp et al., 2015; Phelan & Larson, 2002), which also improves the ability of communities and providers to offer patient, or elder-centered care (Phelan et al., 2004; Rubinstein & de Medeiros, 2015). More recently, Indigenous successful aging literature is challenging the colonial and dominant cultural exploration of successful aging (Chazan, 2020; Lewis, 2011).

Historically, Indigenous populations were portrayed as aging less successfully than their non-Indigenous counterparts (Lewis, 2011; Pace & Grenier, 2017), however, newer approaches have been taken to better understand the complex nature of successful aging, obtaining subjective experiences (Huijg et al., 2015; Jopp et al., 2015; Rubinstein & de Medeiros, 2015) and applying a life course perspective (Stowe & Cooney, 2015) to capture all aspects of an Elders' life, including physical and emotional health, cognitive wellbeing, spirituality, and cultural and social engagement (Lewis, 2011, 2014a, b; Phelan et al., 2004).

For more than a decade, Jordan P. Lewis has been partnering with Alaska Native communities across the state to interpret and publish Elders' understandings of "aging well" or "aging in a good way." These partnerships produced a body of publications outlining the core characteristics of Alaska Native successful aging from two of the seven culturally distinct regions: Bristol Bay (2011) and Norton Sound (2022, b). Additional publications explored more specific topics including urban living (2020), migration (2023), cultural generativity (2021a, c, 2022), sobriety (2017), social engagement (2014a), and optimism (2013).

After conducting research in two of the seven culturally distinct regions in Alaska, Jordan's ongoing relationships with tribal communities in the Aleutian Pribilof Island Association (APIA) region led to a series of interviews that illuminate the meaning of successful aging in this region. While the interviews from the APIA region have informed publications on gerotranscendence (Wortman & Lewis, 2021) and migration (Kim et al. 2023), this paper offers a unique and broad exploration into the essence of successful aging for Elders of this region. While the APIA region is culturally unique from each of the seven other culturally regions of Alaska, this article describes the differences and similarities of perceptions of aging.

Participant Demographics

This community-based participatory research (CBPR) study occurred in collaboration with the Aleutian Pribilof Island Association Inc. (APIA) and two rural communities in the region. Participating Elders were nominated by Tribal Council and community members as respected Elders by their communities and self-identified as Unangax Elders. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to learn what it means to age successfully and explore existing pathways to successful aging within two remote communities. In total, twenty Elders from those rural communities were interviewed. The age ranged between 58 and 87, with an average age of 69. Thirteen participants were women, five were married, six were divorced, and 14 were high school graduates.

Methodology

To understand aging from the perspectives of Alaska Native Elders, we used a CBPR framework, as it allows for a collaborative and participant-led approach (Parra-Cardona et al., 2020). Within a CBPR framework, the research is directed by the community instead of solely by the researcher. Further, the goal of those who employ CBPR is to use research findings to inform action, social transformation, and/or positive change (Collins et al., 2018; Darroch & Giles, 2014; Parra-Cardona et al., 2020) that addresses community priorities. This approach to research places the voices of the community at the forefront, where they traditionally have had limited input or engagement in research (Chilisa, 2019; Smith, 1999) throughout history.

There are eight key principles of CBPR: (a) recognizes community as a unit of identity; (b) builds on strengths and resources within the community; (c) facilitates collaborative partnerships in all phases of the research; (d) integrates knowledge and action for the mutual benefit of all partners; (e) promotes co-learning and empowering processes that attend to social inequalities; (f) involves a cyclical and iterative process; (g) addresses holistic well-being and the social determinants of health; and (h) disseminates findings and knowledge gained to all partners (Brush et al., 2020; Chilisa, 2019; Collins et al., 2018; Lewis & Boyd, 2012; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008).

The CBPR approach has served as the foundation of this research since Jordan conducted his dissertation research in the Bristol Bay region of Alaska that explored successful aging with Alaska Native Elders (Lewis, 2011, 2014a, b) after which several communities approached him to continue his studies within their regions as a means to learn about their Elder's experiences, including the APIA region. To ensure this was a collaborative and participatory project, the research team worked with APIA to hire an Elder Care Coordinator in the two participating communities who served as the key stakeholders for the project. The Elder Care Coordinators were an integral part of the research team to build relationships with Elders in each community (Kovach, 2017; McGuire-Adams, 2020; see Table 1), help mentor and guide the research team with the cultural adaptation of the interview questions, recruitment, data analyses, review of preliminary findings, and dissemination of the results. Engaging the Elder Care Coordinators was an important step in the research process, as we wanted to ensure the research materials (demographic and consent forms, interview questions) were reflective of the cultural, spiritual, and geographic diversity of the region and written in a language and tone that would be understood by Elders.

Methods

The Elder Care Coordinator assisted in recruiting research participants using purposive sampling (Campbell et al., 2020), which allowed us to recruit 20 Elders who fit the inclusion criteria for the research. The Elders that participated in the research were individuals who self-identified as Aleut/Unangax person, and who had been specifically recognized as Elders by their communities for their respected role as traditional knowledge keepers and sharers. Rather than following a Western definition of an older adult, as age 65 or 67 or older, we followed the communities approach to who is considered an Elder. Elders across the State of Alaska are traditionally viewed as role models and considered the cultural and spiritual leaders of their

Table 1 Community-based thematic analysis process

Phase 1	Become familiar with the data (interview transcripts) • Read and re-read data, write memos
Phase 2	Generate initial codes • Code data in a systematic fashion, collate data relevant to codes
Phase 3	Search for themes related to the research question • Collate codes into preliminary themes • Share preliminary findings with Elder Care Coordinator, community partners
Phase 4	Review themes • Generate a thematic map of analysis
Phase 5	Define and name themes • Ongoing analysis to refine themes, generate clear definitions and code names • Share preliminary themes with Elder Advisory Committee, community partners, solicit feedback to refine themes and definitions
Phase 6	Produce results, disseminate to participants, community partners • Select quotes related to the research question for final reports

communities regardless of age (Lewis, 2011, 2014, 2016, 2021b), despite the minimum age requirement of 55 years to receive certain benefits through their Native Corporation. Accordingly, we relied on the Elder Care Coordinator connections in the community to identify potential participants who fit each community's definition of Elder, removing our biases on whom we considered an Elder. The University Institutional Review Board, the Alaska Area Institutional Review Board, the Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association, Inc Ethics Committee, and each participating community tribal council approved this study and publication.

Data Collection

We followed the previously described interview protocol (Lewis, 2011, 2022, Asquith-Heinz et al., 2022) to collect data in this study and answer our research question: How do Unangan Elders define successful aging? Fifteen questions covered topics such as how Elders defined successful aging, how their aging process affected their emotional, spiritual, and cognitive well-being, as well as what it meant to age poorly in their community, how they avoided poor aging, and how the participant maintained their health and well-being in a rural setting. (See Appendix 1 for a list of interview guide questions).

The interviews were either held in Elders' homes, community centers, or Tribal Council offices, and the interviews ranged in length from 30 to 90 min. To protect the identity of the participants, each participant was assigned a unique code to identify their demographic form and interview transcripts. With participants' consent, all the interviews were digitally audio-recorded and then professionally transcribed verbatim by VerbaLink.

Analysis

All interview transcripts were uploaded to the qualitative data analysis software NVivo (<https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo/home>) and then analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The team followed the six phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) in partnership with the Elder Care Coordinators and community partners (See Table 1 for the six phases) to identify, analyze, and report patterns in the data. Rather than imposing themes based on interview questions, the team conducted an inductive analysis, allowing patterns and themes to emerge organically from the data.

For the first phase, the first three authors read through each of the transcripts to create memos with initial thoughts. Next, the first two authors coded every 5th transcript based on the questions to establish the first draft of the codebook. After reviewing and discussing the codes and definitions, Jordan P. Lewis, Steffi M. Kim, and Zayla Asquith-Heinz authors coded all the transcripts and consulted with one another when any questions or inconsistencies arose in code definition and application and established a final codebook. This process was followed by a review of the preliminary themes to determine which codes fit with each theme and to ensure they

accurately represented what was found within the data. Next, we further refined the themes by naming and defining them and found corresponding quotes within the interview transcripts that illustrated the theme. This approach allowed us to develop clear and concise themes answering our research question.

We shared preliminary findings with the Elder Care Coordinator that included each theme, the corresponding definition, examples of the themes within the data, and a summary of our analyses. We solicited their input and recommendations to further refine the themes based on their feedback and ensure we were appropriately representing the perspectives of Elders in their two communities and had their approval to present the findings to APIA and the two participating communities. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these findings have been presented in newsletter and poster format, but given communities being closed to outsiders, we have not presented findings in the two communities in a community meeting format, but plan to when it is safe to travel as determined by tribal leadership.

Findings

This research supported the previously outlined four themes, or characteristics, supporting successful aging: physical health, social support and emotional well-being, generativity as a traditional way of life, and community engagement and Indigenous cultural generativity (Blanco-Molina et al., 2019; Asquith-Heinz et al., 2022, Lewis, 2011, 2013b; Walsko et al., 2006). Furthermore, the unique contributions of the Elders from this region suggest that historical context and geographical location substantially influence aging. While each characteristic will be discussed independently, we found that the themes influenced one another, as evidenced by the importance of generativity in each theme. The next section will discuss each characteristic and use Elders' quotes to illustrate their meaning.

Physical Health

Physical health is an essential characteristic of successful aging through its enormous impact on a person's overall well-being and influences an Elder's ability to stay active. Alaska Native Elder's conceptualize physical health from a holistic standpoint that is understood as an active interplay between physical, mental, spiritual, family, community, and environmental health. The importance of this holistic approach to health was expressed by this Elder, who found that those aging in a good way are doing so through "[...] exercise, maintaining and keeping healthy in mentally, physically, spiritually ways."

Unangan Elders identified the ability to stay active, as promoted through family involvement and supported by a positive attitude, as the main factor in managing and overcoming age-related physical health changes. Staying active included not being idle and could be done individually, with the family, or in the community, including exercising, walking, hiking, household chores, biking, going to the pool, gardening, visiting others, and more. One Elder shared, "As long as you're moving

around, you stay young. Do the things you like, and then you stay young because your body is active.”

To maintain their physical health, Elders emphasized the importance of having a positive attitude, a crucial mindset involving accepting age-related physical changes and a positive outlook on their ability to adapting to new needs, activities, and ways of doing things. One Elder expressed, “I have medical issues that prevent me from doing stuff, but I work through it and do the best that I can and try to live every day as happy as possible.” Furthermore, the adaptation of activities to the Elder’s abilities, e.g., from being able to travel to reading books to travel within their minds, powerfully exemplifies the importance of a positive attitude as directly related to Elders’ emotional well-being.

Social Support and Emotional Well-Being

Emotional well-being is the Elder’s ability to feel at peace and content with their current living situation and accept changes related to the aging process. Part of having positive emotional well-being is learning from past life events and using them as a healing mechanism, not only for themselves but their family and community. One Elder shared, “To age in a good way is to both physically and mentally work on yourself to process the past to let it go. Hanging on to the past can cause both physical and mental challenges when you get to that senior age.” These Elders reference the lived experiences of their ancestors and within their own lives related to colonization, internment, enslavement, and historical trauma impacting their current ability to age well.

The Elders’ emotional well-being was also impacted by the support and encouragement of family to age in place. Living in remote and/or rural communities has implications on the range and availability of resources that can foster an Elder’s emotional well-being. With less availability of resources in very small communities, the role of family was emphasized. Closeness to grandchildren was always related to Elders’ mental health and well-being. When talking about aging around younger generations, one Elder said, “And he [grandson] is a joy, you know. It’s great to see new life, and no matter how tired you get, you get that burst of energy by always being around them.” The cultivation of positive attitudes in combination with physical or mental activities facilitates Elders’ well-being as they age. One Elder summarized, “I’ll find things to do, even though they’re small and tedious. Staying busy, I guess, keeps my mind busy.”

Generativity as a Traditional Way of Life

The theme “traditional ways of life” references traditional ways of life in Unangan people, including subsistence, traditional foods, family, cultural values, and being on the land and water. Alaska Native traditional ways of life always involve foods, family, and the land and waters; however, each region is culturally specific with unique customs and traditions. This regional traditional knowledge is shared and passed

down by Elders, their family, and community members, through Indigenous cultural generative acts, which are considered an important element to successful aging, or achieving Eldership. As a participant noted,

They pass on down things to you and you've got to pass it on down to your kids, everything you learned, you know. You could have a college degree and everything, but where you learn is your home. That's where you first start, from you, your parents, grandparents, elders. You pass that on.

The Elders in this study demonstrated the values and practices of Unangan ways of life through modeling and leading by example, like a silent leader. This principle was explained by this participant:

The Unangan people were people of very few words. They talked only when they had to. Especially to the young. They [youth] were expected to watch and learn and, as they grow, if they felt they were ready to try something, they would be allowed to try it and, you know, learn like that. And still today you'll hear elders say that words were not wasted.

Leading by example not only included how to live as an Unangax person, but how to engage in your family and community as a leader, teacher, Elder, and healthy Native person.

Community Engagement and Indigenous Cultural Generativity

Community engagement is linked to social interactions allowing for visiting with other Elders, the family, and youth. An Elder described the socially accepted ways of engaging and benefits of being engaged as,

It means to be respectful to others as you would want to be treated as well. Being there for the community when the community needs you for questions or traditional events in the community or questions the community may have. To be able to show the young children how things were done and to teach their kids to be respectful so they can teach their kids to be respectful toward Elders.

Elder peer engagement provided them with a common understanding of historical events, current socio-cultural and political changes, and traditional knowledge that can be shared and enjoyed together. Mutual support between Elders was emphasized by many participants, which included sharing food, meeting for tea, and company when spending time on the land or water gathering subsistence foods. The importance of having other Elders around was expressed as,

I just wish there were more of us around because it would be a lot more fun to have people my age who could go out and romp around in the hills or beaches and go walking or picking berries. Or just talk about reminiscing.

Community engagement is a critical aspect of successful aging for Unangan Elders, including intergenerational activities, engaging with their peer group and

family, participating in meaningful activities, and feeling supported and engaged by their community.

Community engagement enabled Elders to seek out opportunities to be generative, to teach and preserve what they have learned from their Elders to the next generation to ensure subsistence hunting and gathering practices are continued within the Unangan ways of life. This knowledge conveys traditional practices on how to be a healthy Native. One Elder talked about the importance of sharing knowledge for their improved well-being: “You keep things locked up inside you and it’s not a good thing. We need to make sure that we’re always telling stories, passing this onto the new generation.”

Discussion

For the past decade, the field of successful aging has been broadening its perspectives from an individualistic approach to health (Foster & Walker, 2015; Rubinstein & de Medeiros, 2015) to include cultural breadth and depth. To gain a better picture of successful aging, researchers are looking across the life course to better understand the impact of different contexts on successful aging (Stowe & Cooney, 2015), highlighting the subjective experiences of Elders (Martinson & Berridge, 2015), and how they define success as it relates to aging (Jopp et al., 2015). This paper addresses these critiques and aims to advance the field by bringing the voices of Indigenous Elders in the Arctic to the literature.

The Aleutian Pribilof Islands Region of Alaska is geographically remote and has a rich history, abundant resources, diverse and vibrant culture, language, and subsistence that make it one of Alaska’s most vibrant and beautiful regions. While the findings of this study strengthen previously established components of successful aging within other regions of Alaska (Lewis, 2020, 2014, 2013a, 2013b, 2011, 2009, 2021a) this region brought to our attention the importance of including socio-historical contexts into the discussion. Successful aging for the Unangan Elders involves physical activity through subsistence activities, adapting and accepting age-related changes, opportunities to continue to engage in their traditional ways of life, and having opportunities to share their knowledge, experiences, and wisdom with the younger generations. All these characteristics form the foundation of successful aging for the Elders of the Aleutian Pribilof Islands within a specific historical context that continues to influence Elders ways of life and their well-being, with each characteristic passed down through generations from their Elders and to their grandchildren and the next seven generations. While each of these characteristics is individual and unique, they are intertwined impacting one another.

Physical Health

Physical activity is a contributing factor to successful aging given its psychological and physiological benefits (Lewis, 2020), including improved cardiovascular health, improved bone health, reduced fall risk, and improved cognitive function and mental

health (Johnson & Acabchuk, 2018; King & King, 2010). One of the criticisms of Rowe and Kahn's model is the emphasis on physical health outcomes (Katz & Calasanti, 2015) and not subjective criteria for physical health (Huijg et al., 2015), which this study addresses. Similar to Jette's and Vertinsky's (2015) findings, Elders reported participating in physical activity to improve psychological and emotional well-being and defining physical activity on their terms (Lewis, 2020). For example, Unangan Elders engaged in physical activity not only to improve or maintain their physical, mental, emotional, cultural, and spiritual health but also to enable them to stay engaged in subsistence activities (Lewis, 2020). Maintaining physical health enabled participants to participate in the other activities that contribute to their successful aging, providing them with opportunities to be socially, emotionally, and culturally engaged in their family and community.

In contrast to Western older adults, physical activities are not only motivated by personal responsibility to maintain health and wellness but expanded to community health and well-being. The physical demands of being on the land and engaging in subsistence activities (i.e., hunting, gathering, preparing traditional foods) were a large part of Elders' concept of successful aging (Lewis, 2020), but were also became more limited as Elders grew older. The Unangan Elders in this study highlighted the importance of accepting and adapting to age-related changes (Heckhausen et al., 2021) and stepping into different roles and responsibilities that align with their capabilities and changing interests. The Elders' perspective on adapting to age-related changes to maintain their sense of successful aging is supported by Baltes and Baltes' (1990) model of selective optimization with compensation (SOC). According to the SOC model, older adults become more selective in choosing activities and interests to achieve desired outcomes or goals within their selected domains (optimization). For example, when a strategy for achieving success as one ages is no longer available (e.g., gathering and harvesting subsistence foods due to physical limitations), the older adults compensate by using other physical, psychological, or technological strategies (e.g., teaching youth how to gather and harvest and accompanying youth to mentor them).

Physical health was found to play a similar role in concepts of successful aging in two other culturally distinct regions of Alaska, Bristol Bay (Lewis, 2011) and Norton Sound (Asquith-Heinz et al., 2022), supporting the possibility that physical health plays a similar role among Alaska Native Elders across the state. More research is needed in other culturally distinct regions of Alaska to better understand the role of biomedical and physiological aspects health among Alaska Native Elders.

Social Support and Emotional Well-Being

Elders highlighted the significance of family and social networks providing Elders with a feeling of being needed (Stowe & Cooney, 2015), fulfilling roles, and having a sense of purpose, which contributes to their emotional wellbeing. Previous studies on social networks have also highlighted the importance of relationships on one's health, well-being, and cognitive functioning (Lewis, 2014, 2021a). The results of Norton Sound and Bristol Bay Elders (Lewis, 2011, Asquith-Heinz et al., 2022)

described similar roles in concepts of aging, supporting a universality of this concept across Alaska Native cultures.

The quality of life for Elders is directly related to the quality of their social network and opportunities for social engagement. Rowe and Kahn (1998) postulated engagement in close personal relationships, including family members, friends, and neighbors as one component of successful aging. Social relations, personal relationships, especially intergenerational relationships, are a source of usefulness that positively influences older adults' desires to develop and maintain connections with others (Lewis, 2014). Successful aging is not solely avoiding disease and disability, but also involves being a caring and productive member of one's family and community and contributing to the health and well-being of future generations (Rowe & Kahn, 1997).

Generativity as a Traditional Way of Life

One of the main contributors to the continuation of traditional knowledge, which includes knowledge of the land and water to harvest and gather food, is generativity. The notion of generativity can be defined as concern and activity dedicated to the well-being of others, especially younger generations, and is an integral component of successful aging for Alaska Native Elders in every region we have studied (Erikson, 1950; Lewis, 2020; Kim et al., 2023). In fact, greater perceptions of generativity have been linked to better health outcomes and increased longevity in older adults (Gruenewald et al., 2012) based on feeling needed and having a purpose in society (McAdams, 2018; Moieni et al., 2020). Being afforded opportunities in your family and community to be generative contributes to Elders ability to be physically and mentally engaged, participate in social activities (family and community) and pass down traditional knowledge and practices.

Erikson's establishment of these stages of human development came from his studies with the Yurok and Sioux Tribes, which strengthens the idea that generativity is a cultural value among Indigenous peoples, including Alaska Natives. Alaska Native Elders fill specific roles in their community, such as mentoring others and teaching how to be good stewards of the land, which contributes to their sense of generativity, or ting into consideration the seventh generation. This concept is a cultural value among Indigenous Elders and communities and continues to be taught to the younger generations. This idea of leading and caring for the next generation, or the seventh generation, has been documented among other minority and Indigenous groups, and has a direct impact on the Elders' sense of purpose and builds community capacity (Pratt et al., 2013).

Community Engagement and Indigenous Cultural Generativity

The notion of being generative is tied to community engagement, which is important for Unangan Elders with their desire to pass on their knowledge, teach and engage in cultural practices, language, and pass on their knowledge to their family and others

to ensure they have the tools, stories, and wisdom to be healthy AN peoples and hopefully age into the role of Elder for their family and community.

Alaska Native communities also provide Elders with a sense of identity, belonging, and attachment to the society they live in. It offers a framework to transmit knowledge, values, and traditions from one generation to another. This transmission of culture promotes the development of generativity, as individuals feel a responsibility to preserve and contribute to their culture. Thus, culture plays a vital role in generativity by developing a sense of belonging and responsibility towards the community and society. It provides a foundation for individuals to engage and contribute positively to society, passing on knowledge and values to future generations.

Indigenous cultural generativity (Lewis & Allen, 2017) does not happen all at once, it is an ongoing process throughout one's life. To begin, you need a sense of belonging to a community in order to feel responsible to pass it on (Manheimer, 1995); the individual must experience a sense of belonging to that culture or feeling wanted and needed by their family and community (i.e., meaningful engagement). Research has consistently demonstrated that self-reported generative concern shares a significant, positive relationship with measures of life satisfaction, self-esteem, happiness, and a sense of coherence (Ackerman et al., 2000; de St. Aubin & McAdams, 1995; Peterson et al., 2007; Warburton et al., 2006), all of which contributes to one's ability to age successfully.

Summary

This study enabled Alaska Native Elders to define their own needs, values, and meanings, (Martinson & Berridge, 2015) of successful aging, and how emphasized the importance of new models of successful aging to be holistic (Martinson & Berridge, 2015), emphasizing social components, historical events, geographic location, cultural value differences, spiritual, as well as taking a life course approach to successful aging (Jopp et al., 2015), to include human development, history, and importance of relationships over time (Stowe & Cooney, 2015).

Given the importance of generativity for Unangan Elders and their understanding of successful aging (Lewis, 2024), future research needs to further explore this concept and its role in cultural values, practices, and its impact on Elders' personal, family, and community interactions and well-being. The findings of this study present an opportunity for the implementation of family, community, and cultural interventions targeting specific behaviors or activities, specifically around generativity and its role in Elder health. For example, creating opportunities for increased social engagement with family and community could increase feelings of engagement, usefulness, and generativity. In turn, these activities may increase levels of physical activity (Cosco et al., 2013),

The lessons and stories shared to provide the public with an insider perspective on aging in the circumpolar North, what it means to age in a rural, isolated region of the United States, and what characteristics enable Elders to age successfully while overcoming adversity. The Alaska Native older adult population in the North is not well represented in the literature and using a strengths-based approach to our

research provides readers and others an alternative, and more positive, way of thinking about aging and growing older. The stories and experiences of the Elders are relevant to everyone, and the words shared can be applied to your own life and help you explore your understanding of successful aging, regardless of where you call home or your definition of health and well-being.

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Data availability The datasets generated by the survey research during and/or analyzed during the current study are available in the Arctic Data Center at <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.18739/A2ZS2KF0D> (Jordan Lewis. 2021. Alaska Native Successful Aging, Northwest, Anchorage, Aleutian Pribilof Islands, 2016–2021. Arctic Data Center. <https://doi.org/10.18739/A2ZS2KF0D>).

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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