



Counterspaces: Fostering Healthy Identity Development

Submitted by: Sara L. Buckingham

Although universities have the potential to catalyze empowerment, frequently U.S.-based universities marginalize the cultures of Indigenous students. They pressure assimilation to White, Euro-American cultural norms, values, and practices through their structures and policies.

Indigenous students report feeling isolated and alienated on university

campuses; many

have felt the need to choose between staying in university and maintaining their Indigenous identities. This likely contributes to low university retention rates among Indigenous students.

Moreover, cultural marginalization has been tied to poorer behavioral health.

It is critical to transform universities to mitigate these harmful outcomes.



Figure 1 Photograph Photograph re-printed with permission from the author

"The Cultural Identity Project set the stage for Alaska Native student empowerment. At the center of this appeared to be the sense of community the space fostered—becoming a true member of the space, having needs met, sharing a deep connection with others, and being influenced by and having the opportunity to influence others... [This] appeared to support all in the space to embrace who they are and to bring their full selves into other spaces, potentially transforming them."

Highlights

The Cultural Identity Project facilitated a space where students spoke to their own empowering actions developing from critical awareness, healing, and solidarity.

People with power in any system must work to uproot oppression for spaces to live up to their potential.

One way universities may work towards transformation is through what have been termed “counterspaces,” spaces created by and for people who experience oppression within a larger setting, like a university.

Counterspaces have been shown to promote positive identity development, foster a sense of community, push back against dominant narratives, support academic persistence, and promote activism and self-advocacy.

This study explored *Knowing Who You Are (Becoming): The Alaska Native Cultural Identity Project* (or CIP for short). CIP's aim is to support cultural identity development of diverse Alaska Native people across tribes and cultural regions rather than any one specific cultural group. This began at the University of Alaska Anchorage as an 8-week online program that brought together Alaska Native Elders, students, and staff at the university during the COVID-19 pandemic to support students. The program incorporated storytelling from Elders,

experiential learning activities, connection with other Alaska Native people, personal exploration of cultural identity, and sharing of cultural identity. Through our observations of the program and later confirmed through focus groups with students, Elders, and additional program staff, we began to think of CIP as more than simply a cultural identity program. CIP appeared to function as a counterspace, a space in which “all members experiencing oppression could develop solidarity with one another, challenge deficit narratives, and heal from oppression.” CIP helped students think, feel, and act in ways consistent with their cultures. It also facilitated relationship building, connection to resources, and social support. This research explored how CIP functioned as a counterspace for everyone involved - students, Elders, and program staff alike.

Methods

Of the 44 Alaska Native students, 5 Elders, and 3 additional program staff who were involved with CIP, 36 chose to participate in 10 focus groups about their experiences in CIP. We asked everyone about their experiences, what was most and least helpful about CIP, and what they thought about CIP's content, structure, and what should be kept or changed. We analyzed what

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?

Community Psychology challenges us to problematize systems and settings, rather than people. Rather than asking, “what is wrong with this person?” or “why can't they adapt?”, it asks, “what can be changed about this setting?” and “how can we transform this setting to make it better for us?” This project looked at how people can create new spaces to develop solidarity with one another, challenge prevailing deficit narratives, and heal from oppression. Hopefully, this will ultimately lead to broader transformation of spaces. Of course, we must not lose sight of the end goal - people in positions of power within oppressive systems must also work towards uprooting oppressive power structures to ultimately promote liberation.

participants said using a method called transformational grounded theory to understand how CIP functioned as a counterspace.

Results

- CIP fostered a sense of community by allowing for membership of a diverse and yet united Alaska Native community, by helping members to recognize their deep connections to one another that transcended time and space, by getting their tangible and intangible needs met, and by allowing members to influence and be influenced by one another.
- CIP served as an empowering setting by supporting students, Elders, and other program staff alike to share leadership, to take on multiple roles as both teacher and learner, and to embrace the vulnerability that comes from growth so they could learn from one another, develop community, and offer support to one another.
- CIP appeared to set the stage for ripple effects beyond the counterspace, potentially setting the stage for empowerment, as students gained skills, created other affinity spaces, and sought to make changes in other settings.

What Does This Mean For?

Research and Evaluation: This counterspace functioned by fostering sense of community, serving as an empowering setting, and promoting empowerment. Future research should continue to examine the functions of counterspaces. The structure of CIP appeared to be more impactful than its curriculum. Therefore, researchers should examine what aspects of a counterspace lead to their positive impacts.

Practice: Counterspaces are important for people who experience oppression in the setting in which the counterspace is embedded. Practitioners should consider how their spaces are structured to facilitate all members' sense of community, healing, growth, and empowerment. This case study points to some key ingredients, including partnerships among students, staff, and Elders.

Social Action: Counterspaces would not be needed if oppression no longer existed. Counterspaces may set the stage for social action beyond the space itself but are not an antidote for oppression. Continued focus on dismantling the oppressive power structures that create the need for counterspaces is critical.

Want to learn more? Check out the project's website here:

<https://akidentityproject.wixsite.com/culture>

Original Citation: Buckingham, S. L., Schroeder, T., & Hutchinson, J. (2023, online first). [Elder-led cultural identity program as counterspace at a public university: Narratives on sense of community, empowering settings, and empowerment.](#) *American Journal of Community Psychology*.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12673>

Terms of use: This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#) It is attributed to the authors and the original version can be found here: <https://www.communitypsychology.com/counterspaces-fostering-healthy-identity-development/>