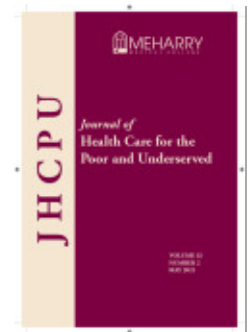




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Psychosocial aspects of Historical and Cultural Learning: Historical Trauma and Resilience among Indigenous Young Adults

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Abstract. Purpose. The purpose of this manuscript is to evaluate the impact of the Remember the Removal (RTR) program, with specific emphasis on participants' experiences learning about and reacting to Cherokee history, including historical trauma. **Methods.** Two cohorts of intervention participants (1984 and 2015) participated in focus groups. An exploratory analysis was performed to categorize themes around the effects of historical training. **Results.** Results yielded two themes and subsequent sub-themes: 1) Reactions to Historical Learning: confronting misrepresentation and erasure, mixed emotions, looking backwards, looking forwards, strengthening Cherokee identity; and 2) The Effects of Colonization: emotional sides of historical loss, empowerment, resilience, and belonging, and addressing contemporary discrimination. **Conclusion.** Teaching tribally-specific historical events was related to increased thoughts about historical loss, an increased awareness of non-Native people's lack of historical knowledge about Native people and subsequent experiences of discrimination, but also an increased sense of tribal identity, resilience, and belonging.

Key words: Native American, historical trauma, resilience, culture.

Historical trauma (HT) and the broader concept of historical oppression¹ have emerged as scholarly frameworks from which to conceptualize the lasting effects of

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colonization and colonialism within Indigenous communities. Historical trauma (HT) is most commonly defined as the “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations emanating from massive group experiences.”^{2,3[p.5]} Another conceptualization of HT describes an event(s) perpetuated with genocidal and/or ethnocidal intent upon a group of people and their environment.⁴ Historically traumatic events and policies imposed upon Indigenous communities in the United States include forced removal/relocation, prohibition of spiritual and cultural practices, removal of children to boarding schools, and dispossession of land.⁵

In the Cherokee language, historical trauma is named *ᎠᎩᎩᎩ ᎠᎩᎩᎩ* (transliterated as, Udanta Ayoutla), which means your thoughts and your thinking (that derive from your heart) are crippled, or in another translation, a person has a crippled heart. (T. Belt, Personal communication) Cherokee is a descriptive language, and research suggests there is truth in the idea that people have enduring negative health effects from historically traumatic events. For instance, historical trauma experiences such as government-supported relocation programs⁶ and residential school attendance^{7,8} negatively affect Indigenous health.⁹ Indigenous people who attended boarding school had more physical health conditions and worsened health status compared with those who did not attend boarding school.⁹ Frequent thoughts about HT also relate to reduced physical and mental health of Indigenous populations;^{9,10} Specifically, experiences or thoughts around HT are associated with increased levels of negative self-image, anxiety, anger, interpartner violence, depressive symptoms, suicidal ideations, and substance use.^{3,10–14}

Although HT originates in past events, its consequences influence contemporary systems of oppression and modern health disparities affecting Indigenous communities, a process recently called *historical oppression*.^{1,14} Previous research has shown that Indigenous adolescents think about historical cultural losses in some cases more frequently than their adult caregivers.^{10,11,14} This work demonstrates that the effects of historical trauma continue to play significant roles in the lives of Indigenous people today despite time passing. In fact, the effects of HT may be worsening for each generation. This effect may be complicated by or encased within current manifestations of historical policies, practices, and beliefs. For instance, many Indigenous communities continue to experience disrupted cultural practices, discrimination, and chronic poverty,¹⁵ all anchored in historical policies and institutionalized practices.¹⁵

Therefore, while empirical evidence of the damaging effects of HT are growing, debate and confusion remains regarding the meaning, impact, and utility of HT as a framework for understanding Indigenous health in the context of diverse applications in the literature to date.¹⁶ Similarly, intervention, treatment, and prevention programs to ameliorate the impact of HT and colonization are limited; those that do exist appear to lack theoretical consistency, may not have been empirically evaluated, and may be complicated in that they reflect tribally diverse conceptualizations and experiences of HT.^{15,17,18} For example, according to the National Congress of American Indians:

AI/ANs are vastly diverse peoples, with historically distinct experiences of colonization based in places and institutions. Thus, descriptions of historical trauma may or may not resonate with some tribal members and may not capture the more chronic

forms of oppression (i.e., discrimination and poverty) that disproportionately affect AI/ANs.^{18[p.2]}

Despite challenges in research about HT, many tribal communities have looked to their own culture as a solution to redress these traumatic experiences. In fact, though not always an overt goal, many existing interventions in Indigenous communities implicitly aim to redress the effects of colonization by reclaiming traditional social and cultural ways of being and healing the wounds associated with HT and cultural loss.^{19–21} For example, Indigenous youth who report a strong connection to their family, elders, and community were more resilient and had more protective factors than those who did not have these resources.^{22–26} Indigenous youth who were embedded in their culture and actively participated in traditional lifeways had better mental health and academic performance and reduced substance abuse than Indigenous youth who were disconnected.^{27–31}

Interventions aimed at reducing the negative effects of HT (1) acknowledge the relation between HT and modern-day suffering; (2) identify the areas of concern in the community (e.g., parenting, family relationships, suicidal ideation, health behaviors); and (3) work to revitalize and teach traditional tools and techniques in order to address the targeted areas of concern.³² Some interventions focus on tailoring or adapting Western evidence-based treatments to culturally specific protocols.^{33, 34} Others fully immerse participants in traditional cultural activities, ceremonies, or practices to treat ailments, otherwise known as *culture as treatment*, or, employ community-level effort for cultural engagement or immersion to facilitate *culture as prevention*.^{35–36} Collectively, culturally-adapted and culturally based interventions are promising in terms of improving health outcomes including depression, anxiety, and cardiovascular risk factors.^{35–36} These approaches are fundamentally anchored in the claim that: “a reclamation of Indigenous heritage, identity, and spirituality . . . neutralize(s) the pathogenic effects of colonization.”^{37[p.78]}

One such program that has moved beyond cultural learning to explicitly address HT is the Cherokee Nation Remember the Removal (RTR) program. Beginning in 1984 and restarting in 2009, around 12 Cherokee Nation citizens between the ages 16–24 years have been selected annually for inclusion in the RTR program. Participants begin meeting on weekends in January. They spend the mornings learning Cherokee history, culture, language, and personal genealogy and the afternoons riding bicycles in preparation for the 950 mile ride from the previous capitol of Cherokee Nation, New Echota, Georgia, to the current capitol, Tahlequah, Oklahoma, all the while learning about place-based historical and cultural events, including historically traumatic events related to the Cherokee removal. Additional details about RTR appear later in this report.

Education in history in the United States silences, eliminates, misrepresents, and demeans Indigenous people and contributes to poor student outcomes for Indigenous students.^{38,39} On the other hand, history classes taught using Indigenous perspectives relate to improved outcomes for Indigenous students including an affirmation of Indigenous identity and sovereignty, increased positive Indigenous role models, and improved self efficacy.^{38,40–43} While we are not aware of any documented negative effects

of learning about tribal history, the traumatic nature of Indigenous history and the negative impacts of HT could be viewed as triggering, may be perceived differently across generations, and are infrequently addressed in health interventions.⁴⁴ Further, each tribal community has experienced different historical losses and HT policies and has its own reactions to them, requiring a regionalized and tailored approach to HT-focused interventions and signaling need for evaluation of outcomes.^{18,44}

To contextualize the RTR program, we will first present a brief history of the Trail of Tears—the specific event and era on which the program is focused. This history highlights terminology, people, and concepts that are used, taught by and understood by Cherokee people, scholars, and educators of the RTR program. We present this information to clarify the difference between a history from the point of view of those who experienced it and history as seen by the colonizers who sanctioned the program.^{45,46,47,48} This manuscript represents a unique collaboration between historians and Indigenous health researchers given the overlap of historical events and their relationship to mental and physical health disparities for Indigenous people. In the text titled *Sustaining the Cherokee Family* about post-removal Cherokees' resilience in the face of further colonial policies and practices, second author Dr. Stremlau says, "Historians do not have tools to measure heartbreak."⁴⁹[p.32] Dr. Stremlau is referring to historical loss and trauma, or ᎠᎩᎠᎵ ᎠᎩᎠᎵ (transliterated as, Udanta Ayoutla), which is a critical and common part of the field of Indigenous history; notably, the full implications of this construct have gone largely unexplored. In the field of Indigenous health research, researchers are more likely to be trained to measure the effects of historical loss on health outcomes but are less able to link outcomes to specific and contextual historical events and timelines (given field-specific expertise and limitations). Therefore, this collaboration allows us (1) to understand more precisely the history, historical events, and timelines that relate to modern day experiences of historical loss; (2) to work to measure the heartbreak, historical loss, or ᎠᎩᎠᎵ ᎠᎩᎠᎵ; and (3) to use a Cherokee-centric perspective (four of the six authors are citizens of the Cherokee Nation) to analyze histories and modern-day Cherokee experiences.

Next, we will describe the Remember the Removal program and, finally, we will present the results of a focus group analysis with two cohorts of the Remember the Removal program. While the focus groups were part of a broader evaluation of the program, the purpose of the current analysis was to investigate how one part of the program—learning Cherokee history—affected participants.

The Cherokee Nation. *Cherokee removal and the Trail of Tears.* The Trail of Tears refers to the forcible removal of the majority of the Cherokees between the years of 1835–1839 from their homelands in the Southeast to Indian Territory—referring to what is today eastern Oklahoma but what was then, land outside of existing state boundaries set aside by the federal government for the relocation of Native nations from east of the Mississippi River. U.S. soldiers rounded up Cherokees for a forced march west, even denying them time to pack food or personal belongings. The U.S. Army first held Cherokees in concentration camps that resulted in almost 400 deaths.^{47,49} Approximately, 1,500 deaths occurred during the actual removal on both the land and water routes.^{47,49} In addition to the 1,000 mile journey that most made on foot, Cherokees faced other forms of suffering: violent deaths such as murder and drowning, rape, as well as denial

of burial. Further, the largest number of deaths actually occurred in the year following removal—approximately 1,500 to 2,000.^{47,49} Cherokees had been migrating to the West—and back East—as early as the 1780s, removal occurred in multiple phases, and Cherokees continued to experience removal-related mortality for years after arriving in Indian Territory. For those reasons, scholars debate the size of the Cherokee population pre-removal and the total number of casualties.^{48,49} However, suffering caused by removal did not begin or end with the trail. The physical relocation was only one—and most likely the shortest—period of crisis resulting from removal policy.

The Trail of Tears was one large event forming part of the period of the Long Removal Era, which began in the early 1800s.^{50–53} This era signaled a significant shift in Cherokee culture and practices in response to policies of genocide, ethnic cleansing, and forced acculturation by the U.S. (see Box 1). In particular, Cherokees suffered an increase in trauma-induced conflict and violence targeted towards women—the central figure of Cherokee families and communities.^{54,55} Building upon existing scholarship, authors' analysis of specific removal-era records (see below and throughout this section) points to the deep and meaningful shifts of impact of removal on Cherokee gender roles. First, the women, many having been abused by U.S. soldiers, now experienced violence at the hands of loved ones. A missionary at the Brainerd, which was a mission established by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in 1817 in the Cherokee Nation for the purposes of conversation and assimilation, reported such an incident and linked the cause directly to removal schemes: "an Indian on Highwassee river murdered his wife and children about a week since; supposed to be occasioned by a disagreement respecting removing over the Mississippi, he wishing to go, she not."⁵⁶[Entry from Feb 13, 1817. Page 29] These may be the first recorded incidents of trauma response to the events of the removal. The central premise of Cherokee social culture places women in powerful, decision-making positions, and this event represents the overall shift towards patriarchal Euro-American gender roles.^{54,55,57} Additionally, violence was being introduced outside of traditional Cherokee rules that had been historically used to contain it. This included the victimization of family members, namely women.

Second, Cherokee men were most often the perpetrators of this violence. Cherokee men were unable to respond as Cherokee hunters and warriors in defense of their kin and homelands as they had only one generation earlier. Demilitarized and traumatized, Cherokee men engaged in violence against themselves, their families, and one another in ways that suggested the escalation of pre-removal, trauma-induced violence.^{54,55,57}

Third, this violence occurred in domestic and public spaces and was witnessed by families, including children. These events suggest that something new and toxic was happening in Cherokee communities that has not been seen before the removal era. This violence often lacked explanation within the immediate context of Cherokee daily life, and no perceivable social and spiritual boundaries contained it as they had previously.^{54,55,57}

Cherokee culture and values changed in response to the Long Removal Era. Cherokee culture and families began to reflect the violence that they experienced during the removal era—a notion posited in HT theory.⁵⁸ Some scholars have assessed how contemporary HT response and/or thoughts of historical loss relate to health status,^{6–9,58} or how Indigenous history and culture can be infused into school curriculum.^{59–63} No

Box 1.

SHIFTS IN CHEROKEE SOCIETY DURING THE LONG REMOVAL PERIOD

	Pre-Long Removal Period	During/Post-Long Removal Period	Historical Trauma Domain
Societal Rules	Matrilineal clan system	Restricted use of clan system by centralized government	Loss of extended family connectivity and structure Loss of cultural and social ways of interacting that maintain balance and order
Governing Structure	Clan law	Constitutional Republic	Loss of decision-making structures Loss of system to retain balance in the community Loss of independence/flexibility of local communities
Economic	Equitable distribution of resources	Land privatization and creation of individual family farms	Loss of community connectivity
Gender Roles	Complementary	Adoption of Anglo-American gender roles by some	Loss of cultural and social ways of interacting
Women	Matrilineal households; shared agricultural and domestic labor	Women's power challenged by assimilationists; increasing incidents of violence towards/in the presence of women.	Loss of autonomy and power for women Loss of safety and comfort for women in their homes and towns
Men	Protectors and representatives	Men encouraged to be patriarchs of families rather than focus on extended kin and community	Loss of role for men in their community Increased tasks of farming, managing the family.
Family Values	Emphasis on nurturing children.	Increasing incidents of violence towards/in the presence of children	Increased exposure of violence for children. Loss of culturally specific child-rearing techniques and values.

other studies were found however that look at the effect of teaching contemporary Indigenous people (by Indigenous people) about tribally-specific historical events of oppression, and trauma as a pathway to address and ameliorate the effects of HT and empower Indigenous learners. A program in the Cherokee Nation—the Remember the Removal program—seeks to accomplish this with its participants.

Remember the Removal Program. The Remember the Removal (RTR) program is a long-standing youth leadership program, yet its effectiveness has never been assessed until recently. This program began in 1984, restarted in 2012, and continues today. The purpose of the RTR program is to teach young Cherokees about one of the most important parts of their history from a Cherokee point of view. The RTR aims to create Cherokee leaders using cultural and historical training. Cherokee citizens including Michael Morris, Mose Killer, and Gloria Sly are credited for creating the RTR program in 1983. (Sly, G, Personal communication) Although the core elements of the RTR program have remained the same since its inception, it has been modified slightly over the years to incorporate suggestions for improvement and changes based on new historical discoveries about the removal. The RTR Program components are Cherokee Leadership, Nation Building, Cherokee Culture, Cherokee History, Memorial Journeys, and Importance of Place.⁶⁴ These components were chosen to increase participants' Cherokee knowledge and values with the hopes of creating well-informed and culturally appropriate Cherokee leaders.

Selected program participants receive a personalized family history and genealogical chart, historical and cultural courses for four months, as well as cycling training late winter through their departure in early June. The ride begins in New Echota, North Carolina and ends in Tahlequah, Oklahoma (The participants travel through mainly rural sections of 8 states including, North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Illinois, Missouri, Arkansas, and Oklahoma.). Throughout the bicycle ride portion of the intervention (three weeks), participants meet with historical and cultural experts who link their personalized family history to places and events along the northern removal route. Historical lessons are meant to improve participants' knowledge of Cherokee history and improve their understanding of their role as citizens of a sovereign nation in preparation for becoming Cherokee leaders. Cultural training includes language courses and education around Cherokee cultural protocol to allow participants to introduce themselves publicly, partake in basic Cherokee conversation, and engage in Cherokee cultural behaviors. Genealogical research is completed to connect participants to their families in the Cherokee homelands and to one another.

Previous evaluation of the RTR. To date there have been two studies of RTR participants' experience completed through focus groups by the first author. In the first study, health outcomes cited by RTR participants were shared in the realms of physical, emotional, social, and cultural domains. In each domain, participants noted improvements lasting up to 30 years after the completion of the program.⁶⁴ Notably, Cherokee identity and values remained important, and RTR participants continued to participate in Cherokee cultural activities, developments that they attributed to the RTR program. Other stated improvements included patience, self-efficacy, stress management, leadership skills, empathy, peer relationships, and family relationships. Participants noted that

increased knowledge about Cherokee history and personal genealogy related to feelings of empowerment, self-efficacy, and ability to get through challenging life events.

After the authors completed the analysis around the outcomes from the RTR program and realized that cultural training was reported to be a key influence in reported positive life outcomes, we set out to use these data to discover how the RTR program taught culture and how participants applied these lessons. Therefore, in the second study, authors explored Cherokee-specific teaching styles in relation to Cherokee-specific values. Five specific Cherokee values were identified that were taught, applied to the program, and brought home at the completion of the program. A strong theme of historical learning arose as a critical part of the RTR enculturation curriculum. Therefore, authors set out to investigate participants' experiences of the historical component of the RTR program in light of a programmatic focus on a historically traumatic event.

Methods

Theoretical approach and community involvement. Tribally-based participatory research (TBPR) methods,^{65,66} as well as a decolonizing lens,^{47,67,68,69} were employed as part of this study's theoretical and applied approach. Both TBPR and decolonizing approaches aim to equalize power imbalances between researchers and research participants by including participants as key decision-makers in the entire research process.^{45,65–67,69} In particular, Indigenious research methods specify that relationship is central to this type of methodology.^{68,69} Therefore, community members' input was a significant part of the co-creation and implementation of the research project and specific attention was paid to Cherokee research needs and values. For example, this project began when RTR alumni and committee members noted positive outcomes of the program (i.e., Indigenious knowledge) and were interested in a more formal evaluation. The positive anecdotal outcomes noted included increased college graduation, tribal employment, leadership positions at work, and participation in volunteer work in the community. The program staff were interested in learning about the long-term, as well as the immediate effects of the program (i.e., community-initiated research question), which led to selecting the first cohort (1984) and the most recent cohort of this program (most recent at the time the data were collected) for further study. Therefore, the first author met with program staff (Cherokee citizens) to create the research questions and method of data collection for over one year to co-develop the research project while on research leave on site (i.e., prolonged engagement). Program staff co-created the design of the study and titled the focus group a *reunion* to reconnect, celebrate relationships, and re-tell their stories to share with others.

RTR participants. Eligible participants (Cherokee Nation citizen, 16–24, able to physically attend trainings in Tahlequah, Oklahoma) are invited to apply every fall via a written application. Potential participants are recruited through the Cherokee Nation newspaper, *The Cherokee Phoenix*, and the Cherokee Nation website; media and brochures are shared with local schools and community centers. Current RTR participants and alumni attend local parades and schools to recruit new participants. Application numbers vary by year and usually range from 60–200.

A selection committee using a standard rubric interviews the top applicants (40–60)

and selects 10–12 participants each year. Applicants receive higher scores for conveying a dedication to their Cherokee community, a desire to serve and give back what they will learn, and an interest in learning Cherokee history.

Study participants. Individuals who completed the RTR program in 1984 ($N = 18$) and 2015 ($N = 12$) were invited to participate in focus groups⁶⁹ to discuss their program experience. For the 1984 cohort, 14 (78%) participated; for the 2015 cohort, 9 (75%) participated. We did not collect socio-demographic information about the participants at the request of the program staff, due to concerns pertaining to reduced confidentiality with such a small group.

Protocol. All study protocols were reviewed and approved by the University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board (IRB) and Cherokee Nation IRB. All focus group participants provided informed consent. Two focus groups from two different cohorts were conducted at the Cherokee Nation for a total of four focus groups. The focus group sessions were approximately two hours each. A meal and a gift card were given to those who participated.

Participants were first asked, “How did the Remember the Removal program affect your life?” Next, they were asked six questions about the positive and negative aspects of the program, as well as specific questions regarding the program’s effects on physical, emotional, social, and cultural traits of life and well-being. Finally, two wrap-up questions were delivered allowing participants to add any additional content and summarize their experiences (A complete list of focus group questions can be found in a previous publication).⁶⁴ The facilitator asked follow-up questions and probed, as recommended by the facilitator’s guide that was created for this project.⁶⁹ Responses were recorded and transcribed. The first author invited participants to complete members-checks; transcripts were sent to all participants to review and edit accordingly. Three participants added content, but no content was edited or deleted.

Analysis. A thematic and descriptive analysis was carried out. Audio recordings were transcribed and analyzed using an exploratory method for evaluation research, in which data and not pre-existing theory guides the analysis.^{70,71} Descriptive and topic-coding was completed by the first author using NVIVO (2016; 11.2.1)⁷² to code, organize, and analyze the transcribed data. These coding techniques are commonly-used, first-cycle techniques to begin to organize the data, and therefore, were helpful in creating a codebook. The codebook was created to maintain and organize the categories and themes, and along with author one, Dr. Melissa Lewis, an additional researcher, Dr. Laurelle Myhra performed a fidelity check on 50% of the themes.^{64,72–74} Next, open coding was used to build upon the initial categories that were created in the codebook and was performed by two researchers. This process led to the creation of 48 discrete themes.^{73, 74} A summative evaluation was completed using themes centering around health and well-being.⁶⁴

Researchers then noted unexpected content that was both frequent and informative, around one specific intervention: teaching history. While participants were not directly asked about their experience of the historical curriculum and its effects on them, the nature of the program and the participants’ subsequent experiences led to an emergence of these topics in the focus group discussions and in the data analysis. Therefore, two researchers completed focused coding around this topic.⁷⁵ A word search

for “history” in the transcripts was also completed to assist in locating this content. We independently excerpted data segments, (i.e., units of analysis) that held together with a coherent unit of meaning. Later, we met to confirm precise data segments. Next, analytical coding techniques^{72,75} were applied that led to the development of themes. This involved grouping substantively similar codes together to create themes. Patterns were revealed through the use of annotations via paper-and-pencil and in the software system. Further, color-coded stripes were used to identify patterns in the codes that lead to the development of the themes. Again, a comparison between two researchers (Drs. Lewis and Myhra) was conducted and consensus was attained on all themes. Themes were not necessarily mutually exclusive given their rich, multiple meanings. After researchers created and confirmed themes, they noted and agreed that themes fell into two distinct categories: Historical Learning and The Effects of Colonization. The selection of quotations that best exemplified each theme was chosen and confirmed by two researchers and a Cherokee Nation program staff member. Some quotations are from an individual and others are small sections of conversations between participants that best exemplify the theme or concept. Conversations are culturally appropriate forms of data segments to present in view of the fact that they demonstrate a relational form of communication.

Results

Results are presented in terms of a) themes, or overarching trends in the data; and b) sub-themes of more detailed categories/findings related to each of the two themes. A summary of themes, sub-themes, definitions, and sample quotations can be found in Table 2. The first theme, Reactions to Historical Learning, comprised participants’ reactions to historical content taught within the RTR program. The sub-themes include confronting misrepresentation and erasure; mixed emotions; looking backwards, looking forwards; and strengthening Cherokee identity. The second theme, The Effects of Colonization, did not specify which part of the program (e.g., historical training or other) influenced the participant’s experience. Instead, sub-themes are unified by participant discussion around their experiences of historical trauma in relation to the RTR program experience; sub-themes in this category were emotional parts of historical loss and associated symptoms; empowerment, resilience, and belonging; and addressing contemporary discrimination. Given the limited number of participants, gender will not be revealed in order to maintain confidentiality. Therefore, he/she will be replaced with they/their.

One unexpected finding from this analysis was the lack of tribal historical knowledge that participants had before this program. It appears that Indigenous people may be just as likely as non-Indigenous students to not receive an education on Indigenous history.

Theme 1) Reactions to historical learning. To set the context for the historical learning of the participants, it is important to assess the amount of knowledge they held about this period before they entered the program. Participants reported having little to no knowledge of this time period before this program. It appears that Indigenous people may be just as likely to *not* receive an education on Indigenous history as their non-Indigenous counterparts. There is a fallacy that because they are Indigenous they

Box 2.

THEMES, SUB-THEMES, DEFINITIONS, AND EXEMPLAR QUOTES

Theme	Sub-Theme	Definition	Exemplar Quotes
Reactions to Historical Learning	Confronting misrepresentation and erasure	In learning about Cherokee history, it was revealed that previous educational experiences had misrepresented and erased Indigenous people in historical accounts.	<i>That was really interesting to find out that [some of] our ancestors were wealthy, they had plantations, they had gold mines. They didn't teach you that kind of stuff, we didn't know that kind of thing about our ancestors. So that was all very interesting to learn. They were just ripped out of their homes and forced. Yeah, that's good to know. Good to know. It's hard to know.</i>
	Mixed emotions	Learning Cherokee history resulted in a wide array of feelings on the spectrum to happy and proud to sad and angry.	<i>Though our Cherokee history is sad and dark, it has a sense of perseverance, honor, integrity.</i>
	Looking backwards, looking forwards	In processing learning experiences of Cherokee history, participants often reflected on what their ancestors endured and applied these lessons to hopes for the future generation.	<i>But you think about it, our ancestors, we're alive because of them, and they were forced to do that. For me, I, sometimes I just want to quit, and it's like wait a second remember the removal, our ancestors they did it, I'm alive because they-they survived. We just had to learn so we could teach the younger generations.</i>
Strengthening Cherokee identity			<i>There were many lessons along the trail and as we drove out to Cherokee, N.C., and riding the trail, we stopped along the way and met people and saw places of pain and heartache for our ancestors. Things not [previously] taught to many of us. Important things that I believe shaped me as a young person and now as an adult. The way families were ripped from their homes and forced to leave, even now brings tears to my eyes. You cannot know who you really are as a person until you know where you came from as a people, as a culture.</i>

(continued on p. 998)

Box 2. (continued)

Theme	Sub-Theme	Definition	Exemplar Quotes
The Effects of Colonization	Emotional aspects of historical loss	This sub-theme comprises the emotional reactions to learning about historically traumatic events within the curriculum.	<i>I remember going through the Andrew Jackson [home]. There was nothing in that home about the removal. We were grumbling, I'll tell ya, we were pretty mad. By then we had learned what he had done, so we were pretty angry because we knew the real history.</i>
	Empowerment, resilience, and belonging	Participants noted that an increased knowledge of Cherokee history and people related to an increased feeling of empowerment, resilience, and belonging to their community.	<i>And I mean, that's our whole culture, as Native Americans compared with other cultures, when you get introduced to somebody the first thing they say is 'what do you do for a living?', but what we say is 'who are your people?' We want to know who your people are. That's the whole point is we know who our people are because we went on that trip. We know who we are because we went on that trip.</i>
	Addressing contemporary discrimination	On this journey to learn Cherokee history, participants faced discrimination in the form of racial slurs, microaggressions, and physical violence and responded using humor, education, kindness, and peer support.	<i>(In this program) I learned . . . that all cultures are just as valid as others and how to respect everybody, even the people who flipped us off, swerved at us, and cussed at us.</i>

will have this history taught in schools, but curriculum does not change at Bureau of Indian Education schools—the same curriculum and textbooks are used within and outside of tribal settings. Further, the majority of Indigenous people (78%) live outside their tribal lands.⁷⁶ Participants discussed that they were taught nothing or next to nothing about the removal of Cherokees in school. Example quotations from participants appear below, with the year of the speaker's cohort provided in parentheses.

1 (1984): Learning things about the trail (versus) actually being there was a lot different than learning in a history class, which obviously they don't even teach that now. They did back then, when I was in school, they would have a very small portion in the history book about the Trail of Tears.

This participant echoes a message that their peers expressed around preferences on experiential learning:

2 (1984): Show people, show them not tell them, show them what our ancestors went through.

3 (2015): It was a lot different actually seeing my, my great grandmother's name on the Dawes roll, actually there in Cherokee, North Carolina. That was really cool!

Participants were hungry to learn more about an era that is popularized by society but not well understood; they preferred learning on site.

Participants shared complex reactions to historical lessons, but ultimately expressed positive sentiment about them. The next section reports their reactions to these lessons. Themes include misrepresentation; mixed emotions; looking backwards, looking forwards; and strengthening Cherokee identity.

Confronting misrepresentation and erasure. During the course of the RTR program, Cherokee history was taught via classroom lectures, readings, individualized genealogical charts, place-based lectures and experiential learning. Curriculum was mainly delivered by Cherokees which allowed for a tribally-specific perspective and experience. Participants expressed that they did not have very much knowledge of Cherokee history from classrooms or other settings before the program and had a desire to learn about it. Example quotations from participants appear below.

(2015) Learning about my Cherokee history was so amazing. I've always wondered about it but never had a clear understanding . . .

(1984) To me—what we're about, where we're from. Instead of just seeing, from other people's point of view. We saw it first-hand . . .

(2015) They didn't teach that in history class.

(1984) One of the things also that I think about is that before we [did the program], you heard of the Trail of Tears, a paragraph in your Oklahoma history book, but the Trail wasn't widely recognized; they had a few markers here and there. But over the course of the last 31 years or so, there's been more markers, more routes get involved, more recognition, more highlight put on the Trail . . . It did happen, this Trail still exists.

The last quoted participant suggests that the state of Cherokee curriculum in public school is not sufficient, and that Cherokee history and Cherokee voices had been kept out of history classes. They also expressed positive sentiment regarding the growth of Cherokee history on a national level while taking pride in playing a role in that recognition. Along with the lack of Cherokee history present in the local public school curriculum, often referred to as erasure,⁷⁷ participants were troubled by incorrect history. A common misunderstanding about the Trail of Tears is that it is one singular event, and in fact, it is one event in a series of events stretching both backwards (i.e., the long removal) and forwards in time.^{53,77}

(2015) It was so cool because [we didn't just learn the] Trail of Tears, [we] did, pre-war, pre-removal, and then after [removal]. There was even one day where he told us [about] the village structure and how everything was laid out [pre-colonization]. It was awesome. A lot of us had not ever seen that before—I definitely hadn't.

(1984) That was really interesting to find out that [some of] our ancestors were wealthy, they had plantations, they had gold mines. They didn't teach you that kind of stuff, we didn't know that kind of thing about our ancestors. So that was all very interesting to learn. They were just ripped out of their homes and forced. Yeah, that's good to know. Good to know. It's hard to know.

This participant reflects on learning that their ancestors had owned valuable property and ran profitable business, lived in modern homes, and were productive farmers. This challenges the false narrative, originating with the advocates of removal and perpetuated by history textbooks, that Cherokees and other Native people had not adapted to colonization and were not thriving.⁷⁸ Erasing Indigenous history works to maintain false ideas of Indigenous people; Suggesting that Cherokees were primitive justified removal and continues to obscure anti-Indian racism. Acknowledging the Cherokee success reveals the removal as more modern, more real, and more cruel than this erasure allows.⁷⁸ This participant noted that learning this information was both good and hard, a sentiment expressed by several participants, and which contributed to the next theme.

Mixed emotions. Participants experienced a wealth of feelings in reaction to learning Cherokee history, both sadness and pride, disconnection and reconnection, yet they seemed to take away feelings of pride and perseverance. As the participant quoted above noted, learning about the removal of Cherokees involved accepting a new understanding about a historical event. They realized that their ancestors, who lived like many other Americans, were taken from their lands and their homes unjustly. That could bring to light increased feelings of anger towards the federal government and the United States and increased fear over the safety of Native American people today, yet it seemed to empower the participants. They felt that events such as divorce, job loss, or loss of a loved one, they believed they could get through it because of what they learned through the RTR program.

(2015) Though our Cherokee history is sad and dark, it has a sense of perseverance, honor, integrity.

(2015) I mean a lot of the things that our ancestors went through, obviously they didn't deserve, but they made the best of every situation. I mean, they came and they prospered in this place that they were forced to go, not even knowing where they were going. And I think that says something.

(2015) I loved learning about the history. I didn't know a lot about the trail, before I started taking the history classes. So, the part of the ride that I liked the most was getting to see all of these places that they talked about. I hadn't imagined what it'd feel like to see those places and seeing them. I had a connection almost at every place. It was—it was saddening and it was, I don't know, hard to explain. [Agreement] Especially seeing the Great Smokies in North Carolina . . . It was amazing. They were beautiful; it felt like coming home. I—it felt like I belonged there and I didn't want to leave.

Looking backwards, looking forwards. This theme reflects a noted pattern that participants expressed when discussing the Cherokee Removal: Participants often reflected backwards to their ancestors' experiences and cultural values, and then looked ahead to future generations, expressing hope that they will carry on the traditions and values learned through this program.

(2015) I loved learning about my family's history because I could actually pinpoint my ancestors. I even learned four of the other riders who I was related to. This ride is more than a memorial to our ancestors. Because of my history, I have decided to stay in Tahlequah [the capitol city of Cherokee Nation] and help rebuild the roots of our ancestors. If I leave I'm helping our tribe deplete. I want to raise my children to know and embrace our ancestors' history and raise them to teach their young and so on and so on.

(1984) But you think about it, our ancestors, we're alive because of them, and they were forced to do that. For me, I, sometimes I just want to quit, and it's like wait a second remember the removal, our ancestors they did it, I'm alive because they—they survived. We just had to learn so we could teach the younger generations.

These participants discussed that learning about the difficult things that their family and ancestors experienced in the past gave them strength and a sense of confidence in themselves to get through difficult situations. They mentioned that they honored their ancestors by taking care of themselves and by taking responsibility to teach the next generation about Cherokee history and culture.

Strengthening Cherokee identity. Historical curriculum provided information to participants about who Cherokees were and who their own family members were. They also learned about the lifestyles and culture of Cherokees during this time period. They vividly experienced what their ancestors endured, resulting in feelings of empowerment:

(1984) I liked learning about the history because what little we had, we didn't know. That's why I chose to [participate in this program], was the history. It just blew my mind, there's still a lot of history that we don't know about. And also, I learned a lot about myself. I didn't know I could do this, but I found a lot of the stuff that about myself which made me a lot stronger.

(1984) There were many lessons along the trail and as we drove out to Cherokee, N.C., and riding the trail, we stopped along the way and met people and saw places of pain and heartache for our ancestors. Things not [previously] taught to many of us. Important things that I believe shaped me as a young person and now as an adult. The way families were ripped from their homes and forced to leave, even now brings tears to my eyes. You cannot know who you really are as a person until you know where you came from as a people, as a culture.

Participants noted that as they learned about Cherokee history, they felt a stronger sense of confidence and Cherokee identity themselves. In particular, the last participant quoted above discusses the Cherokee value of holding ancestral knowledge and ancestral relatives in high regard. They link the teachings of the RTR program to this Cherokee value which they believe is crucial to Cherokee identity.

Theme 2: The effects of colonization. Three themes appeared in the category of The Effects of Colonization: historical loss, empowerment, and contemporary discrimination. These themes were linked through the experiences of the participants: The experience of historical loss in reaction to learning this content through the RTR program, coping with this new content and feelings of historical loss, and addressing the effects of modern-day colonial policies and practices in the face of learning about historically traumatic events. Theme two, *the effects of colonization*, has some overlap with theme one, however, theme one only incorporated participant's experiences that are related to learning history and the effect of the historical curriculum on them while theme two relates specifically to learning about the history of colonization and relevant responses.

Emotional parts of historical loss. For Indigenous people of the United States, their experience since colonization largely comprises events of genocide, trauma, war, and assimilation policies associated with increased thoughts of historical loss around land, culture, spirituality, family, traditional ways of being, and reduced mental and physical health.^{9–11,78} For this program, participants shared their experience of learning about historical trauma and loss.

(1984) I remember going through the Andrew Jackson [home].* There was nothing in that home about the removal. We were grumbling, I'll tell ya, we were pretty mad. By then we had learned what he had done, so we were pretty angry because we knew the real history.

* The majority (86%) of the content taught in history texts and classes about Indigenous people in United States occurs pre-1900⁷⁸ leaving the Native person in the distant past. This time period comprises the civilization, removal, and allotment eras—all policies that aimed to assimilate Indigenous people but not the termination era post-World War II, the relocation act, Indian Child Welfare, or many more important historical and current contexts. Mainstream narratives about U.S. history emphasize political power and those who have it (such as U.S. Presidents), but tribal accounts challenge the justice of the power when used to enact violence against Indigenous people. For example, Andrew Jackson was the president responsible for implementing the Indian Removal Act, yet he has been known as the "people's president."^{80,81,82} Andrew Jackson is a significant part of the historical information that participants learn about through lectures, readings, and visiting historical sites in person.

The last participant quoted above notes that the erasure of critical information from historical narratives—specifically the omission of a genocidal act by a United States president from the historic site devoted to teaching about him—resulted in feelings of anger for them and for their peers which is a commonly cited emotional reaction to historical loss.^{11,78} Further, they note that the increased historical knowledge about the removal and the role of Andrew Jackson resulted in increased feelings of sadness.

(1984) I remember just some of those things, people just being really sad. But people couldn't even move. Couldn't lift our heads.

(1984) Another thing that I can remember is the graves—that was really impactful to me, to see the graves of the Cherokee people. We'd drive right past them and be right there beside them . . . Sometimes there wasn't markers, we had to search sometimes for graves. It's always a memory to me—when I think back about it—it's a impact on your life, you think—it's unbelievable, to look back at it now and think, this really happened.

Participants noted feelings of anger, sadness, or shock regarding events of the removal, including Cherokee people being brutally killed and who still do not have graves to mark where their bodies lie in death. Once participants learned more about Cherokee history, they were uncomfortable with the absence of historical markers such as Trail of Tears information at Andrew Jackson's home, or grave markers for Cherokees who died on the Trail of Tears. The lack of information present in history books or at historical sites was troubling to participants.

(1984) I had a lot of anger. Reporters would follow us every day and ask us questions, "What do you think about this grave?" I was angry—that's all we see is graves. But I learned about the graves, the trail, and the Mississippi River, and all that. But ya know, I seen joy. No matter what I go through, no matter what affects us, I still want to do something [good]— don't look at the negative, be positive. Be positive no matter what. And it's amazing to teach it [Cherokee history and culture] and watch somebody else carry it on.

Despite feeling upset about learning about the Trail of Tears and the focus on death, this participant felt that it is important to teach Cherokee children about their tribe's history. They also explained that even though it was upsetting to them, it is important to be positive and do something good. This was a pattern in many of the quotations in which participants discussed the emotional challenges of the program: Despite hardships, participants looked for positivity. Discussions and quotations about loss and trauma were very short in comparison with other topics such as recalling funny stories, their appreciation for the program, and the skills, values, and perspective that the program gave to them.

Empowerment, resilience, and belonging. Reflecting state-mandated standards intended to Americanize and inspire patriotism, the history curriculum taught in schools to many Indigenous children is not primarily about them or the history of their ancestors or groups. In contrast, through this program, participants learned

about their tribe and their family's history. Learning about history affected the way that participants felt about who they are as a person today. This included an increased sense of empowerment, resilience, pride in culture, and belonging.

(1984) That's a big part about me . . . I knew that I was just an Indian boy. Ya know, from [a small town], but on this trip, I'm more proud to be Cherokee and more proud to know what my family and ancestors went through. It just makes me say that I'm from a really great tribe. And that's why I like the history part of it, it makes me more proud to be who I am, instead of just knowing that I'm just an Indian boy from a small town.

Other participants discussed the relationship between learning one's tribal history and being able to be active in the culture. They noted that an increase in knowledge of history related to an increase in Cherokee identity and Cherokee cultural participation.

(1984) And I mean, that's our whole culture, as Native Americans compared with other cultures, when you get introduced to somebody the first thing they say is, "What do you do for a living?" but what we say is "Who are your people?" We want to know who your people are. That's the whole point is we know who our people are because we went on that trip. We know who we are because we went on that trip.

Another participant explained the concept of Cherokee historical knowledge and Cherokee cultural participation further:

(1984) That's how my husband and I raised our children, and that was part of my culture, from where I came out. You're Indian, sure it's easy to say you're Indian, but what do you know about being Indian? That's what we passed down to ours, to always know what they came from.

1. (1984) We didn't know what kind of strength we had. We didn't know what Cherokee was, the word, "The People." Cherokee means "The People." We didn't know what, "The People" was.

2: DDhBΘϞ [Phonetic: Aniyvwiya; Translation: Complete people, i.e., Indigenous people]

1: But now we do. That's a big word, The People.

3: That's everybody.

4: Yeah, there was some strength there we didn't know about.

1: I'll never think about being Cherokee the same . . . It's entirely different. There were times [you would have] more pride and strength.

(1984) To this day we still have each other. No matter how long it's been, and it's over 30 years now. We can still contact each other or run into each other and it's like no time has passed. We will always be close like a family. Like [peer] said, "We are brothers and sister for life." That is the most important and powerful thing to gain in this world is a family. This world is tough place to live and we are never alone thanks to that Trail. Family is a Cherokee value that was instilled in me before and since The Trail [i.e., the RTR program].

Along with an increase in feelings of pride and cultural connection, participants discussed improved peer groups and ways of treating one another due to a new Chero-

kee understanding of relationships, increased feeling of worthiness, bravery and being an important and notable person in this world, and an increased appreciation for life after reflecting on the lives cut short of their ancestors.

Addressing contemporary discrimination. Remember the Removal participants learned about political and social racism and discrimination that occurred in relation to the Cherokee removal. Although not a planned or intended part of the RTR program, experiences with overt and covert acts of racism occurred during the program and it is possible that cultural and historical learning provide the kind of knowledge and skills to help people deal with racism more effectively. In fact, cultural involvement and social support has been found to moderate the impact of discrimination on health.^{11,79,80}

Remember the Removal participants shared stories of discrimination that occurred to them while traveling with this program across the United States. This included being refused service, receiving rude hand gestures, and being called obscenities and racial slurs. In addition, as participants increased their knowledge about Cherokee history, they learned that non-Cherokees had little to no accurate knowledge about Cherokee history or Cherokee people today, a reality that they found disappointing, frustrating, sad, and dangerous.

(1984) People came up to us like the reporters or people [and] ask[ed] us questions. What bothered me was that they didn't know Cherokees were still around. A lot of them would say "I thought you all were gone." That always bugged me a little bit.

(2015) (In this program) I learned . . . that all cultures are just as valid as others and how to respect everybody, even the people who flipped us off, swerved at us, and cussed at us.

In the face of discrimination, one participant noted that they used lessons learned from the program to value all people, despite their inappropriate behavior. The following conversation between participants continued in the same vein of experiencing false and hurtful stereotypes but moves into other acts of discrimination including microaggressions⁸¹ (i.e., subtle, everyday slights and degradations based on group membership) and violence:

3. (1984) [What] I want people to know is that there's still a lot more out there that the general population in the world don't know about the Cherokees. Going back to the [program], we all got tired of hearing people [say], "How hard was it to get adjusted from going to a horse to a bike?" [Agreement] Or "How big is your teepee?"
6: "When did you start wearing jeans?"

1: And they were like, "Wow. When did you cut your hair?" I was like, "Yeah well, I got a nice teepee, I got four-bedroom teepee. [Laughter] With a bath and a half.

6: "When did you get an indoor toilet?"

1: People were like "Huh?" They did not know that.

6: Where did they throw rocks at us?

4: That was a bad day. [Agreement]

2: Some young kids, start hollering at us and stuff.

6: Just some skinhead kids

5: The other kids was in the car throwing fireworks

6: Yeah it was crazy, they just thought Oklahoma—the whole state was a reserva-

tion and we all still live in teepees and—It was nuts to us, and I was just like man.
[Laughter]

7: We were somewhere one day and I remember this lady come out and to me and said “Can you take a picture with my little girl?” and I thought OK, but then she goes, “You’re an Indian right?” I was like, OK, so you get your picture taken with the Indian. I got it. Alright. [Laughter]

5: Should have said ten dollars.

7: I know! I should have!

[Laughter]

Participants experienced microaggressions, stereotypes, and racially motivated violence by non-Native people while in this program, and most likely, outside of this program as well. While participants may be more attuned to systematic forms of racism due to historical education, they were able to use a culturally specific tool to tackle experiences of racism: humor. Similar to reactions noted earlier, when faced with a negative situation, participants found humor in the situation and leaned on one another. In addition to humor, participants tackled discriminatory experiences by sharing a spirit of wanting others to learn about Cherokee culture and history and by respecting all humankind. The last excerpt also demonstrates how this group used social support as a coping resource in the face of discrimination.

Discussion

Historical teaching and intergenerational sharing of story about family, place, and tribe are critical components of Indigenous life.^{68,81} It is how Indigenous people learn critical life skills, and who they are in relation to others, and also deeply embeds them into place and life purpose. Because a strong cultural identity and a sense of connectedness to one’s tribal community has been significantly associated with resiliency and protective factors, the cultural revitalization of Indigenous people can lead to great benefits for these communities. Through connecting youth with their history and strengthening their cultural identity, the connection they feel with their community can lead to improved health and wellbeing. Although assimilation tactics have led to a deprivation in documenting some history, tribal orators and storytellers have preserved many significant historical elements.^{82,83} Jeremiah (Jerry) Wolfe, a respected Cherokee elder, states, “It’s very, very important to teach our young kids the language. Keep our traditions alive—that identifies us as Cherokee people.”⁸⁵ History can be shared through a number of avenues, in both the community and academic setting, as well as through programs such as the Remember the Removal bike ride.

The RTR program embeds Cherokee young adults into an environment with Cherokee peers, Cherokee educators and mentors, and Cherokee places, reconstructing an environment where Cherokee history, culture, and values are passed down to the next generation. It is important to note that the RTR program was created out of community need and spans decades—significantly longer than the majority of programs targeting Indigenous youth today. This is the first time a program such as this has been evaluated.

In our historical analysis, we highlighted that the social, cultural, familial, and tribal values and norms of Cherokee people were affected by colonization and the removal

period, resulting in reduced individual, personal, and interpersonal health and well-being. By reviewing this history we began to see the first sign of the effects of trauma on Cherokee people—a mirrored violence amongst the most cherished members of society—women and children. In particular, negative psychosocial effects of the removal on Cherokee people resulted in destructive interpersonal behaviors and the breakdown of traditional social roles. Historical accounts noted the breakdown in family and tribal values that have protected Cherokees for time immemorial that became illegal or impossible in this era. There is evidence to suggest that these changes resulted in increased discord, lack of harmony, and increased mental and physical health problems. In fact, Indigenous children today experience adverse events at disproportionate rates including poverty, out-of-home placement, death rates, abuse, suicide, and health problems.^{84,85}

Although children were particularly affected by the trauma of the Cherokee removal during that historical period,^{55,84,85} it appears that young adults who relive this historical event today through experiential and didactic historical education are also strongly affected. In this study, participants noted that the act of learning Cherokee history as teens and young adults simultaneously made them aware of the brutal experiences that their family members endured and also enabled them to critique what was *not* taught to them in school; this juxtaposition resulted in feelings of anger and frustration. Other studies have also found that the relationship between thoughts of historical loss and emotional concerns including anxiety, anger, depression, and substance use.^{3,10–14,86} Further, participants linked historical oppression to current oppression via discriminatory events that they experienced as participants on this journey. This connection has been noted by several other authors; in particular, HT originates in past events and policies, but its effects remain in the form of historical oppression causing contemporary discrimination and continued interference with cultural practices and prosocial health behaviors.^{1,10,11,15,87}

Colonization has damaged tribal peoples' ability to pass down historical information by prohibiting cultural lifeways of Indigenous people and taking over the discourse on Indigenous history, resulting in incorrect and skewed information that has further contributed to the misrepresentations of Indigenous people.^{86–88} Therefore, it is important to look to historical scholarship and tribally specific stories (oral and written) to learn about the impact of colonization and mark the effects on modern Indigenous people as one part of tribal history. Others have worked to embed Indigenous history and culture into their curriculum. For example, the Native American Community Academy, a charter school in Albuquerque, ensures that every class uses an Indigenous perspective and social studies classes spend a significant portion of the curriculum on Native American history.⁸⁸ When ethnic studies are included in education, minority students are more likely to have better grades and attendance. In our study, however, participants noted that there seemed to be a gap between their own knowledge of Native American history and the lesser knowledge that non-Native people have. This gap appeared to grow larger as participants increased their historical knowledge through RTR, and participants linked this disparity to increased racial conflicts. To combat similar issues, some states and universities have implemented mandatory Indigenous curricula for all students in collaboration with local tribes such as Montana and Washington, as well as, University

of Winnipeg, and University of Minnesota Medical School, Duluth campus.^{89–93} It is possible that an increased Indigenous education for all could reduce discrimination towards Indigenous people as well. Perceived discrimination is quite problematic for Indigenous people and is related to increased depression⁹⁴ and substance use,⁹⁵ reduced health visits,⁹⁶ and increased stress response.⁹⁷ Further, discrimination is related to increased substance abuse for Indigenous people while enculturation is related to reduced substance use. An unintended focus of RTR participants was their experience of discrimination including an enriched understanding of and improved skills for dealing with it. Future research should track the learning, health and well-being of all students including intercultural relationships and experiences of discrimination: This should be an iterative and mixed method process with significant tribal community involvement. To reduce discrimination and its subsequent deleterious effects, it is important to learn about the most effective teaching techniques to reduce discrimination including didactic vs. experiential, target age group, and type of training (e.g., implicit bias/unconscious bias, structural intervention, increased accountability or a combination).⁹⁸

Learning tribal history is an act of asserting sovereignty that Cherokees have always done and continue to do today. In 1907, Redbird Smith, a spiritual and political leader who led a movement in defense of Cherokee sovereignty, speaking through an interpreter “stood up” for Cherokee rights and educated a Congressional delegation on the significance of the treaties the United States had signed.⁹⁹ This historical reference suggests that remembering and knowing history has long empowered Cherokee people and is a critical component of Cherokee empowerment and well-being for future generations. For instance, similar to other programs that have incorporated cultural and historical learning into their program curriculum,^{19–21,99} RTR participants reported improved cultural and emotional health as noted in the themes of looking backwards, looking forwards and strengthening Cherokee identity, and empowerment, resilience, and belonging. Participants valued their historical and cultural learning, wanted to pass it down to other generations, and felt more confident as people rooted in Cherokee culture.

Both the results of this study, as well as historical references work to explain the increased rates of mental and physical health concerns in Cherokee and other Indigenous communities today as well as provides direction to heal these wounds through cultural and historical education.^{100,101} In particular, the results of the evaluation of the RTR program indicate that teaching about tribally specific historical events is related to increased thoughts about historical loss, an increased awareness of non-Native society’s lack of historical knowledge about Native people and subsequent experiences of discrimination, but also, an increased sense of pride, resilience, and belonging. In other words, we posit that enculturation, via historical teaching, may serve as a protective factor safeguarding against the deleterious effects of colonization, historic and current trauma, and contemporary discrimination.^{19–21,102}

Limitations. The RTR program was created by tribal members in 1984 to address a community need. Therefore, many programmatic and evaluative components of research methodology were not part of the creation of this program. This study evaluates the program as it was created, which involves multiple intervention points from bicycling to peer support to cultural education, for example. We did not set out to determine

what elements of the program are the change agents, therefore we cannot say what elements led to any of the results that participants noted. Next, given that this project was evaluative in nature, and the participants finished the program at an interval of one time per year, researchers only had access to these focus group members and were not able to use methods of qualitative saturation to determine number of participants.¹⁰² However, each theme had several quotations with no competing perspectives which is consistent with research demonstrating that after 12 participants, 97% of all main themes had emerged.

Further, while program staff and researchers were interested in a longitudinal view of this program, there are some limitations of pooling participants from a program separated by over 30 years. For instance, differences in the nature of the experience for participants, how the program was run, and who returned to participate in the focus group existed, making it difficult to link the active ingredient to the results that participants noted. In addition, while we were interested in taking a longitudinal view of the program—gathering information from those who have fresh experiences (i.e., 2015 cohort) and from the very first group (i.e., 1984 cohort) who have had over 30 years to reflect on and assess how the program has affected their lives—there are some drawbacks to this method.

For the topic of the effects of colonization, the 1984 cohort was more represented in the quotations provided here. It is possible that because they have had the ability to reflect on the effects of this program on their lives for over 30 years, they have more refined reflections; their reflections include a focus on passing their experiences down to the next generation. The 2015 cohort had only had a couple of weeks to reflect on their experience. Further, appropriate to developmental stage, they placed the meaning of this program more often within the context of peers in comparison with the 1984 group. Another difference (again developmentally appropriate) was that the 2015 cohort spoke more often about learning their personal history and developing an identity as a Cherokee. For a more complete analysis of differences and similarities between cohorts please refer to a previous publication.^{103–105} Finally, no demographic data was collected to maintain anonymity, prohibiting the ability to analyze patterns by age, gender, or region.

Conclusion. Regardless of these limitations, this study yielded significant information about both the short- and long-term impact of the RTR program on Cherokee youth. By providing a unique intervention focused on Cherokee history, language, and culture, and including the experiential component of riding the Trail of Tears, it is clear that the participants gained both a greater sense of historical loss and greater resilience. These results add to the growing body of literature addressing the impact of HT in Indigenous groups through historical training, cultural immersion, and reclaiming traditional practices.^{36,40,43}

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