

“The Thing Happened as He Wished”: Recovering an American Indian Cultural Psychology

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Highlights

- Psychologists engaging American Indian communities rarely recognize facets of indigenous psychology.
- One longstanding facet of indigenous *Aaniiih* psychology is the power of thought to create reality.
- Respect for this power of thought may lead to locally-distinctive construals of mind and mentality.
- Absent deeper inquiry, such distinctive construals can be misinterpreted through disciplinary lenses.
- Community psychology is uniquely prepared to preclude or remedy Indigenous misrecognition.

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Abstract One of the chief questions confronting mental health professionals who serve American Indian communities is how best to offer genuinely helpful services that do not simultaneously and surreptitiously reproduce colonial power relations. To ensure that counselors and therapists do not engage in psychologization, it is crucial to recognize the sometimes divergent cultural foundations of mental distress, disorder, and well-being in “Indian Country.” In this article, I will consider four excerpts from a research interview undertaken among my own people, the *Aaniiih* Gros Ventres of north-central Montana. At a superficial level, these excerpts seem to reinforce reigning sensibilities that are readily familiar within the mental health professions. And yet, closer analysis of these interview excerpts reveals several tantalizing facets of an indigenous cultural psychology that may well continue to shape life and experience among tribal members in this setting. I recover this distinctive cultural psychology through archival representations of cultural and community life, including analysis of an important tribal myth. This analysis makes possible an alternative interpretation of these interview excerpts, grounded in an aboriginal cosmology, that yields important implications for conceiving a more inclusive

knowledge base for psychology that only robust community engagement can reveal.

Keywords American Indians · Indigenous knowledges · Cultural psychology · Mental health services · (Post)colonial communities · Indigenous spirituality

Introduction

American Indians and Alaska Natives represent a tiny fraction of the U.S. population (perhaps one percent) but remain important and interesting descent communities in the context of multicultural psychology, diversity science, and community mental health for a host of reasons. First, as the original peoples of North America, American Indians (AIs) have improbably survived centuries of disease, devastation, and dispossession in the wake of colonial encounters with European settlers, and yet this (hi)story is still too rarely told. Second, as survivors of recurrent (and, for many, ongoing) calamity, AIs may have much of value to contribute from these experiences to the modern world, of which all peoples are now a part. Third, the legacy of European colonization reverberates throughout AI communities today, leading to a raft of social problems that are frequently classified by and assigned to the mental health professions for ameliorative action (Gone & Trimble, 2012). Finally, as (post)colonial populations, AI communities express political commitments that often entail indigenous cultural and spiritual reclamation as opposed to adoption of the latest technologies of the “psy” disciplines (e.g., psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis).

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These conditions yield what I have referred to as a “(-post)colonial predicament” for mental health services in AI communities (Gone, 2004, 2007, 2008a): On the one hand, AI distress would seem to call for additional community mental health services, but on the other hand, such services are usually offered by non-AI professionals and frequently rejected as incommensurable or incongruent with the lived experiences of many AIs.

In what ways, then, might conventional mental health services be said to be incongruent for many AIs? Certainly, disciplinary psychology has in recent years acknowledged the severe cultural limitations of its knowledge base, given that as high as 96% of research participants in psychology studies are drawn from Western industrialized nations, with more than two-thirds of these being undergraduate students (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Moreover, mental health advocates and professionals who work in AI communities frequently contend that cultural differences routinely complicate their efforts, even as AIs themselves starkly assert that, instead of embracing professional mental health therapies, “our culture is our treatment” (Gone, 2013; Gone & Alcántara, 2007; Gone & Calf Looking, 2011). All of this suggests clear benefit to pursuing more diverse and expansive conceptions of psychology toward a more inclusive discipline and profession. In this article, I explore a specific facet of an enduring cultural psychology among my own people, the *Aaniih* Gros Ventres of Fort Belknap in Montana. Drawing on the extant ethnographic record for our community, I consider four interview excerpts from an early instance of my own research with fellow tribal members (Gone, 2006b, 2007, 2008b) to demonstrate what these can reveal about potential sources of incongruency with respect to mental health services. Most importantly, I trace the implications of this analysis for—and a role for community psychology in—the development of a more inclusive knowledge base for the discipline.

This analysis pursues a deeply contextualized understanding of distinctive facets of mind and mentality within a particular Indigenous population. It attempts this through scholarly engagement by a tribal member (acting in his role as a community psychologist) with other tribal members in a community-based research project that centered Indigenous knowledges and perspectives related to psychological experience. It expands on this by tracing the implications of these knowledges and perspectives for re-envisioning helping services toward ameliorating Indigenous distress in culturally resonant and potentially emancipatory fashion. Beyond this, it endeavors to model an approach based in community psychology that can incorporate indigeneity in more nuanced fashion through engaged inquiry and situated analyses. Finally, it suggests that persistent facets of indigenous psychology may be all

too easily overlooked or ignored by casual investigations that fail to identify and chart the divergent historical and cultural precedents that underlie seemingly familiar psychological phenomena. In sum, this analysis aims to elucidate the hazards of Indigenous misrecognition for psychologists who are insufficiently engaged in or aware of Indigenous community life. As I will argue, community psychology is uniquely positioned to avert such misrecognition and thereby to advance greater inclusiveness in the profession through systematic incorporation of indigeneity into its disciplinary knowledge base.

Community Mental Health Research at Fort Belknap

During the summer of 1999, I embarked on a research project with tribal members on my home reservation of Fort Belknap. The purpose of this research was to explore in open-ended, discovery-oriented fashion how reservation residents understood the origins, expressions, and ameliorations of problem drinking and depression that seemed to afflict too many in the community. My interest was less in the “etic” application of professional diagnostic categories or formulations and more in the “emic” understandings (e.g., “explanatory models”) of such distress in local terms, with a goal of tracing the implications of these for mental health service delivery. One key interview I conducted was with a middle-aged, monolingual English-speaking traditionalist identified as Traveling Thunder in prior publications (Gone, 2007, 2008b). Traveling Thunder’s perspective was of interest to me precisely because of his comparatively minimal interaction with mental health professionals and services. In this article, I return to my 1999 interview with Traveling Thunder (one hour in duration and comprising 13.5 single-spaced pages of transcript) to highlight four excerpts from our exchange that afford intriguing leads for illuminating analysis. Importantly, these excerpts are marked by *interpretive ambiguity* insofar as they seem casually understandable within a professional frame of reference even as they gesture (I will argue) to a much deeper (and older) *Aaniih* cultural psychology.

Community Setting

The Fort Belknap Indian reservation was created in 1888 in north-central Montana. Home to the *Aaniih* (Gros Ventre) and *Nakoda* (Assiniboine) peoples, the reservation encompasses roughly one thousand square miles. Bounded on the north by the Milk River and on the south by the Little Rocky Mountains, the reservation is roughly rectangular in shape on state maps. As Fowler (1987) observed,

distinctive tribal identities have persisted despite more than a century of intertribal co-residence and intermarriage. Both peoples participated in the celebrated equestrian bison-hunting lifestyle prior to the reservation era. Both were heirs to two centuries of epidemic disease and intertribal warfare wrought by European contact (often far to the east) before allying against incursions by mutual tribal enemies elicited by the dwindling bison herds. And yet, the two tribes adopted differing strategies for navigating Euro-American subjugation throughout their histories, with the *Aaniiih* pursuing more “progressive” tactics than the *Nakoda*, resulting in nearly complete loss of (though recently revitalized) traditional language among the former in a single generation.

At the time of this research, the reservation included roughly 3,000 resident tribal members concentrated in four main settlements. Residents of Fort Belknap have long contended with entrenched poverty, resulting in extensive dependency on government services (some of which harken back to U.S. treaty obligations). One consequence is a visible proliferation of the social ills that accompany alienation from traditional economies and resulting demoralization (such as problem drinking and depression). Beginning in the 1970s, however, resident tribal members began to engage in ongoing projects of Indigenous cultural revitalization and recovered ceremonial practice. This return to “tradition” rendered nearby off-reservation gold mining operations as fairly contentious during the 1990s, when some residents mobilized against the destruction of the sacred Little Rocky Mountains (and resultant on-reservation pollution) while others sought to protect scarce mining jobs. Traveling Thunder was himself a leader in the local anti-mining movement in large part because of his commitment to reclaiming sacred spiritual practices.

Four Interview Excerpts

In my interview with Traveling Thunder, I solicited his perspectives and understandings about problem drinking and depression on the reservation. As I have described elsewhere (Gone, 2007, 2008b), Traveling Thunder expressed what can be seen as a prototypical discourse of distress that appears to resonate widely throughout Native North America (cf. “historical trauma”; Kirmayer, Gone, & Moses, 2014; Mohatt, Thompson, Thai, & Tebes, 2014). More specifically, in his explanatory model, Traveling Thunder identified four historical epochs that structured AI experiences of colonization, and observed that many mental health problems are the direct result not of biological predispositions, dysfunctional psychodynamics, or maladaptive childhood experiences but rather of colonial anomie and disrupted ceremonial tradition. In consequence, Traveling Thunder advocated a return to sacred ritual practice that

might once again recirculate life and well-being to reservation tribal members. Thus, what emerged from this exploration was not only a plaintive critique of conventional mental health services as part of the broader “Whiteman system,” but also a proposal for alternatives grounded in Indigenous ceremonial life. For purposes of this analysis, four excerpts from this interview seem especially relevant. Each was characterized by an interpretive ambiguity such that mental health professionals might casually presume what was being elucidated even while overlooking aspects of a culturally salient but deeply implicit—and readily divergent—Indigenous *Aaniiih* worldview.

Rationale for Ceremonial Participation

Ceremonial practice was central to Traveling Thunder as a means for promoting well-being among tribal members. He explained as follows:

What that ceremony does is you put up a sacrifice. An effort. A personal sacrifice, a family sacrifice, a group sacrifice. . . . And what you’re doing is you’re calling on the Creator, the spirit world, and. . . what they call Grandfather spirits, for something. For life. Or for good health. Or for a good clean mind. An alcohol- and drug-free mind. Or you’re calling on the spirit world for guidance. Or for survival. Even survival.

In this excerpt, Traveling Thunder listed five domains of petition and expectancy linked to ceremonial practice, including a “good, clean mind” and “an alcohol- or drug-free mind.” Indeed, it is the proximity of the words “clean” and “alcohol or drug free” that might lead one to casually conclude that he was simply invoking the recovery discourse of Alcoholics Anonymous (e.g., “clean and sober”), which (as on many reservations) still maintains a following at Fort Belknap.

Ceremony Optional for Overcoming Problems

Given this emphasis on ceremonial practice as an important therapeutic resource, I asked Traveling Thunder whether reservation residents could overcome problem drinking without ritual participation. He replied that they could:

Oh yeah, I think a person could. With their mind. . . . I think they can if they’re strong-minded. I know a few people that did that on their own. They just got fed up with [drinking too much]. And they figured, “Well, it costs too much money and it caused too much problems.” [They] just quit. These strong-minded people, they quit like that. But. . . as a mass majority, I think that the culture and [ceremony] would be better, easier.

Here, Traveling Thunder identified strength of mind as a resource for overcoming problem behaviors, an idea that bears casual resemblance to widespread (popular) notions in U.S. society of the role of determination, self-discipline, and willpower in overcoming addiction.

Some Ceremonies at Odds with Overcoming Problems

Additionally, Traveling Thunder asserted that some ceremonies might hinder rather than help tribal members to overcome their problems. He singled out the Native American Church—which promotes the ceremonial use of peyote as its primary “sacrament”—as his chief example:

This peyote, does it make you hallucinate and see things? Does it mess your mind up?... I wanted to know the mental feeling you got on this peyote.... The same kind of reaction it does to your mind is the same thing...the Whiteman’s drugs does to them. It makes you hallucinate, imagine things in the mind. Your mind is different. It mixes up your mind.

Thus, even within a ceremonial context, Traveling Thunder expressed deep reservations about the use of mind-altering substances such as peyote. This concern would seem to casually align with the rejection by many in the addiction recovery community of various forms of psychopharmacological treatment as merely replacing one addiction with another.

Therapeutic Relevance of Mental Health Services

Finally, I inquired about the conditions under which Traveling Thunder would consider referring a loved one to the professionals in the reservation mental health clinic. He paused before responding as follows:

If you look at the big picture, you look at your past, your history, where you come from. And you look at your future where the Whiteman’s leading you, I guess you could make a choice. Where do I want to end up? And I guess a lot of people want to end up looking good to the Whiteman. Then it’d be a good thing to do... Go to [the] White psychiatrists in the [reservation clinic] and say, “Well, go ahead and rid me of my history, my past, and brainwash me forever so I can be like a Whiteman...” I guess that’d be a choice each individual will have to make.

In other words, Traveling Thunder asserted that formal mental health services represent assimilative (i.e., ideological) dangers precisely because these might transform one’s mentality through “brainwashing.” Interpreted

casually, this would seem to be a reference to the perils of unwelcome cultural assimilation, a routine experience for generations of AIs that missionaries, Indian agents, and government administrators have long sought to “civilize.”

Summary

Thus far, I have reviewed an early research project in which I sought a local emic understanding of the ways that tribal members on the Fort Belknap reservation made sense of problem drinking and depression. For illustrative purposes, I have focused on an interview with a single reservation traditionalist who offered a distinctive and coherent explanatory model that traced the origin of these problems to colonial disruption of sacred ceremonial tradition. In contrast to the services provided at the reservation mental health clinic, this respondent expressed a preference for the return to ceremonial practice as the “therapy” of choice for reservation residents. In conveying these ideas and perspectives, Traveling Thunder referred to mind and mentality at key junctures, but in ways that seem casually expressive of familiar discourses concerning recovery from addiction or critique of cultural assimilation. In this sense, absent deeper consideration, these assertions seem readily compatible with what mental health professionals “already know” about therapeutic processes in the context of AI problem drinking and depression. And yet, beyond Traveling Thunder’s noteworthy explanatory model, could these excerpts afford intriguing glimpses into facets of a distinctive cultural psychology that remains at large in this community? If so, what might this imply about psychology, mental health, and professional services with respect to a more diverse and inclusive discipline? To address these questions, I turn to the broad written record of *Aaniih* traditional knowledge.

The Narrative Efficacy of *Aaniih* War Stories

The first body of traditional knowledge that I review here pertains to the speech genre known as a *coup tale*. As oral communications depicting personal triumphs in battle, coup tales were known throughout Native North America. Such war stories featured prominently in prereservation Gros Ventre social life as well, but these appear to serve functions beyond mere commemoration of courage in battle.

The Death of Bull Lodge

In 1941, my great-grandfather Fred P. Gone was employed by the Montana Writers Project as the

reservation field worker at Fort Belknap tasked with the preservation of Gros Ventre “folklore.” During his 18 months in this role, he wrote roughly 700 pages of *Aaniiih* “history” and “legends” in longhand script. His signature achievement was *Bull Lodge's Life* (1942), a biography (about 170 pages long) of our most famous nineteenth-century *Aaniiih* medicine man. Based on interviews with his only surviving daughter, Snake Woman, this text recounts the rise of Buffalo Bull Lodge (ca. 1802–1886) from an impoverished childhood to ritual leadership primarily through his persistent religious devotion. Indeed, from an early age, Bull Lodge prayed incessantly for a successful life and a prominent career. His lifelong relationship with the sacred Feathered Pipe (Cooper, 1957; Gone, 1999) was key to accessing sacred power through vision quests, which effected his eventual achievements in war and doctoring. In middle age, he was selected as the ceremonial keeper of the Feathered Pipe. Later, nearing death, he was even offered the power of resurrection (but the ceremony was never performed).

Of relevance here is the textual recounting of Bull Lodge's death in 1886 (Gone, 1942). According to his daughter, Bull Lodge was informed by his nonhuman spiritual patrons that he should put his affairs in order because he would die in eight days. On the seventh night, he gathered his family and narrated for them his religious experiences, such as fasting in pursuit of visions. The family dispersed to their lodges for the eighth day until gathering again “on this night that my Father was to die.” As recounted by Snake Woman, Bull Lodge then “told many stories of his escapades and the many thrilling experiences he encountered during his past life as if reviewing his life.” A modern audience can easily imagine these death-bed narratives as a *communicative crafting* of a *self-life narrative* encompassing an *individual legacy for posterity*, in short, as one final autobiographical exercise. And yet, as I have argued elsewhere (Gone, 2006a, 2011), there are cultural reasons to doubt this common-sense interpretation of these oral performances.

More importantly, the “many stories of his escapades” and the “many thrilling experiences” recounted by Bull Lodge that night (at least as they appear in Gone's, 1942 text) primarily included *war stories* that in some cases barely involved Bull Lodge himself. For example, the longest of Bull Lodge's recorded death-bed narratives featured an *Aaniiih* warrior named Bobtail Horse. After barely surviving an initial raiding party against *Piegan* enemies, Bobtail Horse set forth in battle against them on three additional occasions before being killed in action. Thus, in the waning hours of his life, Bull Lodge recounted coup tales for the benefit of his assembled relatives. Here, I felt, was a bit of a mystery: Why would a dying man gather his family, kiss his grandbabies one last

time, arrange them on his bed beside him, and then commence to recounting lengthy tales of violence, rivalry, danger, and triumph that (in at least some cases) appeared to have little to do with his own actions? In sum, these final events of narration from *Bull Lodge's Life* demanded further explication.

The Defeat of Lame Bull

Starting in 1938—some 50 years after the founding of the reservation—my great-great-grandfather, The Boy, collaborated closely with anthropologists John Cooper (1957) and Regina Flannery (1953). These scholars were invited to Fort Belknap at the request of elderly *Aaniiih* men who wished to make a record of their traditional knowledge and prereservation way of life before such recollections completely faded away. The Boy (1872–1956), who was the last remaining tribal member to possess the arcane ceremonial knowledge associated with the Gros Ventre Flat Pipe (Cooper, 1957; Gone, Miller, & Rappaport, 1999), was a principal collaborator in this knowledge production. As a result, he often recounted stories of older family members to illustrate aspects of *Aaniiih* traditional knowledge.

Flannery and Cooper (1946) published one such story recounted by The Boy about a famed gambling contest that featured his own father, Lame Bull. The contest was known as the Wheel game, as it involved a small hoop, wrapped in buckskin, with several large beads threaded through its center. The game consisted of two opponents (always men) who took turns rolling the wheel back and forth across a court. One contestant rolled the wheel, while his opponent trotted backward alongside it and attempted to throw an arrow-like stick or pole through the hoop. The hope was that the wheel would fall across the stick, with (ideally) one of the beads touching the pole where it lay. Points were awarded based on the lay of the wheel on the stick, and the game was played for a set number of points until a winner was declared.

Two things are important to know about the Wheel game as described by The Boy. First, the Wheel game was the pinnacle of gambling contests among the Gros Ventres. Depending on an unpredictable mix of luck and skill, the outcome of a high-stakes Wheel game could determine not only the economic station of contestants, but more importantly the reputation and community standing of the contenders. Indeed, the most highly anticipated Wheel games were between established rivals (i.e., “enemy friends”) who sought through the contest to utterly vanquish their competitors. So it was that an up-and-coming Lame Bull was challenged by his enemy-friend, White Owl—a much older and well-established warrior who wished to end his young rival's rise before Lame Bull could eclipse his own standing—to a Wheel game.

Second, according to The Boy, the outcome of the Wheel game frequently depended on a competitor's ability to harness "luck" or good fortune toward a winning outcome by pausing before the roll of the hoop to concentrate silently but intensely on a prior personal achievement in war. While rehearsing this war deed in his mind, the contestant would think, "The powers know I am not telling a lie" (Flannery & Cooper, 1946, p. 397). The Boy explained that this was *not* a prayer in which the contestant was asking any Being for assistance, but rather this entailed an intent training of one's thought on a personal achievement at war in which one had overcome extremely dangerous risks. Meanwhile, gathered spectators would speculate as to which war deed the contestant was contemplating, and if he won he would narrate the war story for all to hear.

In the end, my great-great-great-grandfather, who had never even played the Wheel game, was roundly defeated by White Owl, who was a veteran of such contests. In an instant, having wagered all that he owned, Lame Bull was impoverished, as White Owl's relatives descended on his camp, tore down his lodge, and even carted away his wife's dishes. Lame Bull's own father, who had lost heavily through the obligation to wager on behalf of his relative, was angry. He berated his son, causing Lame Bull to break down in tears. Fortunately, this setback did not destroy Lame Bull's career prospects, as years later he was appointed the ceremonial keeper of the sacred *Aaniiih* Flat Pipe. Nevertheless, this narrative raises other interesting questions: How could intense concentration on a war deed be expected to alter the outcome of a Wheel game? And why were war deeds (as such) considered relevant for harnessing luck in this respect?

The Power of War Stories

As I have summarized elsewhere (Gone, 2006a, 2011), the recounting of *Aaniiih* war stories featured regularly in prereservation Gros Ventre life. The eighteenth century was witness to unparalleled violence across the northern Plains driven by fierce intertribal economic competition for trade with Europeans and Euro-Americans, first for beaver pelts and then for bison robes. The devastating degree of violence resulted from imbalances in the flow of guns from the northeast and horses from the southwest (McGinnis, 2010). In this context, survival through warfare became a singular preoccupation of the outnumbered Gros Ventres, and no *Aaniiih* man could aspire to prominent status in the community without verifiable achievements in war. Thus, various cultural practices developed that included an obligatory public narration of war stories, such as when setting up a new lodge for the first time or when naming a child (Cooper, 1957; Flannery, 1953). Indeed, the prominent man was one whose "wrist was

made slim" from being pulled to his feet on public occasions to recount his war deeds. The representational and commemorative functions served by these narrative practices in troubled times that required such great fortitude and valor seem readily understandable. And yet, the variety of instances in community life in which war stories were customarily recounted (Cooper, 1957; Flannery, 1953) reflects an intriguing pattern that suggests additional functions as well.

Specifically, war stories were frequently orated in situations associated with blessing or, alternatively, with the avoidance of harm. For example, setting up a new lodge, naming a child, or piercing a child's ears were all occasions of hope and prayer associated with envisioning long and prosperous (future) lives. In contrast, the recounting of war stories was also apparently necessary to avoid the harmful repercussions of violating a ritual taboo, such as when departing a Pipe ceremony with leftover food. Thus, oral performances of war achievements seemed to function not only as public reminders and reinforcements of brave actions in battle, but also as *efficacious interventions* into unfolding events in which blessings—or, alternately, the neutralization of dangers—might generate flourishing futures (i.e., harness luck). In sum, "as commemorations of triumphant agency in which mortal danger had been neutralized by overwhelming vitality," the recounting of war stories evidently "retained some capacity to circulate and redistribute to the assembled audience *at least some measure of that same vitality*...that had made possible the very actions portrayed in the narrated events themselves." In other words, for prereservation *Aaniiih* tribal members, these kinds of narratives "*literally imparted life*," a practice to which I refer as the *communication of vitality* (Gone, 2011, p. 144).

This would account for Bull Lodge's decision to recount coup tales in the presence of his gathered kin on the night he was to die. That is, Bull Lodge sought to impart *life* to his family through this efficacious event of narration. The example of the Gros Ventre Wheel game adds further texture to this interpretation, though, by linking this narrative efficacy not just to oration proper but rather to thought itself. Indeed, it was through *intense concentration* on a past personal war deed that a competitor in the Wheel game might harness luck toward a more fortunate outcome in the contest (Flannery & Cooper, 1946). In doing so, the gambler "used the supernatural. He used words in his mind. He did not talk out loud," according to The Boy, who elaborated further:

The gamblers "prayed" over the wheel silently. But they were not exactly praying. They were appealing against fate. They were wishing for good fortune and good luck in the game, and they were [rehearsing] that

thought by thinking of a particular time, when for instance, they brought back a good-looking horse from a war raid.

(Cooper, 1957, p. 369)

This statement appears to index a distinctive *Aaniiih* psychology, but of what kind and character?

The Implicit Psychology of an *Aaniiih* Myth

Interestingly, my great-great-grandfather afforded additional insight into this distinctive cultural psychology by elaborating on a relevant instance of *Aaniiih* traditional knowledge during his collaborative work with the anthropologists Cooper and Flannery. Specifically, in their efforts to understand Gros Ventre cosmology, the anthropologists inquired, “Who among the beings—apart from the Supreme Being—known to the Gros Ventres was the most powerful?” (Cooper, 1957, p. 365). The Boy answered that “a certain boy and his sister” were the most powerful of all beings, with evident reference to the old *Aaniiih* myth of the Deserted Children. The anthropologists did not obtain this myth from The Boy, but another version was recorded nearly four decades earlier from an old Gros Ventre woman named Watches All by the anthropologist Alfred Kroeber (1907) during his visit to Fort Belknap (cf. Gone, 2014, for analysis of a war story recorded by Kroeber from this same woman).

Kroeber elicited two genres of *Aaniiih* traditional narrative from seven tribal members during this 1901 visit. Classified as myths and tales, respectively, Kroeber rendered 50 of these oral performances as fixed texts, documenting (a version) of these for future analysis (but also radically altering their spoken character; for more on the implications of orality and literacy for indigenous knowledge traditions, see Gone, 2019). Recorded as entry 26 in Kroeber’s (1907) monograph, Watches All’s version of the Deserted Children—recounted in English—consists of 1,737 words, as textualized by Kroeber. This myth recounts the consequences of a community-wide abandonment of its children, centering on “a certain boy and his sister,” as The Boy noted. Like many of the narratives recorded by Kroeber in his collection, the Deserted Children may impress modern readers as somewhat unsettling and disorienting. Set in an ahistorical past, the myth concerns the following happenings (all quotes that follow are from Kroeber, pp. 102–105).

Recounting the Myth

A village abandons all of their children, packing up their lodges and departing while the children are out playing.

Crying, the children wander about, until they approach a river, where they find a stray lodgepole and call out to its owner. An old woman answers from the nearby timber. The children discover that she lives alone in her lodge, and camp with her that night. While asleep, the old woman kills all of the children, with the exception of “one little girl” and her “small brother.” These siblings had only pretended to sleep, so the girl was able to jump up and offer to work for the old woman in exchange for their lives. The old woman allows them to live. The girl, carrying her brother on her back, removes the children’s corpses from the lodge.

The old woman then tasks the girl with gathering wood and water for her, but the girl struggles to bring acceptable kinds of wood and water. A bird assists the girl by telling her which kinds to bring because the old woman is a ghost. The small brother declares his need to urinate. The old woman allows the girl to take him outside, provided that she leaves half of her robe inside the lodge for the old woman to monitor. While outside, the girl stakes her robe in place using an awl, and escapes with her brother. The awl mimics the sounds of the girl and her brother, answering the old woman who tells them to hurry with increasing impatience. After threatening to kill them, the old woman steps out of her lodge and discovers the deception.

The girl and her brother approach a large river, where they discover a *bax’aan* (or Water Monster). The Water Monster asks that they delouse him, so the brother does (although its “lice” are actually frogs). The girl pretends to crack the lice between her teeth, after which the Water Monster offers to ferry them underwater across the river, charging them to “go between my horns and do not open your eyes until we have crossed.” The siblings are carried across the river and continue their escape. The old woman pursues the siblings, threatening “I will kill you. You cannot escape me by going to the sky or by entering the ground.” She comes upon the Water Monster, who requests that she delouse him. The old woman removes four “lice” but refuses to crack them with her teeth, and instead discards them in the river. The Water Monster carries her under the water, but instead of crossing the river he drowns and eats the old woman.

The siblings arrive to the village that deserted them. They approach their parents and other relatives, who deny their kinship with them. Instead, the villagers tie the siblings “face to face” and hang them in a tree before abandoning them once again. This time, they leave behind a sick dog, who keeps with him some fire and a knife. The dog frees the siblings, whereupon “the little boy cried and cried. He felt bad about what the people had done.” Then, many bison arrive:

“Look at the buffalo, my brother,” said the girl. The boy looked at the buffalo, and they fell dead. The girl

wondered how they might cut them up. “Look at the meat, my younger brother,” she said. The boy looked at the dead buffalo, and the meat was all cut up. Then she told him to look at the meat, and when he looked at it, the meat was dried.

They have plenty to eat, and the dog recovers from his sickness.

The siblings set up their camp. The girl sits on a pile of bison hides, and they are suddenly tanned and dressed. She folds them and sits on them, and they become a lodge cover. Then, she ventures out to look for sticks.

She brought dead branches, broken tent-poles, and rotten wood. “Look at the tent-poles,” she said to her brother. When he looked, there were large straight tent-poles, smooth and good. Then the girl tied three together at the top, and stood them up, and told her brother to look at the tent. He looked, and a large fine tent stood there. Then she told him to go inside and look about him. He went in and looked. Then the tent was filled with property.

The dog is then revealed to be an old man.

The siblings proceed to obtain additional necessities:

Then the girl said, “Look at the antelopes running, my brother.” The boy looked, and the antelopes fell dead. He looked at them again, and the meat was cut up and the skins taken off. Then the girl made fine dresses of the skins for her brother and herself and the dog.

The girl calls four bears to come and guard their food. “Then the boy looked at the woods, and there was a corral full of fine painted horses.” The siblings thus flourished at the same place where they were abandoned, with abundant food and property.

One of the villagers notices that the siblings are thriving. He announces to the entire camp that had abandoned the children that they should relocate to where the siblings live, as the camp is now without food. The newly arrived women approach the stockpile of meat, but the bears drive them away. The siblings and the dog remain in the lodge until the girl emerges to select wives for the brother and dog, and a husband for herself. These are invited into the lodge, where they are offered fine clothes and marry the siblings. “Then the sister told her brother, ‘Go outside and look at the camp.’ The boy went out and looked at the people, and they all fell dead.”

Interpreting the Myth

Based on a cursory reading, the myth of the Deserted Children must seem stridently out of step with modern

sensibilities (but at least it’s a cheery tale!). A comprehensive analysis of this myth would attend to many striking features. Kinship is clearly the central theme. The entire village abandons its children, reneging on a fundamental obligation to care for the next generation (and, by extension, all future generations). In contrast, the “one little girl” consistently expresses care for her “small brother,” while navigating a social world of relationships oriented variously to helping them (e.g., the bird, the Water Monster, the dog, the bears) or harming them (e.g., the ghost, the villagers). Indeed, she ensures the progeny of the siblings by selecting mates for them before telling her brother to dispatch with the rest of the villagers. The role of gender also seems quite evident, with the girl and the murderous old woman featuring prominently in the story, while the Water Monster and the dog—who is really an old man—serve as secondary but necessary actors that are represented as masculine. In this respect, the myth reflects gender complementarity to an important degree. The myth also represents expansive forms of personhood, as several significant agents are not human (i.e., the animal characters), and one (i.e., the owl) would be considered decidedly inanimate within a modern frame of reference. Finally, age and generation appear as important insofar as the myth refers to parents and their children, grandparents and grandchildren, and the old woman (the ghost) and old man (the dog).

The purpose for recounting the Deserted Children here, however, stems from The Boy’s response to the anthropologists’ question about the relative power of various Beings. Subordinate only to the Supreme Being, The Boy believed that “a certain boy and his sister” were the most powerful of persons. He elaborated on this designation as follows:

“The boy had power to do things with his eyes. He would only look and *the thing happened as he wished*, but that was only in combination with his sister. She would do the thinking and then he would do the looking,” and the thing would happen, especially as a result of the girl’s thinking.

(Cooper, 1957, p. 365, italics added)

This explanation is illustrated by several instances in the myth when the girl instructs her brother to look at something, at which point his visual attention immediately transforms these items in accordance with her wishes (and their needs). For example, she tells her brother to look at the buffalo and they drop dead, to look at their carcasses and they are butchered, to look at the meat and it is processed, to look inside the lodge and property appears, etc. Most impressively, at the close of the myth, she tells her brother to “look at the camp” and the villagers all fall

dead. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine a more potent example of gender complementarity, but in this instance The Boy suggested the primacy of the girl's power: "The thing would happen, *especially as a result of the girl's thinking.*" What then does this myth reveal about an *Aaniih* cultural psychology?

The *Aaniih* Power of Thought-Wish

Based on the extant record of Gros Ventre traditional knowledge, I argue that an important facet of *Aaniih* cultural psychology concerned the instrumental power of thought to bring the world into alignment with one's wishes. Specifically, the ethnographic evidence suggests a longstanding Gros Ventre belief that *thought creates reality*, and perhaps even that the cosmos are *literally animated* in ongoing fashion by thinking persons. To be clear, nowhere in the cultural record did anyone assert this in such precise or sweeping terms, and yet the available documentation lends itself to such a conjecture. Indeed, Cooper (1957) summarized the significance of "wish and thought" among his Gros Ventre interlocutors in a short section of his monograph (see pp. 365–370). This summary described various aspects of the potency of "thought-wish," acknowledging up front that "the Gros Ventres believed in the efficacy, more or less 'supernatural,' of certain wishes and thoughts about others" (p. 365). In the brief remainder of this article, I first review the illustrative evidence gathered by Cooper and then elaborate on this evidence in somewhat speculative fashion to tentatively formulate the significance of thought-wish for *Aaniih* cultural psychology.

Ethnographic Illustrations of Thought-Wish

First and foremost, Cooper (1957) recorded that one *Aaniih* name for the Supreme Being roughly translates as "the Being who has control over everything by thought or will" (p. 2). Cooper noted that direct address of the Supreme Being using this name was rare, only occurring in "grave emergencies" in which humans faced life-or-death circumstances. Cooper further described how thought-wish featured in blessing and cursing. Powerful medicine men were understood to possess "special power" to harm or even kill through "sheer wish" (p. 365). Ordinary people in the context of serious interpersonal conflict might curse one another by saying, "You are not going to live long," which could create considerable anxiety in one so cursed. Moreover, The Boy characterized public disapproval of someone as follows: "[The people's] *thought* is against him. They *think* badly of him. Against this mass thinking his own thinking cannot stand" (p. 366, italics original). The Boy's

interpreter, Thomas Main, clarified this further, explaining that "it was definitely known by the Gros Ventres that they actually thought people to death" (p. 367). The Boy also observed that "two people may have a battle of thinking. The outcome will depend on how each is developed in thinking, on their respective powers of thought" (p. 366).

The potency of thought-wish involved nonhuman persons as well. In the context of grave personal misfortune, others would speculate that "That is his sentence from above. Someone above thought that out. That is why he is in such desperate straits" (Cooper, p. 366). When Cooper wished The Boy a long life following his serious illness, The Boy replied:

When you said you wished and thought I would live many years I was glad. Now your wish and thought are added to my own. The human being can think and reason because somebody supernatural has endowed him with the right to think. The wishing itself helps. . . . In my opinion, besides your thinking that way as just a human being, your so thinking calls for some action from above.

(pp. 366–367)

When an older person, who has been blessed with long life, prays on behalf of a younger person, he might say:

I am going to ask in your behalf from the power above that allowed me to live this long. I am asking with my words, my prayer, my thought, my wish, for all I am worth. And all this wish has to be transferred to you.

(p. 367)

These examples illustrate the challenge of distinguishing thought-wish from formal prayer.

Cooper (1957) summarized other instances of thought-wish as well. An interlocutor of his named Charles Buckman discussed the role of thought-wish in recovery from illness:

When someone gives the sick person a good talk and sincerely wishes he will get well, then the patient will do his best and get well. If you say unpleasant things to a sick man you will help to kill him. Don't hurt a sick man's feelings. The wish in the case is looked upon as something like a prayer. It has to be really meant. When a person talks that way to you when you are sick, the Supreme Being will look down upon you and help you to get well.

(pp. 368)

Beyond this, with respect to a ritual song for calling the bison, The Boy described the words of the song as a "half

prayer” in which the singer was “wishing as hard as he could, so there would be plenty of game, especially buffalo, so the people would not have to go far to hunt” (p. 368). Finally, Cooper reviewed the case of gambling (as described earlier) in which thought-wish was most distinct from prayer because, as The Boy asserted, the Gros Ventres “did not pray for success in gambling” but instead harnessed luck indirectly by “thinking of everything supernatural” (p. 369).

In concluding his review of these anthropological data, Cooper (1957) captured the challenge of disentangling the efficacy of concentrated thought-wish from prayerful petitioning of nonhuman persons above:

Quite clearly, wishing and thinking under such conditions as indicated, while at times associated with and blending into prayer, into mere morale-building or morale-destroying remarks, and into public opinion operating on a purely secular or social level, were conceived of as distinct from these, as *having a certain efficacy of their own*. Quite clearly, too, such wishing and thinking could be either “good” or “bad,” beneficent or maleficent, and mass-wishing or mass-thinking by many or all the people had a particularly powerful effect on the beneficiary or victim. Further, it seems reasonably clear that the more sincere and more fervent the wish, the more it came from the heart, the longer and more intensely it had been thought over and pondered and concentrated upon, the more efficacious it was.

(pp. 369–370, italics added)

Despite some ambiguity in interpretation, these data suggest several aspects of thought-wish that warrant further (albeit, of necessity, somewhat speculative) elaborations.

Speculative Elaborations of Thought-Wish

The illustrative evidence recorded by Cooper (1957) affords several tentative elaborations. First, thought-wish is an attribute of the Supreme Being. Indeed, it could well be that the wielding of supreme potency through this exercise of thought-wish is that which actually qualifies this Being as supreme. As the Prime Thinker, this Being orders the cosmos by controlling “everything by thought or will” (p. 2). Second, the ability to exercise thought-wish is an attribute of personhood endowed to humans by the Supreme Being. All persons, including nonhumans, possess the ability—to greater or lesser degrees—to exercise thought-wish toward influence in their life circumstances. Third, there is an association between human thought-wish and the thought-wish of those Beings above (including but in addition to the Supreme Being) such that intense human concentration on desired outcomes

resonates with suprahuman intention and attention in a way that functions as a “half prayer” and “calls for some action” from those above. Fourth, thought-wish is an ability that can be honed (i.e., “developed”) by individual persons toward increased potency or efficacy.

Fifth, the thought-wish of persons can be opposed, such that a “battle in thinking” might arise in which the desires of the more potent thinker will come to fruition. Sixth, the thought-wish of one person can be combined with the thought-wish of others—including both humans and suprahumans—for added potency in achieving desired outcomes (especially in the context of “mass thinking”). Seventh, thought-wish can be expressed verbally, as in blessing or cursing, with spoken words acting as a conveyance (i.e., a “transfer”) of its potency (e.g., giving the sick person a “good talk” or telling an adversary that “you are not going to live long”). Eighth (and finally), the exercise of thought-wish is fundamentally interpersonal, such that the reality that results is always born of social relationships and interactions. In sum, the *Aaniiih* concept of thought-wish appears to be a quality of personhood in which the expression of personal desire through concentrated thinking—and (sometimes) concomitant speaking—effects tangible outcomes in the world.

Proper contextualization of this concept requires further recognition of several associated ideas that merit only the briefest of mention here. One is that the medium that renders thought as speech is breath. That is, thought plus breath yields speech, and speech—as the vocable utterance of thought—can alter reality. Breath entails the movement of air into and out of one’s person, which features prominently in sacred ceremony or ritual petition insofar as all *Aaniiih* rites involved smoking, singing, and speech. Furthermore, breath is associated with life in humans and some nonhumans. Relatedly, another *Aaniiih* name for the Supreme Being roughly translates as Master or Owner of Life. According to The Boy, his father Lame Bull observed that “a man lives, not his own life, but according to what is wished by [the Supreme Being]” (p. 6). Thus, life originates out of the thought-wish of the Supreme Being, but such life might be “transferred” through the (half-prayerful) thought-wish of humans (as when old people pray that younger people might live long lives). Finally, it seems that similar transfers of life were effected by certain kinds of narratives (e.g., war stories) that unified thought, breath, speech, and life through social practices that I have described as communications of vitality (Gone, 2006a, 2011).

It is this network of ideas and understandings concerning thought-wish that encompasses the pattern of Gros Ventre practices described throughout this article as a central component of historical *Aaniiih* cultural psychology. Indeed, it was the special potency of their

thought-wish that explains why my great-great-grandfather declared the small boy who looked, and the little girl who thought, as together the second most powerful beings in the cosmos. It was the human exercise of such thought-wish that explains why a competitor in the Wheel Game would silently recollect a great battle deed so that his own past agentic triumph over mortal danger might transfer residual vitality toward realization of his strong desire to vanquish his rival in a gambling contest. And it was the narrative circulation and redistribution of life through thought-wish that explains why Bull Lodge recounted war stories for the benefit of his assembled family during his last night on earth. Finally, it may be a persistent veneration for the potency of thought-wish in *Aaniiih* community life today that accounts for Traveling Thunder's alterNative perspectives on problem drinking and depression at Fort Belknap as excerpted at the outset of this article.

Recovering Indigenous Knowledge Traditions in Psychology

My argument in this article is that the potential for Indigenous misrecognition inheres in the casual interactions of psychologists with tribal members when local explanations of mental health issues are misinterpreted owing to the apparent (but deceptive) familiarity of such explanations. Recall that, in my 1999 interview with Traveling Thunder, he proposed that the therapeutic benefits of ceremonial petition included restoration to “a good, clean mind, an alcohol- and drug-free mind.” He allowed that some subset of “strong-minded people” on the reservation could overcome problem drinking without ceremonial participation, but rather “with their mind.” Not all ceremonies, however, were regarded as therapeutically beneficial by Traveling Thunder. In fact, he condemned the sacramental use of peyote on the grounds that it leads one to “imagine things in the mind”: “Your mind is different,” he explained, “it mixes up your mind.” Finally, he expressed deep suspicion toward the “White psychiatrists” in the reservation clinic, equating consultation with them as an invitation to “brain-wash me forever so I can be like a Whiteman.” Again, absent deeper knowledge or reflection, it is all too easy to interpret these convictions within familiar popular and professional frames of reference.

These prevailing discourses include recovery from addiction (e.g., the interest in remaining “clean and sober,” the contested role of willpower in ensuring sobriety, and the rejection of psychoactive medication usage during the pursuit of sobriety) or anxieties associated with pressures to culturally assimilate (e.g., “brainwashing”). And yet, each of these excerpts from my interview with

Traveling Thunder was characterized by an interpretive ambiguity that appeared to leave room for a deeply implicit—and readily divergent—indigenous *Aaniiih* psychology. By now, this alterNative interpretation should be clear. Ceremonial petition is therapeutically beneficial because in yielding a “good, clean mind” it restores one's facility and potency for exercising thought-wish toward bringing one's desires into reality. Some people—namely, those who are particularly accomplished at exercising thought-wish—can overcome alcohol problems “with their mind.” Sacramental peyote use, however, is of no therapeutic benefit because it cripples the generative exercise of thought-wish by “mixing up” one's mind. And the White psychiatrists from the reservation clinic are not to be trusted because, far from benefitting one therapeutically, they instead convert people into “Whiteman” forms of mentality that do not recognize, exercise, or understand the efficacy of thought-wish for creating the world.

None of this is to claim that all Gros Ventres today believe in thought-wish in the same manner as our ancestors once did. It is not even to claim that Traveling Thunder himself conclusively believed in thought-wish in this manner (or that Traveling Thunder should be taken as representative of most or many Gros Ventres today). Indeed, the assessment of such claims would require focused empirical research that is directly designed to explore the persistence and distribution of these postulated facets of indigenous psychology among the contemporary reservation population. Nevertheless, the challenge of professional psychology is *not* that it hearkens too extensively to the prospects for cultural distinctiveness and community difference, but rather that it hearkens too little to these possibilities. And so, the purpose of this analysis is to simply acknowledge that, absent deeper inquiry into even just the extant and readily available ethnographic record for some Indigenous peoples, *misrecognition of local facets of cultural psychology is entirely plausible*. In fact, such misrecognition seems *likely* because professionals remain poised to interpret local explanations—when they bother to attend to them at all—through lenses that are constituted by dominant disciplinary knowledge. Fortunately, the promise of community psychology—in exercising values that distinguish it as a subfield of psychology (e.g., diversity, engagement, collaboration, empowerment, contextualization, methodological pluralism)—is to prevent such misrecognition, and to remedy it once it occurs. For the costs of Indigenous misrecognition are real, and the stakes are consequential.

In the context of mental health services, the stakes are the effectiveness and relevance of programs, treatments, and interventions that are intended to remedy disabling distress and to promote Indigenous well-being. And yet, to the degree that some *Aaniiih* tribal members persist in

their convictions about the potency of thought-wish, then professional administrators and providers must recognize and navigate the local impulses that might follow from these orientations. Several examples suggest themselves. For those tribal members who subscribe to ideas of thought-wish, we might anticipate their concern for protecting the integrity of mind and thought, as expressed through reluctance to allow credentialed strangers to intrude upon one's mental life or through misgivings about the role of psychoactive medications in mental health treatment. We might expect that these tribal members will prefer to exercise strength of mind in autonomous and instrumental fashion, as augmented perhaps by prayer or even ceremonial petition of nonhumans in which the distinction between mental concentration and spiritual supplication is blurred. We might predict that the expressive mandate of many forms of psychotherapy would elicit deep ambivalence from such tribal members, given that thought and speech must be policed as moral activities that can extend blessing or harm to others (or otherwise create reality) in consequential fashion. And we might surmise that the secular rationality that undergirds the therapeutic promise of mental health interventions would seem nearly incomprehensible to those tribal members whose orientation to the cosmos is one built on the sacred nature of thought-wish.

Conclusion

In this article, I revisited a 1999 interview from a reservation-based research project to further explicate or unpack one tribal member's understanding of problem drinking and depression. I excerpted four observations from this interview that, on casual consideration, seemed readily interpretable within familiar popular and professional discourses surrounding mental health. And yet, in these excerpts, I recognized certain ambiguities that lend themselves to reconsideration with respect to extant documentation of *Aaniiih* knowledge traditions. Indeed, focused exploration of historical Gros Ventre ideas about thought-wish makes possible an alterNative interpretation of these interview excerpts, grounded in an aboriginal cosmology, that yields important implications for mental health services at Fort Belknap. Importantly, such sensibilities do not appear to be unique to Fort Belknap, but rather find resonance among AI communities throughout "Indian Country." Most significantly, the larger project to recover (historically subjugated) Indigenous knowledges will not succeed in influencing scholars and professionals in psychology absent processes of robust community engagement that community psychologists are uniquely positioned to celebrate and promote.

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Conflict of Interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to report.

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